

SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS AND THE EXPRESSION OF EXTREMIST BELIEFS. CASE STUDY: CYBERBULLYING IN THE ROMANIAN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: *Harassment is characterized by intentionality, repetitiveness and the existence of an imbalance in the aggressor-victim power balance. With regard to online harassment, known as cyberbullying, there is currently no unanimously accepted definition and no academic agreement on how the three components of the definition of offline harassment might overlap with online harassment. The latest study by Bitdefender company shows that in 2017, four out of five Romanian teenagers said they were bullied online, most often aggressions being focused on the way the targets shows or dresses, and on the second place is the passions of free time, followed by the financial level of the family of origin, school results and sexual preferences. So far, concrete cases of cyberbullying with targets or authors among Romanian citizens have been extremely limited in quantity, a possible explanation of the lack of visibility could be the absence of a tragic outcome or the retention of victims from telling their story. Another dimension of online aggression is based on racial or ethnic intolerance, exemplifying situations being those where anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim views have been catalysed by punctual events, sometimes without immediate significance, but which have been speculated for the liberation of negative narrations in the virtual environment, maybe expressions of dormant resentment of historical character.*

Keywords: *cyberbullying; offline aggression; online aggression*

1. INTRODUCTION

Intuitively, aggression in the virtual environment is manifested at the level of several social segments and has different modes of expression, depending on the criterion that formed the basis of a community. The way in which verbal attacks occur, including online attacks, between groups of *tiffosi* differ from those taking place between supporters of political ideas or those that are right extreme sympathizers when they criticize traditional targets - Jews, Masons or, more recently, emigrants from the Syrian-Iraqi space. Similarly, Christian-Orthodox fundamentalists, when aggressing, more or less veiled, the members of other religions (see discussions on the opportunity to build a large mosque in Bucharest), use a different type of vocabulary than the one used by supporters of the traditional family versus the followers of sexual liberalism.

The accelerated development of Web 2.0 technologies and the multitude of collective communication channels in the virtual environment, coupled with the exponential evolution of mobile-related technologies, fosters

not only useful interactions in the personal development of individuals but also new ways of expressing feelings and experiences with negative connotations, favored, *inter alia*, by the possibility of anonymizing broadcasters and rapidly disseminating real-time views. Virtually any field of social life can be reached by the phenomenon of discursive aggression and online harassment, as well as by the launching of rumors or the expression of unfavorable opinions towards an individual, a social group (regardless of the catalyst that underpinned its creation - ethnic, religious, professional or other) or a community.

Multiplication of the aggressive transfer cases from real to virtual aggression has generated a new form of harassment, called cyberbullying.

Characterized by the use of information and communication technologies, it can reach wide-ranging dimensions (and, consequently, effects) when action support is socialization platforms that promote rapid content distribution, along with adhesion and rallying such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Youtube. Extensive availability of mobile applications, such as WhatsApp, or the possibility that, in addition to classic SMS, video

files can be transmitted and processed via the phone, it facilitates cyberbullying.

At the level of general perception of cyberbullying, the forms in which they are conducted do not differ from conventional harassment and include: repeated humiliation of a person; sending obscene text or video; sending offensive content to intimidate; the use of adult content during online conversations; ridicule by creating a fake blog or profile containing biased information; the proliferation of threats; posting videos or personal photos online without the consent of the person concerned. From the same perspective, cyberbullying can have multiple effects, manifested individually or together: diminishing self-esteem and sense of security; feelings of fear, anger, shame; students' refusal to attend classes; increasing anxiety; avoiding group activities; changes in mood, behavior, sleep or appetite; feeding prejudices of race, religion, sexuality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indeed, harassment in the offline environment has a widely accepted definition among scholars, an act of harassment being considered an aggressive action characterized by three components: it is intentional, implies an imbalance of the power balance between the aggressor (individual or group) and victim, has a repeated nature over a period. This definition was introduced by Olweus (1994) and so far has not undergone significant changes in the literature. Intentional character has been highlighted to make a distinction between harassment and simple or accidental injuries (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2008). As far as the power imbalance is concerned, it can be interpreted broadly as a difference of a physical, social or any other kind of difference that would put the victim in the position of not being able to defend himself, at the level of the researchers being assessed not (Olweus, 1993; Felix *et al.*, 2011). Regarding the repetitive character of harassment, it refers to intentional prejudice occurring over a period and is not occasional, and incidents of this latter type are not interpreted as harassment (Olweus, 1994).

In order to be able to distinguish between harassment and other forms of online aggression, cyberbullying researchers often resort to the definition of offline harassment, the components of which are accompanied by an explanation of the connection to information technology and communications or other related technologies virtual environment. However, there is currently no

scientifically research-based consensus on a unanimously accepted definition of online harassment and no agreement at the academic level on how the three components of the definition of offline harassment could overlap the online harassment.

Thus, the definitions of cyberbullying contain either traditional traditional classical bullying, with an enumeration of devices through which harassment is online (Vandebosch and VanCleemput, 2009) and have a large variation of the range, addressing the phenomenon predominantly as on a bullying subject of bullying, bounded by the communication environment (Ybarra *et al.*, 2012). A potent example is the Patchin and Hinduja (2012) definition that "cyberbullying occurs" when someone repeatedly harasses, treats adversely or otherwise plays online, or by using cell phones or other electronic devices". Another definition of the mentioned researchers is that cyberbullying is

any kind of behavior that has electronic or digital media support and belongs to individuals or groups that repeatedly send hostile or aggressive messages with the intention of generating harm or discomfort to others people (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012, p.15).

From the victim's perspective, Lenhart (2007) approached descriptive aspects such as gender patterns (e.g. girls are more likely to be cyberbullying boys) or comparisons between online and offline aggression. Girls declare the occurrence of the phenomenon to a greater extent - 38% of them say they have been assaulted online, compared with 26% of boys. Older girls declare the phenomenon to a greater extent than younger girls than boys, 41% of girls aged 15-17 report such experiences. Differences in offline aggression, where boys are often both victims and aggressors, appear to be obvious. Furthermore, it seems that girls are more attracted to boys than "boys online" (Goddard, 2008).

Some studies have highlighted the blurring of the border between aggressors and aggressors, which is an indicator of the difference between traditional and online harassment. For example, there are situations where the victims of cyberbullying respond to the aggressors in the same way they were attacked. At this point we should mention Tokunaga's opinion (2010:278), which showed that in the case of cyberbullying "the identity of the aggressor may be known or not; aggression can occur in school through electronic mediated communication, but it can also work well beyond school.

In a study of a group of 733 young people aged between 11 and 18, the subjects' responses showed that it was easier to distinguish between forms of cyberbullying than to the roles of those involved victim, aggressor or witness (Law *et al.*, 2012).

The same study revealed that many of the respondents were individuals who both fulfilled the role of victim and aggressor in linked incidents. The study suggested that revenge takes place frequently, which confirms the tendency to reduce clear separation between the authors and the victims of the aggressions, which in turn are involved in reactive aggression (Law *et al.*, 2012). Based on a survey of a group of 283 final year students, it was concluded that about 50% of the aggressors were also victims of online aggression (Englander *et al.*, 2009).

Researches on ages where cyberbullying is more common were inconsistent or inconclusive, many of which highlight a lack of a clear association between age and victim, but highlighting a high vulnerability to the 12-14 year age position object of aggression (Tokunaga, 2010). One aspect highlighted in studies of 5,600 pupils in 5th, 8th and 11th grades revealed that online aggressions with physical and verbal aggression were significantly associated with a negative school climate, the lack of support from the group of friends or colleagues, and the neutral attitude of those who witnessed aggression. Offline harassment has a peak of intensity during the gymnasium and decreases with aging, being less common in high schools (Espelage and Horne, 2008; Nansel *et al.*, 2001; Pellegrini and Bartini, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 1999).

3. THE CASE OF ROMANIA

The Save the Children Romania organization conducted in 2015 a study on the use of the Internet in the family, according to which about 47% of the respondents said they had been disturbed / offended in the last year offline, and 45% said this was which happened in the virtual space, results that, compared to the data obtained from the Save the Children Romania in the year 2013, showed that cyberbullying has increased by about 13%, as classical bullying has remained at the same level.

The evoked study shows that the hierarchy of the means by which they had discursive aggressions was: social platforms - 52.8%, chat rooms - 45.2%, gaming sites - 15.5%, instant messaging - 12.7%, e-mail - 3.2%, other forms of online communication - 7.5%.

In terms of the mode of action, the most common were direct or offensive direct messages (texts, images, videos) - 49.6%, threats - 14.3%, unfavorable messages about the victim (texts, images, videos) - 11.1%, exclusion from a group created in the virtual environment - 10.3%. A consistent segment of respondents (13.5%) declined to say how they were assaulted. One aspect of interest is that the share of children who declared themselves victims of online harassment was higher in rural areas (46.1%) than in urban areas (43.9%), and the disproportion between urban and rural areas in terms of direct aggression, of 42.9%, respectively, compared to 61.8% of those questioned. The "contamination" with cyberbullying is indicated by the fact that 32% of the children questioned in 2015 said they had offended somebody in the last year by mobile phone, compared to 22% in 2013, the cases being more often in urban areas (36%) than in rural areas (21%).

The latest study by the Romanian IT company Bitdefender shows that in 2017, four out of five Romanian teenagers aged under 18 said they were being harassed online. The most common (67%), discursive aggressions were centered on the way in which the targets show or dress, the second being leisure passions (30%), followed by the financial level of the family of origin (13%), school results (12%) and sexual preferences (8%).

It draws attention to the fact that 2/3 of those who were assaulted did not tell anyone else about the situation, for reasons such as fear or distrust in the possibility of solving the problem. The aspect is placed in the logic of the reduced weight of notifications received by the Children's Telephone Association on this dimension from October 2011 to October 2013 - out of 2,907 cases of bullying, the physical forms - 45.72%; verbal - 22.86%; emotional - 15.24%; relational - 14.28%; online - 1.90%. Victims were mainly adolescents (girls aged 12-17 years - 28.58%, boys aged 12-17 years - 57.14%), but also pre-adolescents (girls aged 8 to 11 years - 6, 67%, boys aged 8 to 11 years - 7.61%). According to the Bitdefender study, the hierarchy of social platforms where such harassment occurs is Facebook, Messenger and Instagram, and forms of expression are, in order, threatening messages and negative comments received on private chat channels, followed by depreciative comments on photos and of identity theft.

The study concluded that 65% of young people admitted that they were directly marked by online harassment and also observed involuntary behavioral changes following the aggression. Most said that incidents of this kind have lowered their

self-confidence and made them isolate themselves from others. Fewer, but not neglected, are those who said they have entered depression (20%) or compensated for the lack of online friends by alcohol or drugs (5%).

Moreover, 84% of respondents admitted they witnessed such an attack without being aggressors or victims, but only 36% intervened in the conflict between the two sides. Although most would have liked to take part of the harassed one, most people become indifferent or even aggressor for fear of being attacked and turn into casualties.

3.1 Online sexual harassment. Until now, the concrete cases of cyberbullying with targets or authors among Romanian citizens have been extremely limited in quantity, a possible explanation being the absence of a tragic outcome or the retention of victims from telling their story.

A case of cyberbullying involving a Romanian author as a moral author took place in 2015 and ended with the suicide, on June 5, 2015, of an Irish teenager, Ronan Hughes, aged 17, blackmailed with pornographic materials in which he appeared while expressing explicit sexual behavior. The author of blackmail was identified in a 31-year-old native of Timisoara, named Julian Enache.¹ Iulian Enache claimed 3,300 pounds in order not to publish the compromising material on the Internet, warning him:

You will do what I say or otherwise publish all this crap for your friends and not only: porn sites (20 or more), torrents and DC++ !!! Okay, did I get your attention? So you should know what's good for you! What I want? Money! I have no interest in sending your nonsense to your friends. I just want the money!

As the teenager did not send his money, on June 5, the Romanian sent several pictures and videos to Ronan Hughes's friends. After materials were sent to his friends, the teenager did not resist the pressure and shot in the head with his brother's gun.

More recently, in June 2017, a 17-year-old in Ploiesti claimed to have been sexually trafficked through Facebook by an unknown CounterStrike player. Facebook messages show that the stranger insisted on the idea of an offline meeting, but was denied the amount of 50 lei for a sex party.²

3.2 Online ethnically motivated bullying.

Another dimension of online aggression is that of racial or ethnic intolerance, exemplary being a 305-word article posted on the Hotnews news portal about an incident at a German border crossing point between a family of Israelis and a border guard. Within 35 hours, the news generated 85 comments, which totalized 4449 words and contained aggression indicators that we categorized into 10 discursive registers:

- Harsh / Coarse - Use of pejorative appeals by Jews or Israelis as well as their derivatives (jid, jidan, jidov, ovra, jidoavca, ovraic, ovraic, jidovit etc);

- Indictment - views on Israel's involvement in various developments in the Middle East (e.g. the Palestinian issue);

- Pecuniary - opinions on the economic and financial purpose of the actions of the Jews, regarded as their prime concern and one of the characteristics of the ethnic group;

- Inciting - opinions on attitudes considered provocative / agitating and aimed at generating social tensions;

- Criminality - opinions on the assimilation of Jewish / Israeli behavior with facts contrary to legal or moral law;

- Machiavellian - opinions on the scandalousness of the Jews / Israelis, including the use of distortions of facts and their interpretation in a manner that allows the achievement of unlawful purposes;

- Offensive - offensive opinions without justification, be it subjective; in other words, offense for the sake of insult;

- Rudimentary - opinions about Jewish / Israeli primitivism, derived from the rural character of communities of the same name;

- *Foetur Iudaicus* - opinions derived from widespread prejudice in Europe dating back to the Middle Ages, concerning the so-called hereditary ugly smell evolved by Jews;

- The Final Solution - opinions on the elimination, including physically, of Jews or Israelis from society; this register also includes the explicit assumption of anti-Semitism.

The analysis of the incidence of each discursive register showed that most of the commentaries were based on the conviction of the authors that the main purpose of actions by Jewish people is to obtain material / economic / financial benefits and advantages, most often through the evocation of the Holocaust. On the second place there is a belief that Jews / Israelis have a behavior

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-41088814>, accessed in April 8, 2018

² <https://www.republikanews.ro/un-pusti-din-ploiesti-hartuit-sexual-de-un-necunoscutfoto/>, accessed in April 8, 2018

marked by lies and victimization in connection with the same Holocaust. Harsh expressions, offensive and generically called "Final Solution" registers were equally represented, interpretable in terms of belonging to the same type of affront, the frontal one. Incidentally, if these three registers would be merged into one, they would place themselves in the top position of the rankings.

Interesting is the presence of anachronistic registers, the one about the rudimentary character of Israeli society - an anachronistic idea having regard of the current economic developments of Israel - and to the odor of the Jews - a prejudice whose persistence could be explained by the informational fundamentals of emitters, most likely based on classical antisemitic writings.

3.3 Online religiously motivated bullying.

Social media is the scene of the expression of latent or momentary resentment, which manifests itself as a reaction to events perceived as negative. Exemplary is the case for the construction of a large mosque in Bucharest, whose first step was the Government Decision 372 of May 29, 2015, whereby a land of 11,000 square meters was transferred from the private domain of the state and the administration of the Autonomous Administration "Administration of the State Protocol Patrimony", in the public domain of the state, the administration of the State Secretariat for Cults and the free use of the Mufti of Muslim Cult of Romania.

The Facebook page "We do not want the megamosque in Bucharest" was created shortly, with the stated aim of "repealing the HG 372/2015 by an Emergency Ordinance, whereby the land of 11,295 sqm will be returned to the private property of the state". Beyond the discussion of the situation, the discourse of the participants in the talks deviated sensitively, placing themselves in the area of the verbal aggression, so that, over the 800 pages as a summation of the comments on the megamosque, several types of aggressive opinions were identified.

Resentment over Muslims appear to be crystal clear, in view of the fact that the verbal aggression directed obviously on them was represented by 121 items, at a suitable distance from the insults of a general nature (51) and followed by suggestions on the so-called "solution to the problem" (77). The most directly verbal attacks have been addressed to Muslims and Islam and have outgrown the aggressiveness directed to the discussed issue. Moreover, the debate has often deviated from the situation that generated the dissatisfaction, becoming a topic often secondary, only a pretext for launching imprecations.

Regarding advanced solutions, they indicated overwhelmingly physical elimination (52 items out of 77), which shows on the one hand the desire for rapid resolution of the situation, and on the other the awareness that the Muslim community in Romania belong many Islamic followers who are Romanian citizens and can not be expelled, as suggested in 17 cases.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Due to the possible retention of victims from telling their story or the absence of a tragic outcome, in Romania the concrete cases of cyberbullying are extremely limited in quantity even though various studies have shown that this type of incidents is increasing in our country as well.

The most visible situations that could be considered as cyberbullying cases can be found on the social networks or as comments posted on articles published by news sites, but, at least at a first glance, those situations lack a characteristic that could confirm them as cyberbullying: the repeated nature over a period. From this perspective, what remains to be studied is whether the authors of verbal attacks against group targets manifest themselves on several social platforms, synchronize their actions and express their hostility continuously, even if apparently this is discontinuous due to occurrences and successive disappearances. It also remains to be noticed whether the resentments that lead to verbal aggression manifested online are generated by punctual events or has a constant character.

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