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Peer aggression in Italy

Understanding bullying from an adolescents' point of view

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Abstract

This chapter describes previous research on bullying and cyberbullying carried out among Italian students, as well as the Italian school policy on the prevention and reduction of peer aggression. The chapter aims to describe the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying among Italian students in middle and high school, taking into account the role of gender and Grade level and present brief stories about how young people relate at school. In the present study, 494 middle school students (Grades six to eight) and 405 high school students (Grades nine and ten) completed the Italian version of the Student Aggression and Victimisation Questionnaire (SAVQ, Skrzypiec, 2015). Results showed a relatively high incidence of peer aggression, mainly in the offline rather than in the online context, both in middle and high school, involving both males and females.

However, slight differences in specific behaviours were found in terms of gender and Grade level. The qualitative analysis of the brief stories revealed that several students considered their relationships at school as positive. The narratives highlighted differences between face-to-face and online relationships and described some episodes of prevarication. These findings are discussed taking into account the Italian context and providing suggestions for future prevention policies.

Il capitolo descrive le precedenti ricerche sul bullismo e il cyberbullismo condotte in Italia, presentando le normative scolastiche sulla prevenzione e il contrasto delle aggressioni a scuola. Il capitolo ha l'obiettivo di descrivere la prevalenza del bullismo e del cyberbullismo tra gli studenti delle scuole secondarie di primo e secondo grado in Italia, analizzando le differenze in funzione del genere e dell'ordine di scuola. Saranno inoltre analizzate brevi storie raccontate dagli studenti sulle relazioni a scuola. Per il presente studio, 494 studenti di scuole secondarie di primo grado e 405 studenti di scuole secondarie di secondo grado hanno compilato la versione italiana dello Student Aggression and Victimisation Questionnaire (SAVQ, Skrzypiec, 2015). I risultati hanno mostrato un'alta incidenza di aggressioni tra pari, principalmente in modalità offline rispetto al contesto online, nelle scuole secondarie di primo e secondo grado, che coinvolgono ragazzi e ragazze. Tuttavia, sono state riscontrate alcune differenze in specifici comportamenti di aggressione in funzione del genere e dell'ordine di scuola. L'analisi qualitativa delle storie ha rivelato che numerosi studenti considerano positivi i loro rapporti a scuola, sottolineano alcune differenze tra le relazioni faccia a faccia e quelle online e descrivono alcuni episodi di prevaricazione. Questi risultati saranno discussi alla luce del contesto italiano, fornendo suggerimenti per le future politiche di prevenzione.

Introduction

Previous research on bullying and cyberbullying in Italy Research on bullying and cyberbullying carried out on Italian students can be synthesised into three main areas of investigation:

1. The description of the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying, taking into account the role of gender and Grade level, and through comparisons with other countries;
2. The analysis of variables associated with bullying and cyberbullying and the relationship with well-being; and
3. 3 The perception of bullying and cyberbullying, looking at these phenomena from the point of view of those who are more frequently involved in it.

Prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying in Italy

The first studies on bullying in Italian schools were carried out at the end of the last century, revealing a worrying diffusion of the phenomenon among children and adolescents (Fonzi, 1997). Further studies confirmed that a high percentage of Italian students were involved in bullying (Bacchini, Amodeo, Vitelli, Abbruzzese & Ciardi, 1999; Bacchini, Esposito & Affuso, 2009; Genta, 2002), with a higher prevalence of indirect forms of aggression in comparison to direct forms (Genta, Brighi & Guarini, 2009; Guarini, Brighi & Genta, 2010). Moreover, a national report on bullying (Cavallo et al., 2016; HBSC study, 2014), carried out every four years, revealed that from 2010 to 2014 the prevalence of bullying had increased among young adolescents, particularly among males. The number of 11-year-old males who declared they had experienced occasional forms of bullying increased from 20.7% in 2010 to 25.7% in 2014, while for females it rose from 9.2% to 17.3% in the same years. The high prevalence of bullying among males was associated with direct forms of bullying (Guarini, Passini, Melotti & Brighi, 2013), while indirect bullying increased among both males and females (Genta, 2002). In terms of bullying within different Grade levels, an HBSC study reported a trend that was inversely associated with age (Cavallo et al., 2016; HSBC, 2014), while in other studies bullying was found to be more prevalent in high school than in middle school (Guarini et al., 2013).

Some studies have also compared the rate of bullying among different countries. Italian adolescents showed a higher rate of indirect victimisation than Spanish students (Ortega et al., 2012). Higher rates of relational aggression compared to physical aggression were also found among Italian students in a cross-cultural study involving nine countries (Landsford et al., 2012). However, another HBSC study undertaken in 2014 involving 42 countries by Inchley and colleagues (2016) found Italian students showed lower involvement in bullying both as victims and bullies, than students in other countries.

Research concerning cyberbullying in Italy has been developing over the last ten years (Guarini, Brighi & Genta, 2009; Guarini, Brighi & Genta, 2013; Pisano & Saturno, 2008). The first study carried out in Italy on cyberbullying revealed that 14% of pre-adolescents (aged 12 to 14 years) had been victims of cyberbullying, whereas in secondary schools the percentage of victims was about 16% (Pisano & Saturno, 2008). Similar results were found in another study (Genta et al., 2012; Guarini et al., 2009) showing that 13% of adolescents were victims of cyberbullying (10% occasionally, 3% with repeated aggressions, i.e., severe cyberbullying), while 12% had bullied others through the use of the Internet or cellular phones (9% occasional cyberbullying, 3% severe cyberbullying). Furthermore, cyberbullying has been shown to be widespread in Italy with similar

prevalence rates found among different regions of Italy (Brighi, Guarini, Palermiti, Bartolo & Genta, 2011).

In terms of gender, cyberbullying behaviours were more likely to have been instigated by males (Genta et al., 2012; Guarini et al., 2013), while females were more likely to have been cyberbullied by others (Genta et al., 2012; Pisano & Saturno, 2008). However, in a similar vein to traditional bullying, incidences of cyberbullying examined across Grade levels showed incongruous results, as some studies revealed a higher prevalence of cyberbullying among students in high school than in middle school (Guarini et al., 2013; Saturno & Pisano, 2008), while another study did not find differences in terms of age (Genta et al., 2012).

Variables associated with bullying and cyberbullying

A second wave of studies on bullying have tried to respond to the following questions: What variables can be associated with the phenomena of bullying? What is the relationship between these phenomena and student well-being?

Concerning the first question, some studies found that Italian adolescents involved as perpetrators in bullying and cyberbullying had higher levels of moral disengagement and a profile of egocentric reasoning (Menesini et al., 2003). Moreover, perpetrators of bullying and cyberbullying showed low levels of emphatic responsiveness (Gini, Albiero, Benelli & Altoè, 2007), were more exposed to dangerous and violent situations, and experienced poor relationships with classmates and teachers (Bacchini, Esposito & Affuso, 2009; Guarini et al., 2013). In addition, their perceived relationship with parents featured lonesomeness and this was found to be a very relevant predictor of the perpetration of cyberbullying behaviours (Guarini et al., 2013). Risk factors for cyber-victimisation included the victim having low self-esteem, perceived lonesomeness in the relationship with parents, and involvement in traditional bullying as a victim (Brighi, Guarini, Melotti, Galli & Genta, 2012a).

In terms of the relationship of bullying and cyberbullying with student well-being, a longitudinal study found that Italian students who engaged in repeated aggressive episodes showed serious school difficulties as well as externalising and internalising problems (Menesini & Nocentini, 2008). Furthermore, victims of bullying and cyberbullying were more likely to harbor negative perceptions of school climate (Brighi et al., 2012a) and report more internalising problems (Menesini, Modena & Tani, 2009), while victims of cyberbullying whose reputation had been attacked, reported lower self-esteem when compared to victims who experienced other forms of cyberbullying (Brighi, Melotti et al., 2012). Severe symptoms of maladjustment were evident in adolescents involved in both the role of perpetrator and victim of bullying and cyberbullying (Bacchini et al., 2009; Menesini et al., 2009).

Students' perception of bullying and cyberbullying

Some authors (Menesini et al., 2012; Nocentini et al., 2010) have tried to disentangle the criteria adopted by Italian adolescents in defining bullying and cyberbullying episodes by taking into consideration the specific characteristics attributed to bullying, namely intentionality of causing harm, power imbalance, and repetition. In these studies, students suggested that the intention to cause harm was one of the criteria that should define both bullying and cyberbullying episodes. Moreover, students suggested that the harm perceived by the victim should be a major consideration and that the frequency of the perpetrated aggression should be a criterion to determine the psychological effects on victims, as well as for differentiating between jokes and deliberate acts of aggression. A recent

study by Palladino and colleagues (2017) has compared the perspectives of adolescents from Estonia, Italy, Germany, and Turkey in defining cyberbullying. In that study, Italian students declared that an anonymous attack was the least distressing of cyberattacks, and they were more cognisant of the criterion of intentionality than students from other countries.

Evidence from the studies cited above indicates that bullying and cyberbullying in Italy are worrying phenomena that involve middle and high school males and females, and that seriously threaten adolescents' well-being. Furthermore, some of the young people involved in bullying and cyberbullying incidents perceive their behaviour in a different light compared to adults (parents, teachers, and policy makers), by exhibiting a tendency to deny the negative consequences of the aggression on their victims. The alarming proportion of Italian adolescents who are involved in these phenomena compared to other countries, echo some of the dramatic events caused by bullying and cyberbullying, including the suicide of some very young people. Research statistics as well as such sorrowful events have raised awareness among policy makers and as a result, several changes in school policies have been proposed in the last ten years.

National law in Italy and school policy

In Italy, the first national document released by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR, 2007a) concerning the bullying phenomenon and its prevention was published in 2007. The aim of this document was to suggest opportunities, resources, and tools for schools to manage bullying. In particular, some national actions were proposed. These included the creation of permanent regional observatories with a national website, the activation of a national green number, and the establishment of collaborations between institutions and educational settings (for a more detailed review, see Genta, Berdondini, Brighi & Guarini, 2009; Guarini et al., 2010). In the same year, MIUR (2007b) proposed the implementation of a Joint Responsibility Agreement between schools and families, which states that parents and students shall sign an agreement before the student starts school. The agreement defines the rights and duties of the school, students, and their families in relation to bullying episodes.

Since 2012, the Italian MIUR has been associated with the European Programme "Safer Internet" (European Parliament and of the Council, 2008). The programme aims to improve the safety of children in online environments through specific actions such as raising public awareness, combating illegal content and harmful conduct, promoting a safer online environment, and establishing a knowledge base about cyberbullying. Using this programme as a starting point, in 2013 the Italian Safer Internet Centre, co-funded by the European Commission, was created as the project titled "Generazioni Connesse"1. The Italian MIUR coordinated the project in partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Postal and Communication Police, some Italian Universities as well as national and international associations (e.g., Save the Children Italia Onlus, Telefono Azzurro). The project was co-founded again in 2016 by the European Commission as the programme "Connecting Europe Facility2" (CEF). The Italian Safer Internet Centre currently implements several actions to make the Internet a more trusted place for children and young people.

This includes running a communication campaign, providing information through schools, as well as running two dedicated lines for the reporting of online child sexual abuse, racist and xenophobic material, and a Helpline to respond to requests from children, adolescents, and adults.

In 2015, the Italian MIUR published new guidelines to prevent incidences of bullying and cyberbullying at school. As in other countries, Italian schools were invited to celebrate the "Safer Internet Day", which occurs in February each year. Through the MIUR (2015) schools were encouraged to promote intervention programmes, involving parents in the prevention of bullying and cyberbullying, and to update the school's rules on the use of smartphones and digital technologies. The guidelines stressed the need for teacher training using an interdisciplinary approach that would integrate psychological, social, and juridical perspectives for schools to recognise the signs of at-risk behaviours as well as bullying and cyberbullying phenomena.

In 2017, the 71/2017 law concerning "Measures for the prevention and combating of the phenomenon of cyberbullying to protect minors", was approved. This law was aimed at preventing and identifying cyberbullying in all its forms with particular attention to children and adolescents involved both as victims and perpetrators. Note that no such law concerning bullying has been legislated in Italy.

Since the law against cyberbullying is particularly innovative in the European context, it may be interesting to explore its characteristics in more detail. Among the first important aspects of the law is the legislative definition of the term cyberbullying, which is comprehensively stated as:

> *Cyberbullying is any form of pressure, aggression, harassment, blackmail, insult, denigration, defamation, identity theft, alteration, manipulation, acquisition or illicit treatment of personal data made electronically in the detriment of minor, as well as the dissemination of online content (also related to a family member) with the precise purpose of isolating the child by serious abuse, malicious attack or ridicule.*

Another important aspect of the cyberbullying law is the possibility for minors over 14 years of age to ask the manager of a site or of a social media to obscure, remove, or block malicious content spread over the network. If this does not happen within 48 hours, the guarantor of privacy may be contacted, with an intervention due in the next 48 hours.

At the school level, the most important innovation introduced within the cyberbullying law is the identification of a teacher in each school, who can coordinate actions to prevent and identify cyberbullying, with the collaboration of the police and other associations. In addition, the school dean has an important role in informing the parents of the child victim of cyberbullying, and in implementing appropriate educational actions. The Italian MIUR guidelines of 2015 were updated in a new document in 2017 taking into account the new suggestions of this cyberbullying law.

Taken together, these legislative initiatives point to the growing acknowledgment that bullying, and in particular cyberbullying, are very serious phenomena, which can undermine the positive development of all those involved, and may have an important role in influencing the quality of the school system. For these reasons, the cyberbullying legislation asks schools to become the focal point for the promotion of positive and responsible citizenship, starting with students and including the policy in the wider sociocultural context.

Nevertheless, it is important to specify that schools have their own autonomy in applying all these suggestions, and there is no formal control on whether or not they are implemented. For these reasons, bullying and cyberbullying prevention programmes considerably vary among Italian regions and among schools in the same local territory. This situation has also been highlighted in the Child Rights

Connect Report (AA.VV, 2018) which recommended that the government, "pursuant to the law 71/2017, create an integrated Action Plan to combat and prevent cyberbullying" (p. 40).

Research aim

The aim of this study was to describe the prevalence of peer aggression both in the online and offline context among middle and high school students. We considered the role of gender and Grade level (middle vs. high schools) on specific victimization and perpetration behaviours. We hypothesised some differences between males and females. In line with the research literature in this domain, we expected that males would be more involved in physical bullying and females more in indirect bullying. Since controversial evidence has emerged from different surveys, we had no hypothesis concerning the pattern of bullying rates as a function of the Grade level.

Moreover, our research sought to combine the results obtained through an analysis of quantitative data with the evidence emerging from qualitative data. This approach allowed us to gain a better understanding of adolescents' voices about bullying and peer relationships at school. For this purpose, we performed a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the brief narratives provided by participants describing how young people interact at school.

Method

Participants

In this study, four middle schools and two secondary schools formed the participant pool. Both secondary schools were technical schools that focused on vocational training. All of the schools were public and were located in three different regions in Central and Northern Italy: Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, and Veneto. The data were collected in 2017. No anti-bullying programmes had been implemented in any of the schools involved in the study.

Questionnaires were completed by 494 middle school (Grades six to eight) and 405 high school (Grades nine and ten) students. The gender composition of the sample was unbalanced and just under one-third (32%) were females (n = 286) and 68% were males (n = 608). The ages of participants ranged from 11 to 16 years (X= 13.33, SD = 1.56).

Questionnaire

The Peer Aggression and Well-being Questionnaire, including the Student Aggression and Victimisation Questionnaire (SAVQ, Skrzypiec, 2015) was translated into Italian and then back-translated to English. For a detailed description of the Peer Aggression and Well-being Questionnaire, see Chapter 2. An open-ended question was included at the end of the questionnaire, which asked students to describe how young people interacted at school. Of the participants who took part in the study, over half (57%, n = 510) provided a response to this question, the majority of whom were male (61%, n = 312), and students from middle school (63%, n = 323).

Procedure

The Peer Aggression and Well-being Questionnaire was filled-in online by students during school hours on campus in their IT classroom. Teachers provided each student with a link to the questionnaire

through Qualtrics. Teachers remained in the classroom during the survey to supervise and to clarify any questions or problems.

Ethics

The study protocol met the ethical guidelines for the protection of human participants, including adherence to the legal requirements of Italy, and received a formal approval by the Bioethics Committee, University of Bologna. Parents provided informed written consent for the participation of his/her son/daughter to take part in the study. Moreover, before beginning the Peer Aggression and Well-being Questionnaire, students provided their consent as teachers explained that the questionnaire was voluntary, anonymous, and that students could stop filling-in the questionnaire at any time if they so wished.

Data analysis

In order to investigate the role of gender and Grade level for each item of victimization and perpetration, mixed-effects logit regression models for binary outcomes were fitted, using lme4 and lmerTest packages under R version 3.4.4, accommodating for the hierarchical nature of our data (with students nested in classrooms nested in schools).

We approached the qualitative data as narrative cases (e.g., Syrjäläinen, Jukarainen, Värri & Kaupinmäki, 2015), focusing on meaningful stories or telling cases without any pretence to provide a systematic analysis of the content. First, we carefully read all the students' answers, many of which consisted of one or two words, discarding the inappropriate ones (bad words, meaningless sentences, complaints). Then, two researchers worked together to create data-driven thematic categories. The work ended when the researchers reached full agreement on all the categories and subcategories. Thematic categories that were identified included good relationships; face-to-face vs. online relationships; and prevarication episodes. In this chapter, we have selected representative texts of these thematic categories, and these are reported in the results.

Results

Experiences of peer aggressions in Italian schools

As shown in Table 1, the most common victimisation experiences were similar for both middle and high school students. The most prevalent victimisation experience was "I was picked on", while the next most common experiences were "I was teased or laughed at" and "I was left out by another person". In the online context, victimisation experiences were reported less often than in the offline context (less than 10% for each item), except for "I was left out of peer (classmates) events" which was reported as an online victimisation experience by 12% of middle and high school students (see Table 1).

The most common types of perpetration of aggression behaviours (shown in Table 2) were "I was mean to someone", which was reported by a total of 20% of students, followed by "I left someone out", which was admitted to by a total of 15% of middle school students and 21% of high school students. In the online context the incidence of the perpetration of aggressive behaviours was very low (less than 5% for each item), both among middle and high school students (see Table 2).

Table 1 Online and offline victimisation reported by students

	Middle School (Incidence)				High School (Incidence)			
		Online	*Offline*	*Total*		*Online*	*Offline*	*Total*
Experience	*N*	%	%	%	*N*	%	%	%
I was teased or laughed at	148	3.0	26.9	30.0	99	3.2	21.2	24.4
I was picked on	203	6.5	34.6	41.1	138	5.9	28.1	34.1
I got called names	133	3.0	23.9	26.9	88	2.7	19.0	21.7
I was left out by another person(s)	148	3.4	26.5	30.0	75	2.5	16.0	18.5
Another person(s) spread rumours (lies) about me	87	3.6	14.0	17.6	53	3.2	9.9	13.1
I was left out of peer (classmates) events	103	11.9	8.9	20.9	67	11.6	4.9	16.5
I had sexual comments directed at me	58	1.2	10.5	11.7	58	2.0	12.3	14.3
I had things taken from me	143	1.4	27.5	28.9	103	0.7	24.7	25.4
I was threatened	55	0.8	10.3	11.1	34	2.7	5.7	8.4
I got hit, kicked or pushed around	50	0.4	9.7	10.1	16	0.2	3.7	4.0
Someone was mean to me	115	2.4	20.9	23.3	66	3.7	12.6	16.3

Table 1 Online and offline perpetration of aggression reported by students

	Middle School (Incidence)				High School (Incidence)			
		Online	*Offline*	*Total*		*Online*	*Offline*	*Total*
Experience	*N*	%	%	%	*N*	%	%	%
I told false stories or spread rumours about another person(s)	46	1.21	8.1	9.3	39	0.74	8.9	9.6
I made another person(s) scared of me	50	1.82	8.3	10.1	57	1.7	12.4	14.1
I got into a fight with someone I could easily beat	48	0.20	9.5	9.7	37	0.49	8.6	9.1
I hit, kicked or pushed someone around	74	0.40	14.6	15.0	66	0.74	15.6	16.3
I left someone out	74	1.2	13.8	15.0	85	2.2	18.8	21.0
I directed sexual comments at someone	35	1.0	6.1	7.1	74	2.0	16.3	18.3
I picked on someone	39	1.0	6.9	7.9	20	1.5	3.5	4.9
I was mean to someone	92	2.0	16.6	18.6	83	4.0	16.5	20.5
I threatened someone	18	0.40	3.2	3.6	22	1.2	4.2	5.4

Gender and grade level-related differences

Victimisation

There were significant differences between males and females in middle and high school in terms of their experiences of victimisation. Being left out by another person was more common among females ($t(889) = 3.496$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .620$) and middle school students ($t(889) = -2.152$, $p < .05$, $\beta = -.389$),

while getting hit, kicked, or pushed around was more commonly experienced by males ($t(889) = 3.075$, $p < .01$, $\beta = -.971$) and younger students ($t(889) = 4.313$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 1.32$). Experiences of sexual comments showed a significant interaction effect for gender and Grade level, since males were more involved as targets of this behaviour in middle school, while females were more likely to become victims of this behaviour in high school ($t(888) = 2.126$, $p < .05$, $\beta = 1.267$). Being mean toward others was typically more common in middle school than in high school ($t(889) = 2.023$, $p < .05$, $\beta = .378$).

Perpetration of aggression

With regard to the perpetration of aggression, males were more likely than females to report getting into a fight with someone who they could easily beat ($t(889) = 3.423$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 1.086$), and reporting that they directed sexual comments at someone ($t(889) = 3.382$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 1.121$). High school students were more likely than middle school students to state that they had directed sexual comments at someone ($t(889) = 3.326$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .771$).

Students' interactions at school

Good relationships

A number of students described their relationships at school as good and uncomplicated, thus depicting the educational context as a place where it is easy to make and improve friendships. Of the respondents who answered the open-ended question, 13% (n = 65) used the adverb "well" associated with the verb "to relate", and a further 6% (n = 31) focused their descriptions around words such as "friendship", "friend/s", or "friendly". For example, statements such as "Young people at my school relate very well" (12-year-old female) typified this common response, as did the following comments:

> The guys at my school usually relate well to each other, usually most of them go to school all together or take the bus at the bus station all together. During breaks, we are all (or almost all) at the bar to have a snack together and have a chat. *16-year-old female*
>
> You quickly become friends with new classmates. *16-year-old male*
>
> In my school we relate quite well. Bullying is very rare, but this does not mean it is non-existent. Rather than physical violence, the rare cases of bullying concern the exclusion of someone. If someone is bullied, however, it is easy to clarify. *12-year-old female*

Some students also highlighted the importance of friendship, as the following quote illustrates:

> Young people need friends; many people do not admit that, but each of us, including me, needs a shoulder to cry on and a good confidant. *12-year-old girl*

Face-to-face vs. online relationships

Although many comments—such as those reported in the previous section—highlighted the importance of daily face-to-face interactions, several students pointed out how young people relied on social media in order to manage their friendship network.

> At school, people usually relate by talking or through social media. *13-year-old female*

> Since globalisation was born and came to present days, social media has become the main way to interact with other people. *15-year-old male*

In their texts, students showed that they were aware of how the technological revolution has changed their ways of communicating and interacting. Rather surprisingly, considering the time young people spend online, many participants expressed negative opinions about social media and the (ab)use of electronic devices. The following quotes illustrate this point.

> I believe that today's young people relate more with the phone than with their voice and I think this thing is ugly. *12-year-old female*

> Every day in my school I see many guys constantly with the smartphone in their hands, and this does not allow them to relate with classmates and maybe new friends…. *15-year-old male*

> Today's young people relate through videogames they play. They talk and know each other when they're online … not like in the past, when we met on the street and we knew each other by talking face-to-face. *14-year-old male*

Some of the participants referred to the risks associated with Internet use, as the following statement suggests.

> Today's young people are often (almost 24 hours per day) on their cell phones. You never know who you can trust on social media, and this is a problem. *14-year-old male*

Prevarication episodes

Consistent with the results obtained in the quantitative section of the questionnaire, we found some reports of verbal aggression, mainly referred to by females, and of physical aggression, mainly referred to by males. The quantitative questionnaire was designed to examine the harm associated with peer aggression as not all aggressive behaviours are perceived or experienced as harmful. The qualitative analysis revealed that indeed this was the case, as in some narratives students pointed out that some peer aggression was acceptable or could be accepted as a joke. The following quotes seek to make this point.

> In my school people of my age relate badly. They keep playing games in which they punch others. *13-year-old male*

> We insult each other just to joke. Since we are males, we fight; we have fun playing football or cycling. *13-year-old male*

In addition, some students pointed out that older students often perpetrated bullying toward the younger ones. Typical comments alluding to this included:

> For example, an older guy asks one of the first graders to give him some of his snack. The younger one has to do so, even if he has not been threatened, because he knows that if he does not, he'll come to a bad end. *12-year-old male*

> In my opinion, in my school we are friends and talk to each other, but only with those of the same age. I do not want it to be that way and sometimes I work hard so that there are no differences in my class. *11-year-old male*

> The oldest ones dominate, but all in all we're fine in my school. *14-year-old female*

It also emerged that students who tend to prevaricate other peers belong to popular groups within the school. The reference to a dominant group at school was a common feature in the students' narratives, and it triggered specific coping responses among students as the following statements show.

> We are divided into groups. There is the group of the "cool" ones, and then there are the others. The cool guys always make confusion, believing they are the most important. The others fear them and mind their own business. *12-year-old female*

> For example, I had to build a false personality and I told some untrue things in order to be part of the group of the strong ones. I even argued with a friend of mine because others believed she was not good enough to be one of us. Until today, and even today, I have to lie to myself and I'm really afraid that my friend will get angry with me and hate me. She thinks of me as a false liar, but I still love her the same way, even if I'm cold with her. *14-year-old female*

> Today's young people are increasingly morons. They only look at people's pockets, if they are full, and if you are popular, they do not look at the inner aspects of a person. So, it is very difficult to relate, so generally the weakest follow the strongest. *14-year-old male*

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to describe incidences of peer aggression in online and offline contexts among Italian students, taking into account gender and Grade level differences. Our results suggest several points that are worthy of further deliberation and consideration.

First, the prevalence of students that affirmed involvement in peer aggression as victims was higher than that of students who admitted to having perpetrated aggressive behaviours against peers. This result is consistent with many studies (i.e., Brighi, Melotti et al., 2012; Guarini et al., 2013) and it may be due to both social desirability effects and to the characteristics of the phenomenon itself: A perpetrator may target more victims, especially when indirect or cyber forms of aggression are involved.

Second, the incidence of peer aggression in the offline context was higher than in the online context in terms of both perpetration as well as victimisation. This aligns with findings from our previous studies (Brighi et al., 2011; Genta et al., 2012), the HBSC study (Inchley et al., 2016) and a recent Italian survey, wherein one in ten children reported that they had been a victim of cyberbullying (Ipsos-Save the Children, 2017). In addition, indirect aggression such as exclusion was more diffuse than direct aggression such as physical aggression, once again confirming findings from a previous Italian study (Genta et al., 2013).

Our results suggest that both males and females were involved in peer aggression both in the role of perpetrator and of victim, even if some slight differences were found, as suggested by the international literature (Smith, López-Castro, Robinson & Görzig, 2018). Concerning victimisation, females were more involved in indirect forms of bullying (e.g., exclusion), and males in physical direct forms (e.g.,

hitting and punching), confirming a trend already described in previous Italian studies (Cavallo et al., 2016; Genta, 2002). In terms of perpetration, males were more involved in physical (e.g., fighting others) and direct verbal bullying (e.g., directing sexual comments at someone), confirming a prevalent role of males in acting-out aggression (Cavallo et al., 2016; Guarini et al., 2013).

Concerning Grade level, our study suggests that peer aggression is already present among students in Italian middle school and that it persists into high school. However, some slight differences emerged among victims and perpetrators. Looking in detail at the different forms of bullying: Students of middle school were more likely to be victims of indirect aggression (e.g., exclusion) and direct physical aggression (e.g., getting hit and pushed around), supporting, as reported by the HBSC study (Inchley et al., 2016), that the rate of bullying victimisation decreases with age. A different scenario emerged in terms of perpetration, since students in high school were more involved in direct verbal aggression, especially with explicit comments about sexuality.

We also found gender differences between middle and high school students who were victims of sexual comments (i.e., "I had sexual comments directed at me"). Sexual comments directed at them by peers were endured more by males in middle school than females, for whom this type of victimisation was more likely in high school. If we consider that this type of behaviour may include comments linked to homophobic teasing, this kind of aggression is worrisome (Merrin et al., 2018). While there is an overlap, bullying perpetration and homophobic teasing are nonetheless distinct forms of peer aggression (Espelage, Basile & Hamburger, 2012; Espelage et al., 2018). In middle school, homophobic teasing is common among students (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman & Austin, 2010; Evans & Chapman, 2014), especially among males. Research has found that these aggressive behaviours increase during middle school and decrease during the high school years (Espelage & Horne, 2008). Merrin and colleagues (2018) suggest that individual engagement in homophobic teasing can be meaningful for the identification and formation of friendships; thus, sexual-oriented comments among males may serve this aggregative function in early adolescence, while for older adolescents this form of aggression may be associated with other forms of aggression such as dating violence.

To gain a better understanding of the adolescents' point of view, our study sought to integrate quantitative and qualitative results. Our analysis of brief stories revealed that several adolescents declared that peer relationships at school were positive. Participants described good relational climates with peers in Italian educational settings and stressed the importance of having good friends at school. Socialisation within the peer group is an important factor in the process of adolescent social identity building (Marcia, 1980).

Concerning the use of technology, participants showed insight, since they described opportunities as well as risks in being involved with social networks. However, it is noteworthy that while steps have been taken by legislators to develop laws against cyberbullying, none have been proposed for bullying.

Finally, when students described episodes of prevarication they confirmed our quantitative data with regard to gender and Grade level differences. In particular, females were more involved in indirect forms of bullying (such as exclusion), while males in direct forms. Moreover, younger students were more involved as victims, while high school students were more likely to be perpetrators.

Some limitations of the current study need to be taken into account. Caution must be exercised in the interpretation and generalisation of our results. First, high school data were collected only in technical and vocational schools, which are typically attended by males rather than females. In the future, data collection in different types of schools could increase the external validity of our findings.

Second, in our present study qualitative data was collected through questionnaires. In the future, further integration between questionnaires and focus groups would be better used to describe the points of view of students with regard to peer aggression.

Third, no specific anti-bullying programmes were carried out in the schools involved in the present study. We can hypothesise that different prevalence rates would be found in schools that implement effective anti-bullying programmes.

In conclusion, the present chapter, which has described the diffusion of peer aggression, bullying, and cyberbullying at school, highlights the need for prevention programmes in Italian educational settings. Despite the anti-bullying guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education in 2015, which were further upgraded in 2017, prevention and intervention programmes in Italy are not widespread, although they are carried out in some schools. We would advocate that more schools should enact the Ministry's policy guidelines to prevent or reduce peer aggression in schools. Since the school environment is the setting in which peer aggression primarily occurs, it should also be the setting where interventions for preventing this phenomenon should be administered.

Notes

1. http://www.generazioniconnesse.it/site/it/english-presentation/.
2. https://ec.europa.eu/inea/en/connecting-europe-facility.

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