

BULLYING AND SUICIDAL TENDENCIES AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Adelina-Maria SZOKOLA¹, Luiza VLAICU², Cosmin GOIAN³

Abstract

The study aims to explore the influence of bullying on suicidal tendencies among students who were victims of this phenomenon., 130 responses were collected, of which: 103 are from women, and 27 from men. Since the main purpose of the research is to identify whether the students who were victims of bullying had suicidal tendencies, it was found that the presence of bullying explains a considerable proportion (30%) of the emergence of suicidal tendencies among victims. At the same time, another purpose was to explore the relationship between the social network and the development of a suicidal behavior, and with the use of partial correlation to test the association between poor communication with parents and the emergence of suicidal tendencies while controlling the bullying variable, we identified a significant score confirming the relationship between these two elements.

Keywords: bullying, suicide, school violence, students, Romania.

Résumé

L'étude vise à explorer l'influence de l'intimidation sur les tendances suicidaires chez les élèves qui ont été victimes de ce phénomène. 130 réponses ont été recueillies dont : 103 de femmes et 27 d'hommes. Puisque l'objectif principal de la recherche est d'identifier si les élèves victimes d'agression avaient des tendances suicidaires, on a constaté que la présence d'intimidation explique une proportion considérable (30 %) de la survenue de tendances suicidaires chez les victimes. Parallèlement, un autre objectif était d'explorer la relation entre le réseau social et le développement de comportements suicidaires et avec l'utilisation de la corrélation partielle de tester l'association entre une mauvaise communication avec les parents et l'émergence de tendances suicidaires tout en contrôlant la variable d'intimidation identifiée, un score significatif confirmant la relation entre ces deux éléments.

Mots clés : harcèlement, suicide, violence à l'école, étudiants, Roumanie.

¹ Student, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University Timișoara, +40730043075, Str. Vasile Pârvan, nr. 4, Timișoara, Timiș, România; adelina.szokola00@e-uvt.ro

² Asist. univ. dr., Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University Timișoara, +40743520678, Str. Vasile Pârvan, nr. 4, Timișoara, Timiș, România; florina.vlaicu@e-uvt.ro

³ Prof. univ. dr, Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University Timișoara, +40256592373, Str. Vasile Pârvan, nr. 4, Timișoara, Timiș, România; cosmin.goian@e-uvt.ro

Rezumat

Studiul își propune să exploreze influența bullying-ului asupra tendințelor suicidare în rândul studenților care au fost victime ale acestui fenomen. Au fost colectate 130 de răspunsuri, dintre care: 103 sunt de la femei și 27 de la bărbați. Întrucât scopul principal al cercetării este de a identifica dacă studenții care au fost victime ale agresiunii au avut tendințe suicidare, s-a constatat că prezența bullying-ului explică o proporție considerabilă (30%) din apariția tendințelor suicidare în rândul victimelor. Totodată, un alt scop a fost acela de a explora relația dintre rețeaua socială și dezvoltarea unui comportament suicidar, și cu utilizarea corelației parțiale pentru a testa asocierea dintre comunicarea slabă cu părinții și apariția tendințelor suicidare în timp ce se controlează variabila bullying-ului identificat un scor semnificativ care confirmă relația dintre aceste două elemente.

Cuvinte cheie: bullying, suicide, violența în școală, studenți, România.

1. Introduction

When it comes to dealing with social phenomena it is very important to understand their entire meaning, from the first definition to the updated forms. The term „bully” has been assigned various connotations over time. If today the word provokes negative reactions, during the Renaissance cultural movement (XIV-XVI century) it was used with a positive meaning, being a form of addressing the loved one. Even the great writer William Shakespeare used the word to express feelings of affection: „I kiss his dirty shoe, and from my heart-string I love the lovely bully” (Crawford, 1999). However, the meaning of the word began to change around the end of the 17th century. In Romanian, the term is translated as „harassment”, „intimidation”.

Regarding intervention in bullying situations, the focus is primarily on preventive programs. One of the most well-known prevention programs on the phenomenon of bullying is the one developed by the psychologist Dan Olweus. „The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program”, also known as „OBPP” is based on 4 main ideas developed from research on adolescent aggression (Olweus *et al.*, 2019). Adults involved in the educational process must place particular importance on creating a positive atmosphere, where there are limits when it comes to displaying inappropriate behavior and techniques to reinforce positive behavior are used, without promoting hostile repercussions. In the intervention on suicidal tendencies, the emphasis must be on: increasing the level of awareness of one's own values and the meaning of life, developing skills for managing emotions, increasing self-confidence, developing skills for managing stress and eliminating stressors, developing skills regarding formulating goals and maintaining the motivation to achieve them (Abil *et al.*, 2016 apud Lidars, 2009; Alieva, Grishanovich & Lobanova, 2006; Avidon, 2008).

Since suicide, suicidal behavior and suicidal ideation are a direct consequence of bullying, the relationship between these social phenomena has often been addressed by researchers in the field. In this sense, participation in acts of harassment, both as an aggressor, but also in that of direct victimization, was associated with an increased risk of suicide among adolescents (Arango *et al.*, 2016

apud Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kim & Leventhal, 2008). At the same time, suicidal behavior and suicidal ideation are closely related to the types of bullying. Thus, young people who took part or were victims of physical aggression are more likely to intentionally harm themselves or think about death (43% and 36%), than young people who were affected by verbal bullying (32 % and 23%) (Arango *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, following a study on the effects of bullying and cyberbullying on mental health, strong links were highlighted between both types of bullying and self-harm, correlated with high levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Eyuboglu *et al.*, 2021). The association between bullying and suicidal ideation by gender plays a significant role in understanding the relationship between the two aspects. Bullying at school and sharing problems only with friends and not with a person who can provide professional support are factors associated with the emergence of suicidal tendencies among boys (Laukkanen *et al.*, 2006).

2. Research methodology

The purpose of the research is to identify whether students who were victims of bullying had suicidal tendencies. The objectives of the research refer to the percentage measurement of the likelihood of appearance of suicidal tendencies among victims of bullying, comparing the occurrence of suicidal tendencies according to gender, and finally, establishing the relationship between the social network and the development of suicidal behavior.

Hypothesis

1. The presence of bullying significantly and positively predicts the emergence of suicidal tendencies among young people.
2. Males are more likely to develop suicidal tendencies.
3. During adolescence, when young people were victims of bullying, they felt more comfortable sharing their problems with friends than with family.
4. Poor communication between young people and their parents, during the period of adolescence when they were bullied, contributed to the emergence of suicidal tendencies.

Research method

The research method is quantitative. The characteristics of quantitative methods, namely, determining the frequency, probability, and discovery of certain relationships between two or more variables, generating numerical data, are in accordance with the research objectives and the finality of the study.

Participants

The questionnaire was applied among Romanian students, regardless of the university and their specialization. Thus, 130 responses were collected, of which: 103 are from women and 27 from men. At the same time, 115 undergraduate students, 15 master's students and 2 doctoral students participated in the research.

Research tool

To carry out the research, the questionnaire was distributed through the Google forms platform. The first part of the questionnaire presents identification questions (gender and education level), and then the questions refer to the bullying experienced by the participants during high school and the emergence of suicidal tendencies.

The items are evaluated using the Likert scale, as follows: for bullying, a scale from 0-5 was used, where 0 means „never” and 5 „very often”. The scale has a strong internal consistency, having a cronbach's alpha coefficient $\alpha = .86$. For suicidal tendencies, items are rated from 0-4, where 0 is equivalent to „never” and 4 to „every day”. The internal consistency of this scale is also strong, the Cronbach alpha coefficient being $\alpha = .92$. For questions about family and aspirations, a scale of 0-4 was used, 0 being „total disagreement” and 4 being „total agreement”. In this case, the scale has a strong internal consistency, having an alpha cronbach coefficient $\alpha = .70$.

Data collecting and processing

Student participation in the research was voluntary. The data was collected with the help of the questionnaire, which was also sent online through social networks, on student groups. The social networks were Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Gmail.

The collected data was transferred into the Microsoft Excel program to create a database, to process the information in SPSS Statistics, with the help of T-tests, regression with a single predictor and partial correlation.

Ethical aspects

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the nature of the study, namely: study description, eligibility criteria, procedure, and data confidentiality. Since the research contains items that can generate certain situations of discomfort, the collected data was anonymous. At the same time, the participants had to give their consent regarding the participation, in order to access the questionnaire.

Limitations of the study

Among the possible limits that could appear in the research, we can mention: imbalances between the gender of the respondents, the samples not being equal, so it is impossible to generalize the results, given the sample size, the subjectivity of data interpretation, the sensitive nature of the study and the chosen method of data collection.

3. Results

Hypothesis 1: The presence of bullying significantly and positively predicts the emergence of suicidal tendencies among young people.

Table no. 1. Simple linear regression of bullying on suicidal tendencies

Variable	B	B SE	β	r^2
Constant	.152	.12		.30
Bullying	.47	.06	.547***	

Note. *** $p < .001$; $N = 130$

To measure the percent of occurrence of suicidal tendencies among victims of bullying, linear regression with a single predictor was used to check whether the presence of bullying will significantly and positively predict the occurrence of suicidal tendencies among young people.

Thus, the presence of bullying explains a considerable proportion (30%) of the occurrence of suicidal tendencies among victims.

Table no. 2. Verbal bullying

	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Very often
1. You have been called various offensive nicknames or insults by your classmates	10.8% (14)	24.6% (32)	18.5% (24)	24.6% (32)	10.8% (14)	10.8% (14)
2. People have spread rumors about you in class/school that could have led to damaging your personal image	25.4% (33)	14.6% (19)	19.2% (25)	18.5% (24)	12.3% (16)	10% (13)

When asked about the behaviors that make up verbal bullying, such as the assignment of offensive nicknames or insults by classmates, two predominant categories of responses can be identified, namely „very rarely” and „sometimes”. Of the total number of respondents, 24.6% claim that they were very rarely called various offensive nicknames or insults by their classmates during high school, and at the same time, 24.6% answered the same question with sometimes. Moreover, 18.5% say that this behavior happened to them rarely, and the items never, often and very often are equal, all 3 variants being in the proportion of 10.8%.

Regarding the spread of unfounded information (rumors) in the classroom/school, 33 of the respondents (25.4%) claim that this has never happened to them, and only 10% claim that it has happened to them very often. At the same time, 19.2% claimed that unfounded information was rarely spread in the classroom/school, while 18.5% answered sometimes. 14.6% of the respondents state that they very rarely experienced unfounded information about them being spread in the class/school, and 12.3% mention that this happened often.

In conclusion, significant differences can be observed between the responses. If in the first question in this category the extremes have equal values (10.8%), in the second question the difference between the positive and negative values is 15.4%.

Table no. 3. Relational bullying

	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Very often
3. You were ridiculed and humiliated in front of your peers	16.2% (21)	24.6% (32)	15.4% (20)	23.8% (31)	11.5% (15)	8.5% (11)
4. You have been excluded from various social activities due to aspects that you cannot control (e.g. physical appearance, financial situation, background, etc.)	31.5% (41)	19.2% (25)	13.8% (18)	16.9% (22)	10.8% (14)	7.7% (10)

To the first item that refers to relational bullying, for the question „ You were ridiculed and humiliated in front of your peers?”, the predominant answer is very rarely (24.6%), being followed by sometimes, with a difference of 0.8%. Only 8.5% of the respondents stated that they were very often ridiculed and humiliated in front of their colleagues, while 16.2% answered never. At the same time, 15.4% said that it happened to them rarely, and 11.5% often.

Regarding being excluded from various social activities due to aspects beyond their control, most respondents stated that this had never happened to them, the predominant category of responses is 31.5%. At the other extreme, 7.7% say it happens to them very often. Out of the total number of respondents, 25 claim that it happened to them very rarely (19.2%) to be excluded from various activities, and 18 claim that it happened to them rarely (13.8%). However, 16.9% of respondents chose the option sometimes, and 10.8% often.

In conclusion, almost half of the respondents responded negatively to the relational bullying category, with a total of 62 respondents, with a difference of 41 responses compared to the affirmative responses.

Table no. 4. Physical bullying

	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Very often
5. You have formally been involved in violent acts (such as pushing, scratching, slapping) that had as a result your intentional injury.	49.2% (64)	20% (26)	11.5% (15)	8.5% (11)	6.9% (9)	3.8% (5)

In the case of physical bullying, 49.2% of respondents answered that they were never involved in the actions that had a purpose to injure them, and 3.8% said that they were involved very often. 20% chose the very rarely option, representing 26 people, 11.5% mentioned that they were rarely victims of any aggressions, 8.5% say it happened sometimes. Of the total number of respondents, 6.9%, respectively 9 people answered that it often happened to them to be involved in violent actions against them.

Table no. 5. Cyberbullying

	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Very often
6. You've been mocked on a social network	40.8% (53)	19.2% (25)	11.5% (15)	16.2% (21)	6.2% (8)	6.2% (8)
7. Pictures/videos have been posted on a social network without your consent	65.4% (85)	18.5% (24)	6.9% (9)	3.8% (5)	3.1% (4)	2.3% (3)

In the case of cyberbullying, when asked if they were insulted on social networks, almost half of the respondents (40.8%) answered that they were not placed in such a situation, 19.2% said that it happened to them very rarely, 11.5% chose the option of rarely, and 16.2% mentioned the fact that it happened to them sometimes. At the same time, 12.4% of the total respondents admitted that they had been mocked often (6.2%) and very often (6.2%).

For the question „Have pictures/videos been posted on a social network without your consent”, more than half of the respondents answered never (65.4%),

and only 2.3% said it happened to them very often. The next most popular option was very rarely with 18.5%, followed by rarely 6.9%, sometimes 3.8% and often 3.1%.

In conclusion, significant differences can be observed among the respondents in this category, with the predominant answers being the negative ones.

Table no. 6. Suicide

	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	Once a week	Every day
8. I think about what life would be like for those around me if I hadn't been born	37.7% (49)	29.2% (38)	14.6% (19)	10% (12)	8.5% (11)
9. I think that if something bad happened to me, those around me would be relieved and happier	52.3% (68)	23.8% (31)	12.3% (16)	5.4% (7)	6.2% (8)

From all the answers given to the statement „I think about how the lives of those around me would be if I had not been born”, the predominant option was „never”, with a percentage of 37.7%, followed by the answer „of a few times a year” with 29.2%. 14.6% of respondents say that they thought about this aspect „once a month”, while 10% thought about it „once a week”. At the same time, 8.5% of the people who participated in the study said that they thought about it every day.

Regarding the statement „I think that if something bad happened to me, those around me would be relieved and happier”, like the first item, most of the answers were for the never option (52.3%). 23.8% of respondents say that they thought about this aspect several times a year, 12.3% say that it happened to them once a month, 5.4% once a week, and 6.2% say that they had such thoughts every day.

Table no. 7. Suicide thoughts

	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	Once a week	Everyday
10. I picture scenarios that have as results the end of my life	40.8% (53)	25.4% (33)	10.8% (14)	14.6% (19)	8.5% (11)
11. I think about what I would write in a possible farewell letter	55.4% (72)	23.8% (31)	9.2% (12)	7.7% (10)	3.8% (5)

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	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	Once a week	Everyday
12. I think if life deserves living	42.3% (55)	23.1% (30)	14.6% (19)	12.3% (16)	7.7% (10)
13. I wish I could go to sleep and never wake up so I would not have to face reality	47.7% (62)	22.3% (29)	11.5% (15)	8.5% (11)	10% (13)

As can be seen in table no. 7, all four questions have as the dominant answer the option never with 40.8%, 55.4%, 42.3%, respectively 47.7%. However, from the total of research participants, gathering the „every day” category within this section, 30% of respondents have experienced suicidal thoughts. Afterwards, the second most popular answer being a few times a year with 25.4% for the statement „I imagine scenarios that end in my own death”, 23.8% for „I think about what I would write in a possible farewell letter”, 23.1% to „I think about whether life is worth living or not” and 22.3% to „I wish to go to bed and not wake up so I don't have to face reality”.

Table no. 8. Suicide

	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	Once a week	Everyday
14. I resort to methods of self-harm to endanger my life (e.g. self-mutilation with sharp objects and abuse of drugs, alcohol or other substances, burns, etc.)	74.8% (97)	15.4% (20)	4.6% (6)	3.8% (5)	1.5% (2)
15. I would rather suffer from a somatic point of view than suffer emotionally	68.6% (89)	16.2% (21)	9.2% (12)	4.6% (6)	1.5% (2)

In the case of destructive behaviors such as self-harm methods and the perspective on internal vs. external suffering, more than half of the respondents say they have never resorted to such a gesture or had such thoughts, at a rate of 74.8%, respectively 68.6%. At the same time, 15.4% of respondents state that they resorted to self-harm methods several times a year, 4.6% say that they resorted to this gesture once a month, 3.8% once a week, 1.5 % admit they used to do this every day.

Moreover, 16.2% of all respondents claim that several times a year they thought that it was better to suffer from a somatic point of view than emotionally, while 9.2% did it once a month. 4.6% had such thoughts once a week, and 1.5% every day.

In conclusion, although the values regarding bullying and those regarding suicidal ideation do not present a very high score, they have a direct influence on each other. The greater the intensity of the bullying, the more suicidal tendencies will be present.

Hypothesis 2: Males are more likely to develop suicidal tendencies

Table no. 9. *t*-test variable gender and the development of suicidal tendencies

	Male	Female	
	MS	MS	t(130)
	SD	SD	p
Suicidal tendencies	49	1.05	-4.068
	.492	1.019	.006

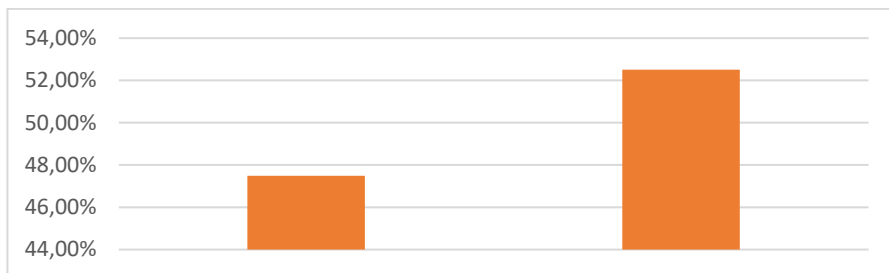
We used the independent samples *t*-test to check whether males are more likely to develop suicidal tendencies.

Results: Males (N = 27, M = .49, SD = .492) are not more likely to develop suicidal tendencies than females (N = 103, M = 1.05, SD = 1.019). The test results thus indicate $t(130) = -4.068, p = .006$.

To determine what stage the research participants are in, we used a scale from 0 to 4, where 0 is the equivalent of „never” and 4 represents the option of „every day”. We divided the scale into 3 equal segments: between 0-1.33 the level of suicidal tendencies is interpreted as low, 1.34-2.67 illustrates the average level, and 2.68-4 we find a high level.

Of the total male respondents, 5 out of 27 have a suicide-related question average above 1, while 21 of them have an average between 0 and 0.5, and only one respondent has a score of 0.9. Of the 27 respondents, all fall into the low segment. Thus, this hypothesis was not confirmed, a possible cause being the inequality of the groups. Although suicidal ideation is not present in a very high proportion, it still exists among the respondents.

Hypothesis 3: During adolescence, when young people were victims of bullying, they felt more comfortable sharing their problems with friends than with family.



Graph 1. *Families vs friends in bullying situations*

To test if young people feel more comfortable sharing their problems with friends than with their family comparisons between the bullying variables and friends vs. bullying and family were conducted. The graph above illustrates the fact that in situations of bullying, 52.51% of the respondents talk to their friends about the problems. This shows that they have more trust in the created social environment than in the family nucleus. After analyzing the results, this hypothesis is confirmed.

Hypothesis 4: Young people's poor communication with their parents, during a period of adolescence when they were bullied, contributed to the emergence of suicidal tendencies.

Table no. 11. Correlation partial between family and bullying

Controlled variable	Variable	M	AS	r	p	r ²
Bullying	Family	1.66	1,121	.47	.00	.93
	SUICIDE	.93	.96			

N = 130

Using partial correlation to pair poor communication with parents and the appearance of suicidal tendencies and controlling the bullying variable, we identified a significant score in these correlations, confirming the mentioned assumption. To have a clearer result, we divided the respondents according to gender. To determine the situation of poor communication between young people and parents, we used a scale from 0 to 4, where 0 is total disagreement and 4 is total agreement.

This scale was divided into 3 segments to find out the average of respondents when it comes to poor communication with parents. From 0 to 1.33 communication is healthy, from 1.34 to 2.67 it is difficult and from 2.68 to 4 it is almost non-existent. The average for this category is 1.66, which means that the respondents have difficulties in communicating with their parents, having a difficult relationship with them. 81.71% of the female respondents claim that they have poor communication with their parents, while only 18.29% of the male participants support the hypothesis. Moreover, it appears that 83.22% of the number of female students who completed the questionnaire imagined scenarios that have as their finality the end of life, the male respondents being at the opposite pole with only 18.29%. In conclusion, this hypothesis was confirmed, the 3 aspects being interconnected.

4. Conclusions

The understanding of the bullying phenomenon can be achieved by analyzing aspects such as the conceptual delimitation between the types of

bullying and how they manifest, the effects on the individuals involved (both the victim/victims and the aggressor/aggressors), but also the intervention methods that allow professionals in the field to act at the expense of aggravating risk situations. Since the consequences of bullying can affect the individual on several levels, especially on the cognitive-behavioral side, this phenomenon is closely related to the development of suicidal tendencies.

The perspective of this study is to measure the percentage of occurrence of suicidal tendencies among victims of bullying, to compare the occurrence of suicidal tendencies according to gender and to establish a correlation between the social network and the development of suicidal behavior.

Following data collection and analysis, 3 out of 4 hypotheses were confirmed. The unconfirmed hypothesis may be due to the inequality of the groups within the sample, as 27 respondents are male and 103 are female.

The research shows that bullying and suicidal tendencies are closely related, as bullying has a 30% influence on the emergence of suicidal tendencies among victims. Thus, as long as the intensity of bullying increases, suicidal tendencies will also be on the rise. In this case, immediately after detecting a case of bullying, the fastest possible intervention is necessary so that the situation does not degenerate.

The scale related to the measurement of suicidal tendencies was segmented into 3 equal portions: between 0-1.33 the level of suicidal tendencies is interpreted as low, 1.34-2.67 illustrates the average level, and 2.68-4 we find a high level. The average for all respondents is 0.93, falling on the low level. However, for female respondents the highest value was 3.63, being very close to the maximum level, and the lowest value was 0. The highest score for male participants was 1.5, while 4 respondents had an average of 0. Although the level of suicidal tendencies is not very high, they were present in the respondents' lives.

Both the family network and the social network that people create throughout life play a significant role in the well-being and effective functioning of individuals. In the case of bullying situations, victims were more confident to share their problems with friends than with family. An explanation in this sense can be the usual saying „friends are the family you choose”, this aspect being highlighted by the percentage results also illustrated in Graph no. 1, namely: 52.51% of respondents preferred to turn to friends when they were bullied, compared to 47.49% who prefer to keep their problems within the family. The difference between the two values is not very significant. In addition to the existence of bullying, a factor that can lead to the emergence and development of suicidal tendencies is lack of communication. Thus, the data from table no. 11 highlights the fact that the value within this category is 1.66, which means that the respondents have difficulties in communicating with their parents, having a difficult relationship with them. The family environment should be seen as a space characterized by safety and trust, where people should not feel judged because of situations they cannot control.

Contacting a specialist in the field is an essential step in reducing the phenomena. They are able to provide support on all levels, including strengthening relationships with the family environment. Since bullying affects the self-esteem of the victims, specialized help can improve the vision of the person, the goal being to restore balance and increase the adaptability of the individual.

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