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Research article

Promoting ethical online behaviour: the perspectives of educators, experts and policymakers on cyberbullying in Maltese secondary schools

Lucianne Zammit[1,*]

[1] Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Msida, Malta
* Correspondence: lucianne.zammit@um.edu.mt

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Abstract

This research study focuses on Maltese secondary school students' experiences with cyberbullying through the perspectives of educators, experts and high-level policymakers. The literature review delves into the concept of 'onlife', highlighting the blurred boundaries between physical and digital spaces and the impact of technology on empathy and relationships. It explores Suler's theory of the online disinhibition effect, suggesting that the lack of face-to-face interaction and the anonymity in digital spaces can diminish empathy and facilitate aggressive behaviour, such as cyberbullying. The research employs a qualitative case-study approach, involving in-depth interviews with 21 participants, including educators, policymakers and experts, as well as document analysis of national policies. The findings reveal a connection between the perceived decline in students' empathy and a rise in cyberbullying cases. Participants emphasised the difficulties that educators face in addressing incidents occurring beyond school boundaries, despite their impact within schools. The findings underscore the complexities of cyberbullying and the role of educational technologies in enabling it. They also

highlight the absence of clear policies on cyberbullying and the increasingly blurred lines between the physical school environment and digital spaces. Educators, especially teachers and school leaders, were primarily concerned with the operational challenges, while policymakers and experts focused more on the well-being of victims. The findings underscore the need for schools to extend their responsibility beyond physical premises. The study aligns with the online disinhibition effect theory, and calls for comprehensive strategies in the curriculum and school policies to address cyberbullying effectively.

Keywords Malta; cyberbullying; secondary schools; empathy; online disinhibition effect

Introduction

The prevalence of technology has become pervasive in the lives of young people, significantly influencing their cognitive, emotional and social well-being. Some argue that they have a fundamental right to use technology for accessing information and actively participating in society, which is deemed crucial for them to fully enjoy their rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Livingstone and Third, 2017).

Studies indicate that Maltese children are deeply immersed in digital spaces, with more than 98 per cent of them reporting having internet access (Lauri et al., 2015). Moreover, they dedicate over three hours daily to online activities, ranking second-highest internet consumers in comparison with their peers across the European Union (Smahel et al., 2020). However, connectivity does not always yield positive outcomes for young people. Social media platforms have been associated with cyberbullying, abuse and online hate speech, with young people often being victims and perpetrators of such harmful behaviours (Lauri and Farrugia, 2020). The primary aim of this study is to investigate the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying among Maltese secondary school students through the perspectives of educators, experts and policymakers. It seeks to understand the challenges faced by schools in addressing cyberbullying, particularly given the blurred boundaries between physical and digital spaces.

This research is significant because it addresses a critical gap in the existing literature regarding the perspectives of those directly and indirectly involved in Maltese education policy and practice. By examining how schools promote ethical online behaviour, the study contributes to understanding the intersection of technology, education and student well-being in Maltese schools. The findings provide valuable insights into the operational and policy-level challenges faced by schools in tackling cyberbullying. They highlight the need for clearer guidelines, enhanced digital citizenship education and comprehensive strategies to address cyberbullying effectively. This study enriches the broader discourse on digital ethics and offers actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers and researchers.

Following this introduction, the section on literature review examines key theories and studies on cyberbullying, empathy and the role of schools in preventing cyberbullying. The methodology section outlines the qualitative approach used, including participant interviews and policy analysis. The findings and discussion explore themes such as reduced empathy, the prevalence of cyberbullying and schools' responses to it. The article concludes by presenting implications for educators and policymakers, alongside recommendations for addressing cyberbullying in Maltese secondary schools and fostering ethical online behaviour.

Literature review

Empathy and the online disinhibition effect

In 2007, Floridi coined the term 'onlife' to describe how developments since the beginning of the twenty-first century have eroded the differences between physical and digital spaces. This shift has caused the boundaries between 'virtual life' and 'real life' to progressively blur into each other (Floridi, 2007: 62). We have become increasingly reliant on digital communication platforms such as social networks, online games and video-conferencing apps, which have profound impacts on our lives

(Jurgenson, 2012; Terranova, 2004), making us practically 'digital by default' (Stoilova et al., 2020: 198). These platforms have allowed us to maintain a sense of connection with others even when physically apart, which revealed to be a crucial lifeline during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a critical question arises: can these digital connections genuinely replace face-to-face interactions, or do they have a detrimental impact on our relationships with others?

Various researchers have argued that the frequent use of technology displaces face-to-face conversations with others (Bugeja, 2005; Konrath et al., 2011; Martingano et al., 2022; Small and Vorgan, 2009; Turkle, 2011, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Turkle (2011, 2015) contends that the more time people spend looking at screens instead of faces, the less they engage in meaningful conversations, eye contact and active listening. She suggests that while virtual spaces encourage connection, human relationships become more superficial. Turkle (2011, 2015) asserts that modern technologies create a split in our sense of self, dividing it between the digital screen and the physical world, impacting our ability to forge deep connections and maintain empathy.

Turkle's (2011, 2015) work, although seminal, echoes concerns expressed earlier by Bugeja (2005). Bugeja argued that people spend more time in the online realm than in their real life, fostering deeper connections with online communities than with their physical counterparts. He maintained that this shift led to a neglect of primary relationships and a sense of isolation, diminishing our ethical and emotional responses to life's challenges. In their work on technologically mediated relationships, both Turkle (2011, 2015) and Bugeja (2005) draw a dichotomy between the 'real' and the 'virtual', a distinction that may have been more relevant at the time, considering the evolving integration of digital technologies into daily life. Other researchers also assert that spending time online reduces our capacity for empathy (Konrath et al., 2011; Martingano et al., 2022; Small and Vorgan, 2009; Twenge, 2017). They argue that modern life, with its heavy reliance on technology, has made us less empathetic, as deep attention to the needs, feelings and facial expressions of others becomes less common due to reduced face-to-face interactions.

Bauman, in conversations with Donskis, discusses a loss of empathy that he terms 'adiaphora', attributed partly to the sadistic language and insensitivity in online communication, which he links to mass media. Bauman suggests that the constant exposure to sensational and destructive stimuli desensitises individuals, making them indifferent to others' suffering. He points out that only celebrities and victims seem to gain society's attention in a media-saturated world (Bauman and Donskis, 2013).

John Suler's (2004) theory of the online disinhibition effect is grounded in the notion that virtual interactions can erode empathy. Suler (2004) contends that online behaviour often diverges from in-person conduct. He argues that online interactions often lack the usual restraints seen in face-to-face encounters, as social norms and inhibitions are often loosened or discarded altogether. The online environment facilitates anonymity, with pseudonyms allowing users to shield their true identities, providing them with an opportunity to harm and defame others without revealing themselves. This anonymity allows users to disconnect from their in-person identities and moral responsibilities, effectively distancing themselves from their actions. When individuals feel that their identity is concealed, they may be more likely to engage in aggressive or hurtful behaviour without fear of immediate consequences. This anonymity can embolden potential cyberbullies, making them feel less accountable for their actions.

The disinhibition effect is exacerbated by the fact that online participants, often not visible to one another, miss out on non-verbal cues of disapproval from each other. This lack of empathic feedback can lead to reduced empathy online, making individuals less attuned to the emotional impact of their actions. Suler (2004) draws a parallel between this form of interaction and psychoanalysis, where the analyst sits behind the patient to encourage free discussion, unaffected by the visible reactions of the analyst. According to Suler (2004), the asynchronicity of some online communication intensifies this effect, as users can post a hostile message and then postpone or even refuse to deal with the immediate reactions. The online disinhibition effect can lead individuals to perceive the online world as a separate, disconnected space from real life. As a result, they may detach from the potential harm they cause through cyberbullying, seeing it as divorced from the consequences they might face offline. Additionally, online users can dehumanise those they interact with, perceiving them as fictional characters in a make-believe world (Suler, 2004).

Finally, in digital environments, individuals may perceive a reduced presence of authority figures or consequences for their actions. This perception can embolden potential cyberbullies, as they believe they can engage in bullying behaviour with impunity.

Cyberbullying

The link between the online disinhibition effect and cyberbullying is well established (Antoniadou et al., 2016; Wang and Ngai, 2021). The term 'cyberbullying' was coined in 2008 by Canadian educator Bill Belsey (2019: n.p.), who defined cyberbullying as 'the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group intended to harm others'. Since the introduction of the term, numerous studies have examined its prevalence and impact on children and young people. A scoping review by Hamm et al. (2015) found that the median prevalence of reported cyberbullying in the US was 23 per cent, with significant associations between cyberbullying and depression, low self-esteem, behavioural issues and substance abuse among children and adolescents. An earlier study by Van Geel et al. (2014) revealed a strong link between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation. According to Campbell et al. (2012), some aspects of cyberbullying, such as anonymity and larger audiences, can increase the harmful effects of the bullying.

Similar trends have been observed in the UK and Europe. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2016) reported changes in the nature of bullying, including online gaming site bullying, sexual bullying online and race- or faith-related bullying following high-profile terrorist attacks. In the latest World Health Organization study conducted in Europe, central Asia and Canada, the prevalence of reported cyberbullying stands at 15 per cent for boys and 16 per cent for girls (Cosma et al., 2024). Bryce and Fraser's (2013) research with UK youths indicates that cyberbullying is viewed as a prevalent and serious issue, yet it is considered a relatively common aspect of young people's online experiences and interactions. In Malta, cyberbullying is also a prominent issue. Local sources indicate that it is widespread among Maltese teenagers (Azzopardi et al., 2023; Borg, 2016). Caruana (2014) reports that 38.3 per cent of respondents admitted to being perpetrators of cyberbullying, while 60.7 per cent of 13–15-year olds claimed to be victims of cyberbullying on social media platforms. Some victims reported missing school, thoughts of self-harm and suicidal ideation.

The latest EU Kids Online survey studied European children's (ages 9 to 16) online opportunities, risks and safety. The survey combined online and offline bullying, since they often overlap. The EU average for children reporting victimisation in bullying stands at 23 per cent, while 14 per cent admitted to being bullies themselves. In Malta, the numbers were higher, with 34 per cent reporting victimisation and 20 per cent admitting to being perpetrators (Smahel et al., 2020). Notably, in older age groups, the majority of bullying occurred online (90 per cent for 13–14-year olds and 78 per cent for 15–16-year olds) (Lauri and Farrugia, 2020). A more recent study on child abuse in Malta showed that, according to professionals who worked with children, cyberbullying is the most frequently mentioned type of abuse among Maltese children (Azzopardi et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying prevention and intervention in schools

As observed by Lauri and Farrugia (2020), online and offline bullying often intersect, highlighting the complexity of the issue. Research indicates that teachers, school leaders and school staff view cyberbullying as a major concern (Macaulay et al., 2018; Young et al., 2017). Furthermore, educators and schools play a crucial role in both preventing and addressing cyberbullying (Elbedour et al., 2020; NASP, 2019).

Researchers, practitioners and policymakers have sought to mitigate cyberbullying through school-based interventions (Mishna et al., 2011; Polanin et al., 2022). Meta-analyses of cyberbullying prevention and intervention programmes implemented in schools indicate reductions in cyberbullying perpetration by up to 15 per cent and in victimisation by as much as 14 per cent (Gaffney et al., 2019; Polanin et al., 2022). Polanin et al. (2022) found that preventive programmes were effective in reducing both cyber perpetration and victimisation, with a more significant effect on perpetration. These findings align with those of Gaffney et al. (2019).

This research study seeks to offer insights into the perspectives of educators and policymakers regarding the causes of cyberbullying and the approaches adopted by Maltese secondary schools to address this phenomenon. Although cyberbullying in Malta is well-documented, there is a lacuna in research focusing on the viewpoints of educators and educational policymakers, and the aim of this study is to fill that gap.

Research methodology

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case-study approach. The primary data collection method involved in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 21 participants, comprising 10 experts or policymakers, 3 heads or assistant heads of schools (representing state, church and independent schools) and 8 teachers. A secondary data collection method involved an analysis of educational policy documents.

Interviews, lasting approximately 40 minutes each, were held with participants in their respective schools or offices. They were audio-recorded via a digital audio-recording device. The decision to conduct participant interviews was motivated by three key reasons. First, interviews enable researchers to explore participants' 'lived world' (Kvale, 1996) and to gain insights into their thoughts and experiences, which are otherwise difficult to observe (Patton, 2002). Second, interviews often yield thick, detailed descriptions, providing rich data on the topic (Merriam, 2009). Third, participant interviews allow for the triangulation of information from other sources, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The data obtained from the interviews were triangulated with official documents freely available online on official websites.

Given that Malta is a country where both Maltese and English are official languages, some interviews were carried out exclusively in English. However, the majority were conducted in both languages, often featuring regular switches between Maltese and English. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and, when necessary, translated. The data underwent systematic coding to identify emergent themes. The participants were primarily recruited using a purposeful sampling technique, a common strategy in qualitative research for selecting information-rich cases. This approach ensures the efficient use of limited resources by selecting participants considered 'key informants'. According to Patton (2002), key informants possess extensive knowledge within the research domain and can provide valuable insights addressing the research questions. All the experts and policymakers were recruited through purposeful sampling, while some teachers and school heads or assistant heads were recruited via snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), where participants suggested others who might be interested in participating.

The interviews were structured around open-ended questions aimed at eliciting candid and comprehensive responses from participants (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Esterberg, 2002; Kvale, 1996). The questions were tailored to the specific participant category, with teachers, heads of schools and experts/policymakers each responding to distinct sets of questions.

For data analysis and coding, the study adopted the Braun and Clarke (2006) method of thematic analysis. This approach facilitated the identification, analysis, organisation, description and reporting of themes within the dataset, enabling a thorough examination of perspectives across participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, widely used in psychology research, offers flexibility and depth in data analysis, making it particularly valuable for exploring diverse viewpoints, highlighting commonalities and disparities, and generating unexpected insights. Moreover, it assists researchers in managing large datasets while ensuring clarity and organisation in the final reporting (King, 2004). This thorough analytical process safeguarded against researcher bias, while ensuring precision and uniformity in the findings.

Sample and sampling strategy

Twenty-one participants were interviewed. The participant count was determined by feasibility, considering time constraints and the scope of the study. The participants were categorised into three distinct groups: teachers; heads or assistant heads of schools; and experts or policymakers.

The first group consisted of eight teachers who taught subjects deemed most promising in terms of content related to digital citizenship and cyberbullying. These subjects were ethics, social studies, personal, social and career development (PSCD), information and communication technology (ICT), media literacy or a combination thereof. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they taught any of these subjects in any Maltese secondary school. They were assigned a pseudonym for anonymity, as listed below:

- Ms Mangion: ICT
- Ms Magri: PSCD
- Mr Gatt: ethics/PSCD
- Ms Farrugia: ethics/social studies
- Mr Darmanin: media literacy
- Ms Tanti: ethics
- Mr Galea: ICT
- Mr Saliba: media literacy/PSCD

The second group of participants comprised school heads or assistant heads from three distinct sectors: state, independent and church schools. Heads or assistant heads teaching in other schools, such as primary and middle schools, were excluded from the participant list. The participants were chosen on a first-come, first-served basis. To safeguard their identities, the following pseudonyms were assigned:

- Ms Borg: Assistant Head of a state school
- Mr Zammit: Assistant Head of an independent school
- Mr Attard: Head of a church school

The third group of participants consisted of 10 high-level policymakers and experts, with diverse roles and expertise across various aspects of educational policies. They are acknowledged experts in their respective fields. The eligibility criterion was their involvement in drafting policies, developing syllabuses or managing various aspects of the Maltese educational system. They include various education officers, directors and the minister of education, who were incumbent at the time of the data collection. All the policymakers and experts willingly consented to be identified and have their data attributed to them. Below is a list of these experts, along with key details about their roles and expertise at the time of data collection:

- Hon. Evarist Bartolo: Minister of Education and Employment
- Mr Stephen Cachia: Director General of the Directorate for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability
- Mr Grazio Grixti: Director of the Department for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills within the Directorate for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability
- Mr Mark Spiteri: Project Coordinator of BeSmartOnline, a project aimed at raising awareness on the safer use of the internet
- Ms Suzanne Garcia Imbernon: The representative of Ms Pauline Miceli, the Commissioner for Children
- Mr Brian Chircop: Education Officer for Social Studies
- Mr Stephen Camilleri: Education Officer for PSCD
- Mr James Catania: Education Officer for ICT
- Professor Alex Grech: Executive Director of the 3CL Foundation and Lecturer at the University of Malta. Professor Grech is an expert on digital media literacy and new media, and has also written the National Lifelong Learning Strategy for Malta
- Professor Kenneth Wain: Professor and former dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Malta. Professor Wain is a philosopher of education and has played a leading role in Malta's national educational policy development.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, with approvals obtained from the relevant research ethics committee and the institutional gatekeepers. Prior to the commencement of the study, all procedures were thoroughly reviewed and subsequently approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee. This approval ensures adherence to ethical standards in research. Before the article

was submitted for publication, a Research Ethics and Data Protection form was also submitted to the University of Malta Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Recruitment emails were sent to participants, explaining the purpose and scope of the research. Most participants willingly agreed to be interviewed, except for the Commissioner for Children, who designated a representative to speak on her behalf. Heads of schools and teachers were recruited through snowball sampling. In the case of teachers, their heads of school were contacted before the interview to gain their permission to interview the teachers on school premises.

All participants were requested to sign a consent form, granting permission for audio recording. In the case of experts and policymakers, the participants consented to the disclosure of their real name and role/affiliation, since failure to do so would have rendered their data unusable. However, heads or assistant heads of schools and teachers were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information, with the commitment that all measures would be taken to prevent identification. Participants in these groups were guaranteed pseudonyms, and the schools where they worked would remain undisclosed. Consent forms containing personal information were stored separately and kept in a secure location.

To further protect participant identity, teachers and heads of schools were not queried about details that could reveal their identity, such as age, experience or the specific school where they taught. This precautionary measure was implemented early on, recognising the unique challenges of conducting research on a small island, which requires stringent safeguards to ensure participant anonymity.

A key ethical consideration for this research is Malta's small size (316 square kilometres), which increases the likelihood that some participants may be acquaintances or, in some cases, even colleagues. Conducting research in familiar settings is a common practice, particularly in sociology and anthropology, and adopted by many educational researchers, too (Hockey, 1993). The advantages and challenges of being an 'insider' in the research process have been extensively explored in the literature (Merriam et al., 2001; Merton, 1972; Weiner-Levy and Abu Rabia Queder, 2012). The challenges of conducting research on peers are also well-documented in Platt (1981) and Hockey (1993). Platt (1981) observes that researchers are generally not acquainted with their participants, operating under the assumption that they do not belong to the same social groups and are unlikely to encounter each other again. Platt emphasises that interviewing peers differs significantly from typical research scenarios where participants are strangers, often in subordinate positions to the researcher. She highlights the difficulty of maintaining boundaries when a personal relationship exists, suggesting conscious role-play as an effective strategy to navigate these dual roles (Platt, 1981).

At the time of data collection, I was the Education Officer responsible for ethics, so a small number of participants were colleagues or direct superiors of mine. To counteract this potential ethical issue, I took specific measures to establish professional boundaries. To establish my role as a researcher, I ensured the interviews were conducted as formally as possible. After initial contact, I sent formal emails outlining the purpose of my research and the details of the interview. The interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace to maintain a professional setting. I limited small talk before the interviews and promptly provided information sheets and consent forms at an appropriate time. Explaining the content of these documents, obtaining the participants' signatures and starting the recording process helped formalise the interview and reinforce my role as a researcher.

These ethical safeguards align with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research by adhering to principles of respect, transparency and informed consent. Following BERA's emphasis on researchers' responsibilities to participants, this research prioritised voluntary participation, confidentiality and the protection of educator identities. To this end, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence, in line with BERA's recommendations on transparency and the right to withdraw.

The study also acknowledges BERA's guidelines on digital/online research, ensuring that ethical considerations were applied to data collection involving digital interactions. Issues of privacy and data storage were addressed in compliance with data protection laws, safeguarding the integrity and security of the research process. Data storage and handling were conducted with the highest standards of confidentiality and security, ensuring compliance with privacy laws, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as recommended by BERA (2024).

Findings and discussion

Empathy

Many of the research participants agreed with the researchers who argue that the use of technology diminishes empathy (Bugeja, 2005; Konrath et al., 2011; Martingano et al., 2022; Small and Vorgan, 2009; Turkle, 2011, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Ten participants reported reduced empathy observed in Maltese secondary school students. The participants blamed anonymity behind screens as the main factor which led to a decrease in empathy, echoing Suler's (2004) concerns about the online disinhibition effect. The Commissioner for Children's representative, Ms Garcia Imbernon, emphasised the significance of acknowledging the real person behind the screen, highlighting the notable absence of emotional connection in online conversations compared to face-to-face interactions.

Mr Catania voiced concern regarding the use of apps that provide anonymity among teenagers. He maintained that his role as the Education Officer responsible for the teaching of ICT in Maltese schools requires familiarity with the apps that students use on a daily basis. He highlighted the potential risk of young users feeling empowered to act invisibly online, remarking that young people often believe that when they go online, 'all of a sudden they get a superpower which makes them invisible'. Mr Spiteri, the Project Coordinator of BeSmartOnline, echoed similar sentiments:

> I'm sure that three quarters of the people that say certain things online wouldn't say them face to face, and that, I think, goes to show that they have learnt their values and the principles offline, but they can't easily transfer them online.

Some participants, including Mr Grixti (Director of the Department for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills) and Mr Attard (Head of a church school), highlighted a pervasive 'lack of boundaries' in digital spaces, where students frequently engage in online insults directed at their teachers or peers. Their observations aligned with those of Bauman and Donskis (2013), who claimed that virtual life is eroding human compassion and fostering an indifference to the plights of others. These assertions resonate with similar concerns raised by others (Konrath et al., 2011; Small and Vorgan, 2009; Turkle, 2011, 2015; Twenge, 2017). The participants drew a direct connection between the decline in empathy and the surge in cyberbullying cases among students.

The findings of this study reveal a strong connection between diminished empathy and the prevalence of cyberbullying among Maltese secondary school students. Many participants observed that the anonymity provided by digital platforms fosters a lack of accountability, aligning with Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect. These findings underscore the urgent need to address the erosion of empathy as a key factor in combating cyberbullying. As highlighted in the literature, reduced empathy diminishes the ability to understand the emotional impact of one's actions, thereby perpetuating harmful online behaviours. These findings are particularly relevant in the Maltese context, where the close-knit nature of communities amplifies the effects of cyberbullying within school settings.

Cyberbullying among Maltese secondary school students

Fourteen participants expressed concern over cyberbullying among Maltese secondary school students, confirming the results from various studies (Azzopardi et al., 2023; Borg, 2016; Caruana, 2014; Lauri and Farrugia, 2020; Smahel et al., 2020). Ms Garcia Imbernon, whose work at the Office of the Commissioner for Children brings her into frequent contact with children and youths, described cyberbullying as 'rampant' among Maltese students, with many incidents occurring on online gaming platforms. Of the educators in schools, 11 supported this assertion, with Ms Mangion (ICT teacher) describing a dramatic increase in cyberbullying cases in her school, characterising them as 'out of control'.

Mr Attard, Head of a church school, lamented the collapse of social boundaries in the digital era, noting that students often insult each other online, leading to conflicts that spill over into the school environment. He stressed that cyberbullying is a significant concern for Maltese schools, and that school leaders often invest a lot of energy and resources in tackling this issue. This concern was shared by many participants, particularly heads of school and teachers. It is noteworthy that all heads or assistant heads of schools, regardless of their affiliation, highlighted cyberbullying as a significant concern. Ms Borg, the Assistant Head of a state school, shared an incident illustrating how petty online disputes could escalate into real-life problems. She described an incident that had occurred just that morning. A female student

had been to her office, expressing concerns about feeling excluded at school due to a disagreement related to her online 'likes'. Although Ms Borg did not delve into the specifics of this incident, she suggested that girls tend to employ more covert methods of bullying, while boys often display physical aggression.

Other participants also highlighted a gender difference in cyberbullying, with girls more likely to engage in such behaviour. Mr Zammit, the Assistant Head of an independent school, maintained that girls often initiate cyberbullying, while boys tend to get involved in disputes started by girls. This observation was supported by Ms Tanti (teacher of ethics) and Ms Garcia Imbernon. Ms Tanti reported that while evaluating students' responses to a question on cyberbullying in an ethics examination, she observed a higher number of reports from girls of experiencing online bullying. In a similar vein, Ms Garcia Imbernon, drawing from her work with young people, highlighted that girls tend to engage in more personalised attacks when targeting others online, whereas boys frequently direct their focus towards critiquing fellow boys' gaming skills. These observations align with data from the EU Kids Online survey, which reported higher instances of cyberbullying among girls (Smahel et al., 2020). When asked about the source of cyberbullying, Mr Galea, an ICT teacher, attributed it to complex romantic relationships among students, which sometimes led to online harassment when relationships soured.

The increase in the number of cyberbullying and online harassment cases among Maltese secondary school students is not surprising. Floridi's (2007: 62) concept of 'onlife' is based on the merging of people's online and offline lives. As students seamlessly navigate both realms, traditional and cyberbullying become intertwined. In fact, the EU Kids Online Survey reports both forms together, with Maltese children having the highest reported incidence of bullying in the EU (Lauri and Farrugia, 2020). This survey data aligns with findings from participant interviews in this research.

Ms Garcia Imbernon stressed the role of schools in addressing cyberbullying, claiming that the line between online and offline experiences is often blurred for young people. She argued that although such bullying starts after school, students often continue arguing at school, which is in line with Lauri and Farrugia's (2020) conclusions. She claimed that cyberbullying is worse than traditional bullying because it continues even after students leave school grounds, and she said that schools should have a prominent role in supporting victims of cyberbullying or other online harms. This resonates with research that shows that schools and educators play an important role in preventing and addressing cyberbullying (Elbedour et al., 2020; NASP, 2019).

Participants identified significant challenges in addressing cyberbullying, particularly due to its occurrence beyond school boundaries. This finding is consistent with research emphasising the blurred lines between digital and physical spaces (Floridi, 2007; Terranova, 2004). While schools are expected to manage the repercussions of cyberbullying, the lack of clear policies exacerbates the difficulty of defining their role in such incidents. This gap highlights a pressing need for comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policies tailored to the unique dynamics of Maltese schools, as discussed in the literature review.

Strategies employed by schools to combat cyberbullying

The majority of participants discussing cyberbullying were either educators working in schools or professionals with close interactions with students. Remarkably, only three policymakers or experts addressed this issue. It is worth noting that most of the participants centred their discussions on the challenges that cyberbullying presents within a school context. In fact, the three participants who raised concerns about the victims of cyberbullying were all policymakers or experts. The educators were primarily preoccupied with the difficulties cyberbullying posed in terms of upholding discipline within schools. Conversely, the experts and policymakers appeared less preoccupied with the prevalence of cyberbullying, but among the three who did address it, their greater concern revolved around the adverse consequences it had on students, rather than the disciplinary challenges it imposed on schools. For instance, Professor Wain, an expert in the field of moral education, underscored how digital technologies add a new dimension to bullying, making it more accessible and dangerous. He acknowledged the considerable challenge for schools, but he was uncertain about whether Maltese schools had formulated specific policies to address cyberbullying.

A significant insight from the interviews, particularly those involving teachers, heads and assistant heads of schools, highlighted that schools frequently face challenges in addressing cyberbullying. This issue tends to occur outside school hours and off school grounds, largely because personal devices are

prohibited on school property. Mr Darmanin, a teacher, pointed out that educators seem to be 'washing their hands' of cyberbullying:

> I think that in a way it's a new form of bullying that everyone seems to wash their hands of, since it's not physical, so it's like it is not related to school. Last year, they used to say that there wasn't much bullying happening in school, but it seems that this year there is quite a bit, so, as I said, in a way, it's something that happens online, so since it's not happening at school, it's like everyone is washing their hands of it.

Mr Attard, the Head of a church school, emphasised that cyberbullying represents a major issue for schools in Malta, prompting them to allocate considerable effort and resources to combat it. Two of the participants (Ms Mangion and Mr Galea) mentioned that, at times, they have had to involve police officers from the Cyberbullying Unit to educate students on the repercussions of cyberbullying.

Despite varying approaches shared by the educators, it was noted that there was no mention of the anti-bullying strategy that was supposed to be in effect at the time of the interviews. The formal anti-bullying policy, titled *Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools*, was released in 2014 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). It makes a very cursory reference to cyberbullying, and it lacks any specific information or guidance for schools on how to tackle it. Later, a new document aimed at offering guidance on managing cyberbullying was made available on the Department for Assessment and Learning Programmes curriculum web page. Titled *How to Deal with Cyberbullying: Guidelines for the senior management team*, this resource carries the BeSmartOnline consortium's logo, but it lacks a publication date and does not hold the formal status of an official policy. It references the official *Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools* policy, but it focuses specifically on cyberbullying. It outlines a Standard Operating Procedure for teachers and senior management teams to address cyberbullying incidents, and it provides guidance for students, parents or guardians, and external agencies, on reporting cyberbullying incidents. Notably, the document does not differentiate between cyberbullying occurring within school premises and that taking place outside (Ministry for Education and Employment, n.d.).

The fact that none of the participants made any reference to these two documents suggests that schools lack a clear policy on cyberbullying, and that instead they address incidents on an individual basis. Mr Galea noted that guidance teachers, who serve a pastoral function, often handle these issues. Ms Farrugia shared that at her school, students implicated in cyberbullying are temporarily removed from their regular classes and placed in a 'Learning Zone'. Here, guidance teachers adopt a more holistic approach, prioritising pastoral care over the standard curriculum:

> The Learning Zone is a space which is run by guidance teachers. Students who are going through difficult times, or have particular needs, are taken out of the classroom setting for a number of lessons and are taught in the Learning Zone. The teachers work with them on anger management, challenging behaviour or time management, according to the students' needs.

Mr Attard stood out as the only school leader who described a comprehensive approach to managing cyberbullying and other forms of misuse of social media. He outlined a process through which identified offenders or victims receive individual counselling sessions with school counsellors or guidance teachers. Subsequently, the entire class receives broad instruction on social media etiquette through PSCD lessons, occasionally supplemented by assemblies addressed to the whole school. These assemblies feature presentations by the Police Department's Cybercrime Unit or, in some cases, parents of other students who work as judges or magistrates, providing insights into the legal implications of cyber activities.

Mr Gatt, a teacher of ethics and PSCD, claimed that the head of the school in which he taught had limited technological expertise, relying on teachers to address the issue. He proposed increased school involvement in cases of cyberbullying, emphasising the importance of schools engaging with social media. He portrayed the school authorities as 'ignorant' of the realities of students, arguing that schools should be active in their school community's online activities, even beyond the physical school boundaries. He attributed the school authorities' ignorance of students' realities to their limited presence on social media:

> Bullying is not only happening at school, now it's happening away from school, it's happening on the social media. Although bullying has happened outside of schools before, on the social

> media it stays public, and it could involve the school as well, because it's happening within the social media bubble of the school community, and then they carry it back to the school, and the school is usually obliged to ask, Why? What has happened? Why are you fighting? Why are you bullying each other? What's going on? And the reason why there is this ignorance of what is happening is because the school is not present enough on the social media. Sometimes you get teachers who know what's happening, but the school itself as an institution does not know.

Ms Mangion, an ICT teacher, explained that ICT and computing teachers were often tasked by the head of school to develop a strategy to combat cyberbullying. They organised a talk on responsible online behaviour during Internet Safety Week, conducted by a Police Inspector from the Cyberbullying Unit. Mr Galea, another ICT and computing teacher who taught at the same school, said that this approach was effective, since the students seemed to be rather receptive to the talk, and, consequently, there was a noticeable decrease in cyberbullying cases within the school. This is reflected in studies which show that prevention strategies are effective in reducing cyberbullying (Gaffney et al., 2019; Polanin et al., 2022).

Of the participants, 14 extensively discussed cyberbullying among secondary school students; 11 of them contended that cases of cyberbullying have proliferated among secondary school students, presenting challenges for school authorities. They highlighted a central problem in addressing cyberbullying, where school staff often grappled with intervening in incidents occurring outside school premises. The 'spillover' of cyberbullying from students' homes and external spaces into schools was frequently mentioned.

Furthermore, the research findings indicated that educators found it challenging to understand how to combat cyberbullying, particularly when it occurred outside the school's physical boundaries. Traditionally, there was a clear demarcation of school authorities' responsibilities – any kind of misbehaviour or illegal activity which occurred outside school premises was not considered to be the school's remit, unless students were wearing the school uniform when they committed their misdeeds. However, with cyberbullying, this distinction is blurred, as cyberbullying often merges with traditional bullying occurring within the school environment. Victims of cyberbullying often seek help from teachers and guidance counsellors, especially if both the perpetrators and the victims attend the same school. Digital and physical spaces became intricately linked, as many participants noted. As Terranova (2004), Floridi (2007) and Jurgenson (2012) contend, digital spaces and physical spaces are intricately linked, rendering it impractical to treat them as separate domains. The participants' discussions highlighting a division between the physical school setting and the digital realms frequented by Maltese students reveals a discrepancy in how participants perceive this division while concurrently acknowledging that their students' interactions seamlessly traverse both physical and digital spaces.

The results of this research show that the distinction between the physical school environment and the digital domains frequented by Maltese students has become outdated. Students engage with one another in diverse ways, whether within the physical school premises, beyond school boundaries, or online through school-related platforms, school social media accounts, private messaging groups and direct messaging. Instances of cyberbullying often encompass the use of multiple platforms, sometimes coupled with face-to-face confrontations or exclusion. The complexity heightens when students from different schools become involved in cyberbullying incidents, either as victims or perpetrators. This complexity becomes even more pronounced with the growing adoption of educational technologies.

Between 2020 and 2021, students spent extensive periods, sometimes months, engaged in online synchronous lessons, due to Covid-19 restrictions. Maltese schools actively endorsed the use of educational technology platforms as a means for students to interact with both their peers and teachers. In fact, all students have institutional access to such platforms, provided by their respective schools. While there may be no official data or academic research supporting this claim, anecdotal evidence from parents and teachers suggests that students have experienced cyberbullying via such platforms. An online news report highlighted at least one instance of a student being bullied by peers (Barbara, 2022). Additionally, another news article revealed a security vulnerability in government-provided digital devices, enabling anyone to access children (Calleja, 2022). Consequently, such cases of cyberbullying squarely fall within the jurisdiction of school authorities, who can readily intervene given their access to students' chat logs.

The insights gleaned from participant interviews also revealed a noteworthy pattern: those directly engaged with students, particularly teachers and heads of schools, exhibited a higher level of concern

regarding cyberbullying. However, their predominant focus tended to revolve around the operational challenges that cyberbullying posed within a school's framework. Conversely, policymakers and experts who were not directly affiliated with schools or lacked direct interactions with students were less inclined to discuss cyberbullying as a pressing issue. Nevertheless, when they did address it, their primary concern centred on the detrimental impact of cyberbullying on the well-being of the victims. This suggests that educators actively engaged with students may perceive a lack of support from existing policy structures and are more inclined to prioritise addressing cyberbullying and managing its consequences in the day-to-day running of schools.

Mr Spiteri, overseeing the BeSmartOnline project, stood out as the sole participant who played down the impact of cyberbullying on its victims. He proposed that cyberbullying has proliferated to such an extent among Maltese secondary school students that they have developed a sense of resilience to it. His perspective mirrored the findings of Bryce and Fraser (2013), who argued that cyberbullying had become so commonplace among young people that they no longer found it surprising when they encountered it in digital spaces.

However, it is worth noting that the EU Kids Online research findings do not align with Mr Spiteri's or with Bryce and Fraser's (2013) conclusions. The data revealed that 47 per cent of 13–14-year-old victims, and 61 per cent of 15–16-year-old victims, reported feeling fairly upset or very upset by cyberbullying (Lauri and Farrugia, 2020). These conflicting data can be attributed to one's expectations regarding cyberbullying. If one adheres to a zero-tolerance stance against any form of bullying, these statistics would be deeply concerning. Conversely, if one subscribes to the viewpoint that bullying, in some form, has always existed and that children tend to expect a certain degree of bullying, these figures might appear more acceptable.

Despite numerous insights shared by participants on the topic of cyberbullying within schools, it appears that many teachers and school administrators find it challenging to manage its repercussions due to the absence of explicit guidelines for schools, leading to a case-by-case evaluation of each incident. The fact that none of the participants referred to the anti-bullying policy or the cyberbullying guidelines available on the national curriculum's website highlights the lack of awareness of a comprehensive anti-bullying policy in Maltese schools.

The study's findings underscore the importance of integrating empathy-building initiatives into the curriculum, particularly through subjects such as ethics and PSCD. These subjects are well-positioned to promote critical thinking and ethical decision making, which are essential for fostering responsible online behaviour. The operational challenges identified by educators further validate the need for targeted professional development to equip teachers with strategies for managing cyberbullying effectively.

Implications for practitioners and policymakers

The findings indicate that cyberbullying is a pressing issue in Maltese secondary schools, with many educators facing challenges in addressing it effectively. To combat this, it is essential for schools to develop a comprehensive anti-bullying policy. This policy should not only define cyberbullying and its consequences clearly; it should also be regularly updated to reflect the ever-changing landscape of technology and the evolving methods of bullying and harassment.

Moreover, the policy must outline the support mechanisms available for bullying victims. Establishing a robust psychosocial support team in every school is crucial. This team would play a vital role in providing assistance to bullied students and encouraging them to voice their experiences. Additionally, it is important for school leaders, educators and all personnel interacting with students to undergo specialised training on handling cyberbullying. This training, ideally part of their continuous professional development, should be an ongoing process due to the dynamic nature of digital technology, which influences the modalities of cyberbullying. This aligns with findings by Polanin et al. (2022) and Gaffney et al. (2019), who have demonstrated the efficacy of prevention strategies in reducing cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation.

In comparison to traditional bullying, cyberbullying lends itself more readily to sanctioning, owing to its propensity for generating tangible evidence. Students typically retain digital evidence such as screenshots, chat transcripts and even video recordings, which document their online abuse. Such evidence makes a zero-tolerance approach to bullying easier to enforce. Consequently, stronger collaboration between schools and law enforcement is recommended for investigating serious

cyberbullying cases. Teachers and educators have a responsibility to report any suspicions of harm to a child, regardless of where the bullying occurs. Even when instances of bullying occur outside the school's jurisdiction, teachers and educators bear a legal obligation to report any suspicions of harm or criminal misconduct concerning minors (individuals below the age of 18). This duty is further reinforced by recent legislation, specifically Chapter 569, which mandates that all professionals engaged with children adhere to these reporting obligations. The Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act of 2020, which came into effect during the same year, underscores the significance of these reporting guidelines (Government of Malta, 2020).

To provide clear guidance, the state should publish detailed Standard Operating Procedures for educators, aligning with a zero-tolerance approach to cyberbullying as per the Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (2020). However, the aim of a zero-tolerance policy should be protective rather than punitive. Schools should prioritise preventive measures, incorporating anti-bullying education into both the formal curriculum and extracurricular activities. The focus should be on raising awareness of bullying, its negative impact and the consequences for perpetrators. A whole-school approach could include morning assemblies, inter-school collaborations on anti-cyberbullying projects, drama activities and student-produced educational content, thereby fostering a comprehensive understanding and intolerance of bullying among students.

The role of the curriculum is also very important. Subjects such as ethics and PSCD aim to foster empathy and critical thinking. Emphasis on empathy and critical thinking within the curriculum is proposed to further this goal. Empathy is instrumental in humanising others, preventing the devaluation of their rights, disrespect or mistreatment. An emphasis on empathy in the curriculum might help reverse loss of empathy through the frequent use of technology (Bugeja, 2005; Konrath et al., 2011; Martingano et al., 2022; Small and Vorgan, 2009; Turkle, 2011, 2015; Twenge, 2017). Conversely, critical thinking enables students to analyse and assess their own beliefs and opinions, ensuring that they are reasoned, unbiased and informed. Together, these skills enable individuals to view situations from multiple angles, fostering the ability to metaphorically 'walk in someone else's shoes'. This approach is vital in bridging the divide between 'us' and 'them', encouraging a viewpoint that encompasses diverse perspectives.

This study addresses its research questions by delving into how the dynamics of empathy and digital disinhibition influence cyberbullying behaviours. It provides empirical evidence that supports the theoretical frameworks explored in the literature, such as the online disinhibition effect and the integration of digital and physical spaces. By linking these theories to real-world observations, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the systemic and cultural factors influencing cyberbullying in Maltese schools.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

A significant limitation of this study is its reliance on the views of teachers, experts and policymakers in education, rather than on direct input from students. This approach risks marginalising the voices of young individuals. Consequently, this study would greatly benefit from further research that directly involves youth. Such inclusion would not only empower young people by giving them a platform to share their experiences; it would also enhance our understanding of their interactions with digital technologies and new media. This approach would provide a more comprehensive and authentic insight into the digital lives of today's youth.

All the data gathered for this study relied on self-reported information, reflecting the perceptions of the participants. Self-reporting introduces the possibility of bias, as responses may be influenced by the subject's perceived personality or self-interest. Despite purposeful sampling facilitating the selection of participants with significant expertise and experience in Maltese schools, it cannot be assumed that their perspectives align with those of all experts, policymakers and educators in Malta. Consequently, the collected data only capture the viewpoints of these specific individuals. Furthermore, given the case-study nature of this research, caution must be exercised in generalising the findings to contexts beyond Maltese secondary schools. The specificity of the study's focus limits the broader applicability of its results. To gain a deeper understanding of cyberbullying among Maltese youths, future research should focus on both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, thereby filling the current gap in knowledge and providing a more comprehensive view of their digital interactions.

Conclusions

This study explores the critical issue of cyberbullying among Maltese secondary school students, linking it to diminished empathy and the online disinhibition effect. It highlights the urgent need for comprehensive school policies and practical interventions to address cyberbullying as a key educational responsibility. The findings contribute to understanding the challenges posed by the integration of digital and physical spaces, offering valuable insights into the ways educators can foster empathy and critical thinking through curriculum design and teacher training. These approaches not only address cyberbullying; they also promote ethical online behaviour among students. The findings also underscore the importance of collaboration between educators and policymakers in creating a cohesive strategy to combat cyberbullying. For practitioners, the study highlights actionable steps, such as incorporating empathy training into teacher professional development and implementing whole-school approaches that integrate digital citizenship into the curriculum. For policymakers, the research calls for the development of comprehensive, context-specific policies that address the unique challenges faced by Maltese schools.

Future research should give voice to students, exploring their perspectives on digital interactions and cyberbullying. Longitudinal studies on empathy development and cross-cultural comparisons can deepen our understanding and enhance global practices. By bridging research and practice, this study emphasises the collective responsibility of educators, policymakers and researchers in creating safer and more empathetic digital environments for young people.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Reference: Z6364106/2018/09/36) and the University of Malta Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Reference: EDUC-2023-01032).

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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