

viWTA

Cyberbullying among youngsters in Flanders

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

**Study commissioned by
viWTA – Samenleving en technologie**

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"Vandebosch, H. , Van Cleemput, K., Mortelmans, D., Walrave, M., (2006), Cyberpesten bij jongeren in Vlaanderen, studie in opdracht van het viWTA, Brussel"

or

"Vandebosch, Heidi, Van Cleemput, Katrien, Mortelmans, Dimitri, Walrave, Michel, Cyberpesten bij jongeren in Vlaanderen, studie in opdracht van het viWTA, Brussel, 2006."

1.	What is cyberbullying (definition)?	3
2.	Research into cyberbullying in Flanders	4
2.1.	Youngsters and the use of new information and communication technology (ICT).....	4
2.1.1.	How often and why do youngsters use ICT?	4
2.1.2.	All cyberwizards?	5
2.1.3.	Do parents monitor their children's Internet and cell phone behavior?.....	5
2.1.4.	Internet at school?	5
2.1.5.	Cyberspace or the real thing?	5
2.2.	Traditional bullying	6
2.2.1.	How prevalent is bullying?	6
2.2.2.	Who are the bullies and who the victims?	7
2.3.	Cyberbullying	7
2.3.1.	How prevalent is cyberbullying?	7
2.3.2.	Who are the cyberbullies?	10
2.3.3.	Who are the victims of cyberbullying?	10
3.	Conclusion.....	11
4.	Policy recommendations	12

1. WHAT IS CYBERBULLYING (DEFINITION)?

Cyberbullying relies on new information and communication technologies, primarily the Internet and mobile phones. Examples include anonymous emails, abusive instant messages, changing email passwords, text message harassment and the setup of defamatory websites.

In the case of traditional bullying, the initiator wants to hurt and incessantly harass the victim. The bully has more power, and often greater physical strength than the victim. By and large, it applies to cyberbullying as well.

There are nevertheless some important differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying:

- Cyberbullying does not need to be as repetitive. For example, a defamatory website will often remain on line for a long period and can be seen by many people. In contrast, a spoken insult disappears the moment it is uttered, and is only heard by those present at that time.
- In case of traditional bullying, the physical strength of the bully is often an important factor. Cyberbullies however, gain their power mainly from their computer and Internet skills. If one can build a website, it is only a small step to turn it into a defamatory one. Yet, relatively simple tools such as email or instant messaging can already inflict serious damage.
- Email and cell phone text messages typically are difficult to interpret since there are no facial expressions, no intonation. The lack of interaction also makes it tough for cyberbullies to assess a victim's reaction and harder to realize how much pain such action can cause.
- On the Internet, it is easy to take on a fake identity, allowing for the anonymous harassment of victims.

Some examples of cyberbullying

- Break into a mailbox and change the password
- Purposely send a virus-infected file
- Hack into someone's computer and stealing personal information
- Purposely send many or excessively large messages in an attempt to overload their system
- Use the Internet or mobile phone to insult or threaten
- Exclude someone from an online group
- Disseminate private or embarrassing information about someone through the Internet or by mobile phone (e.g. an embarrassing photograph)
- Pretend to be someone else over the Internet or mobile phone
- Steal of someone's email or messenger password and send messages in their name
- Set up defamatory personal polls (e.g. "Just how much of a loser is Betty?")
- Post private or confidential information on a website or forward it to others through text or messages
- Spread rumours via email or text messages

2. RESEARCH INTO CYBERBULLYING IN FLANDERS

In October 2005, viWTA, so ordered by the Committee for Culture, Youth, Sport and the Media of the Flemish Parliament, asked the University of Antwerp to conduct a large-scale survey into cyberbullying among youngsters in Flanders. The study tried to establish a clear picture of ICT use by youngsters and their experience with traditional and cyberbullying. A total of 636 primary school children and 1416 high school students participated in the survey. They completed a questionnaire on the use of the Internet and mobile phones and their personal experience involving traditional and cyberbullying.

2.1. Youngsters and the use of new information and communication technology (ICT)

2.1.1. How often and why do youngsters use ICT?

- 94.4% of the youngsters interviewed use the Internet. 91.8% have access to the Internet at home.
- On average, youngsters spend almost 2 hours per day on the Internet. During weekends, they spend almost 3 hours online.
- Over 80% of youngsters aged 10 to 18 years own a mobile phone.
- The main reason why girls use the Internet is to "chat with others". Boys use the Internet mainly recreationally.
- Youngsters use their mobile phones primarily for texting and, to a lesser extent, for phoning. More recent applications of mobiles, such as MMS and Internet connectivity, are used less frequently.

- About half of the youngsters in the survey play video or computer games regularly or on a daily basis. Car racing and sports games are the most popular, followed by simulation and strategy games.

2.1.2. *All cyberwizards?*

The youngsters in the survey rate their knowledge of the Internet and computers highly: 70.1% consider themselves advanced users, and 15.4% call themselves experts. Internet use by youngsters, however, is not without risk: almost half (48.9%) chat online with people they know only from the Internet. An even larger proportion (51.6%) sometimes post personal information on the Web. Furthermore, 31.5% say they have passed on their password to a friend.

2.1.3. *Do parents monitor their children's Internet and cell phone behavior?*

Parents have the possibility to restrict their children's access to the Internet. However, the survey reveals that six out of ten youngsters are allowed to use the Internet at home at will. Parents have the option to be involved to varying degrees in their children's use of the Internet. For example, they could give their children tips about how to use the Internet more effectively (one in five parents already does so). They can pass on their Internet knowledge (12.0%), and point out the dangers of cyberspace (six in ten). It is also worth noting that only 38% of youngsters feel their parents are knowledgeable about the Internet. Clearly, though, some knowledge is required in order to give sound and credible advice to youngsters about how to use ICT.

Almost eight in ten youngsters say they are allowed to phone at will, and nine in ten add they can send all the text messages they want. At school though, mobile phone use is usually severely restricted.

2.1.4. *Internet at school?*

About six in ten youngsters also have access to the Internet at school. However, in three cases out of four Internet use is limited to looking up information that is related to school work. A large majority of youngsters (89.1%) feel their Computer science teachers know a lot about the Internet. The level of knowledge of other teachers is not considered as high.

2.1.5. *Cyberspace or the real thing?*

Youngsters still prefer to speak to their friends in person (99.7% 'like to' or 'like to very much'). Yet almost nine in ten (89.7%) indicate that they also 'like to' or 'very much like to' communicate with their friends through instant messaging. Talking over a mobile comes in

third (82.8% 'like to' or 'like to very much'). Fixed-line telephone (74.5% 'like to' or 'like to very much') and email (63.5% 'like to' or 'like to very much') are least popular. Youngsters are more likely to use the Internet or a mobile phone to tell someone they fancy them or that they find them annoying than for other types of messages.

Almost 60% of youngsters (59.3%) agree that they are more daring on the Internet. Half of them find that Internet messages and mobile phone messages are often misunderstood.

2.2. Traditional bullying

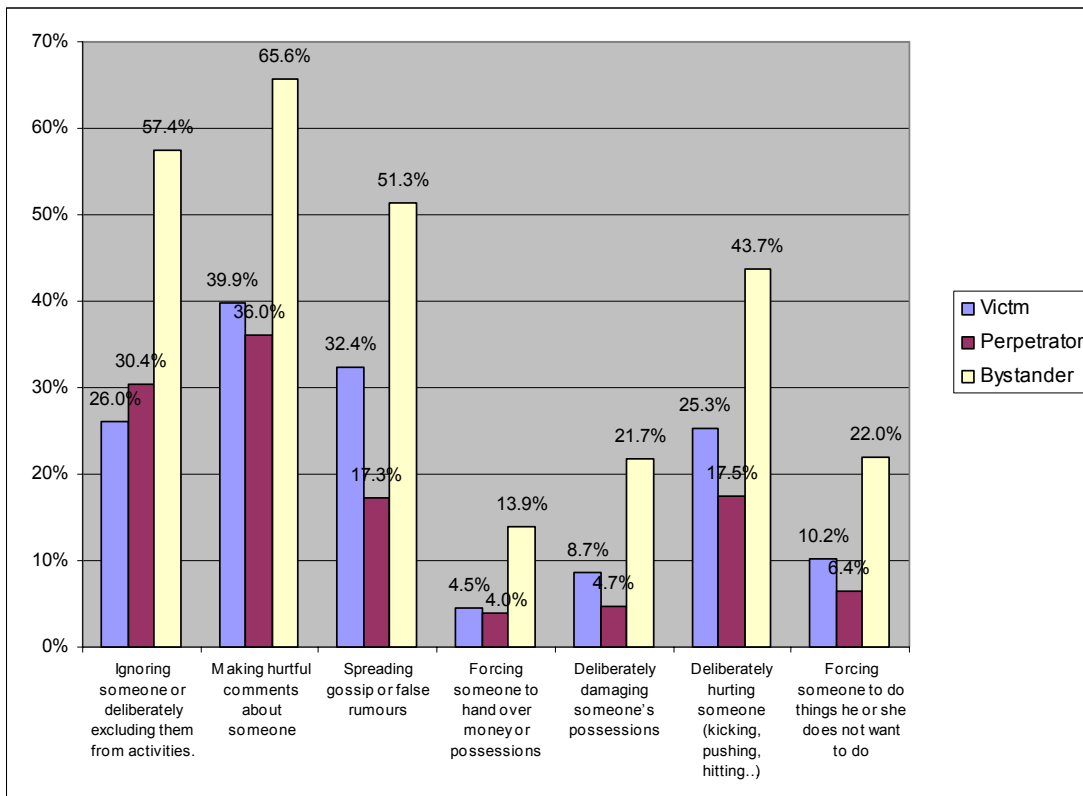
2.2.1. How prevalent is bullying?

56.7% of the youngsters report that, over the past three months, they have been the victims of at least one form of potentially offensive behavior. 49.3% admit they have bullied others, and 78.6% report having witnessed bullying.

The most common forms of bullying are 'offensive comments', 'deliberate exclusion or ignoring', 'spreading false rumours or gossip' and 'hitting, pushing, kicking or otherwise hurting people'.

Just over one in ten youngsters (10.4%) say they were often bullied over the past three months (i.e. frequently). Almost as many (9.0%) admits to having bullied others over that same period. A tiny minority (3.7%) say they have been both a victim and a bully.

Diagram 1: Overview of proportions of victims, perpetrators and bystanders of traditional forms of bullying.



2.2.2. *Who are the bullies and who the victims?*

The victims

- are most likely to be pupils from vocational secondary schools and least likely to be general secondary education pupils
- tend to have negative self-perception, less self-confidence, fewer social skills (they have fewer friends and feel less liked) and have an adverse relationship with their parents.
- Just over half of the victims told someone they were bullied.

The bullies

- Are usually older than the victims.
- are most likely to be pupils from secondary vocational schools and least likely to be general secondary education pupils.
- are more likely to be boys than girls.

The victims and perpetrators of traditional bullying incidents attend the same school in eight out of ten cases.

2.3. **Cyberbullying**

2.3.1. *How prevalent is cyberbullying?*

One in ten youngsters claims to have been a victim of bullying through the Internet or by mobile phone. Almost two in ten say they have been cyberbullies and about three in ten respond they have been bystanders.

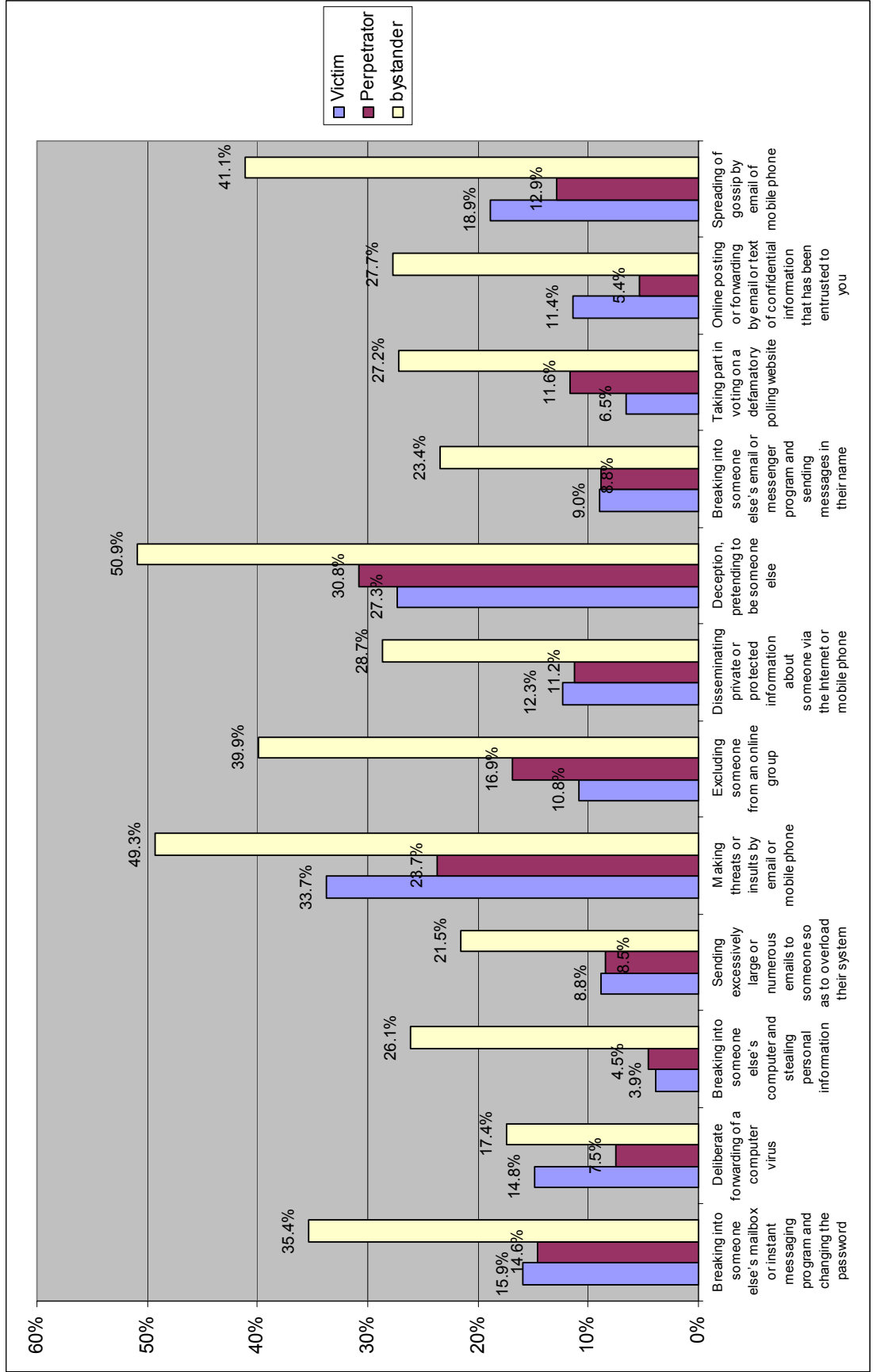
If we assess the youngsters who have come into contact with at least one form of potentially offensive behavior over the Internet or mobile phone over the past three months, the following picture emerges: 61.9 % of youngsters have been victims, 52.5% have been bullies, and 76.3% have been bystanders.

The most common forms of potentially offensive Internet and mobile phone behavior are: insults or threats via Internet or mobile phone, deception via Internet or mobile phone, gossiping via Internet or mobile phone and breaking into someone's computer and changing the password. Bullying which requires a deeper knowledge of computing and the Internet, such as organising a defamatory poll on a personal website and hacking into a computer, are far less common among youngsters.

About one in ten youngsters has been involved in frequent cyberbullying: 3.3% exclusively as a victim, 5.0% exclusively as a bully, and 2.6% as both a victim and a bully.

The majority of youngsters (63.8%) believes cyberbullying is a “major problem”. This figure may reflect a general assessment of the size of the issue in the eyes of the youngsters. But it may also show that they find it a serious problem for the victims.

Diagram 2: Frequency distribution of the various forms of potentially offensive Internet and mobile phone behaviour for victim, perpetrator and bystander



2.3.2. *Who are the cyberbullies?*

Youngsters who admit to having bullied someone through the Internet or by mobile phone...

...spend more time on the Internet

...have parents who are less involved in their use of the Internet

...are more often also victims and bystanders of bullying through the Internet or by mobile phone

...are more often perpetrators of traditional acts of bullying

...do so anonymously in seven out of ten cases

Youngsters who have tried out various Internet and mobile phone actions that are potentially offensive...

...are more often boys than girls

...have greater knowledge of more complex Internet applications

...have many friends and feel popular

...have parents who are less involved in their Internet use

...are more often also bystanders and victims of various Internet and mobile phone actions that may be offensive

...are more often perpetrators of traditional bullying

2.3.3. *Who are the victims of cyberbullying?*

Youngsters who feel like they have been bullied through the Internet or by mobile phone...

...are more dependent upon the Internet (they find life without the Internet boring, they may disregard their homework to go online, they make many friends over the Internet...)

...have fewer friends and feel less popular

...are more often also a bystander and perpetrator of Internet and mobile phone bullying.

...are less often the perpetrator and more often the victim of traditional acts of bullying

...show more symptoms of stress

...have told someone about the Internet or mobile phone bullying in less than half the cases

Youngsters who have been the victim of various actions on the Internet or by mobile phone that may have been offensive:

...are more often girls than boys

...take more risks on the Internet: they are more likely to chat with people they know only from cyberspace

... have many friends and feel popular

...are more often also bystanders and perpetrators of various actions on the Internet or by mobile phone that may be offensive to others.

3. CONCLUSION

1) There is a strong link between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. It raises the assumption that bullying at school and in social life is extended into cyberspace. In such a case the roles remain unchanged: bullies remain bullies and victims remain victims. There would seem to be no evidence of so-called "revenge of the nerds" in cyberspace. On the other hand, there is the possibility that cyberbullying spurs traditional bullying. There is, however, a category of youngsters who are only involved in cyberbullying. In other words, cyberbullying has not only deepened the phenomenon of bullying (more intense, via multiple channels), but has also broadened it (more youngsters involved).

2) Cyberbullies have, in many cases, also been the victims or bystanders of such bullying, and vice versa. This is an indication of counter- or chain reactions in cyberbullying, with bullies becoming victims and victims bullies. Ultimately it creates a "culture of cyberbullying" (which may be witnessed by many, and inspire many).

3) The amount of time that youngsters spend on the Internet and the level of Internet dependency may be an indication of their involvement in cyberbullying.

4) Youngsters need no knowledge of complex Internet applications to become cyberbullies, although it does provide the bully with a broader range of tools. Youngsters who take risks on the Internet (e.g. online posting of personal information, chatting with strangers, lack of caution with regard to passwords....) are more likely to fall prey to certain types of online bullying. Nevertheless, even those who take heed may become victims of cyberbullying.

5) The lack of parental involvement and expertise means that youngsters are often able to experiment at will in cyberspace. It is therefore also an environment where they can bully unchecked.

6) Youngsters more likely to be bullied in real life often seek refuge in cyberspace (which appears to be unsafe too)

7) Cyberbullying varies according to gender, schooling and age. Bullies are more often boys than girls. Youngsters from vocational secondary schools are more likely to have experienced cyberbullying (in all aspects) than youngsters from general secondary schools. The prevalence of cyberbullying increases up to about age 15 after which it

declines again. These differences in gender, schooling and age are strongly linked to the amount of Internet activity, the degree of parental supervision, and involvement in traditional forms of bullying. These factors primarily indicate the involvement in cyberbullying.

8) Youngsters do not always perceive the Internet and mobile phone activities that the survey considers potentially offensive as "bullying." Much depends on the action involved: for example, youngsters are hurt a lot more by Internet and mobile phone actions in which they are publicly humiliated than by actions which affect only themselves (e.g. computer crash caused by deliberate infection with a virus). Obviously, much also depends on the relationship between the youngster and the perpetrator. Youngsters are less likely to feel hurt or offended if they have fallen victim to a prank by friends (or at least will not consider it as an act of bullying) than if they are being harassed by someone else (e.g. someone who also bullies them at school).

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Cyberbullying Prevention

Make youngsters aware that:

- cyberbullying can have far-reaching consequences for the victim. Youngsters in front of computer screens have feelings too, and can be deeply hurt or offended by online behavior of others.
- high-risk behavior on the Internet (handing over passwords, online posting of personal information, etc. ...) increases the risk of becoming a cyberbully victim.
- Internet bullies can be traced and punished.

Make parents and schools aware that:

- parents should have better knowledge of their children's Internet and mobile phone use. To this end, parents should improve their Internet skills.
- Computer science courses should go beyond the technical aspects of computing and pay closer attention to the dangers and risks of the Internet and to cyber etiquette.
- Since cyberbullying often is an extension of traditional bullying (or can be a cause for) schools should assume responsibility in cases of cyberbullying.

Dealing with cyberbullying

Raising assertiveness of victims

Victims should be told which action they may or must take to protect themselves (e.g. Storing of evidence)

Raising awareness of Internet providers and mobile telephone operators

Internet providers and mobile telephone operators must be encouraged to enforce their code of conduct for users and to intervene in instances of cyberbullying.

Suggestions for further research

Qualitative research can explore the phenomenon of cyberbullying in greater depth. First and foremost, this may involve interviews with victims and perpetrators to gain insight into how they perceive cyberbullying. Additionally, professionals who are confronted daily with cyberbullying at work (e.g. social services at school, (anti-bullying) teachers...) could be interviewed about their experiences. Finally, the experiences of parents and teachers could be analyzed to gain clearer insight into the causes of cyberbullying.

We recommend that quantitative follow-up research be conducted to better understand how cyberbullying is developing, and to measure how effective policy interventions have been. The questionnaire used in the present survey may serve as a starting point.