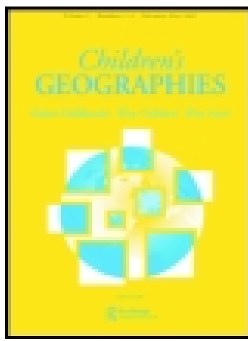

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(Cyber)Bullying in schools – when bullying stretches across cON/FFlating spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article posits that analyses of (cyber)bullying among digitally connected young people need to explore the interdependences, intersections and cON/FFlation of bullying in ONline and OFFline spaces. It combines digital geographers' works on relationalities between digital and offline spaces with studies on children's and young people's geographies and digitization as well as with interdisciplinary work on cyberbullying and traditional bullying in the school context. Drawing on narratives written by young people in Austria, the article lets participants speak through their own voices. There is an urgent need for disparate research examining either or both traditional and cyberbullying, to take note not only of each of their inimitable spatialities, but also their intersections. Through taking a perspective of cON/FFlating spaces we seek to produce a better understanding of the cON/FFlating nature and spaces of bullying in the digital era and to deepen the conceptualization of these interlinked and entangled socio-material-technological spaces.

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Digitization; digital geographies; pupils; digital space; physical space; written narratives

Introduction

Digital media entail a variety of positive effects for young people. They offer alternative ways of self-expression and self-care, friendship building, learning and knowledge acquisition in education and training, and in doing so, expand young people's everyday worlds in times of increased supervision and restriction of their access to physical public places (cf. Ruckenstein 2013; boyd 2014; Wilson 2016 ; cf. Jones, Williams, and Fleuriot 2003). Equipped with mobile media devices like smartphones and tablets, an increasing number of young people worldwide are constantly connected to their social peer groups and have photo and video capabilities at their fingertips. For them, the internet is no longer a separate 'cyberspace' but is deeply woven into the spaces of their everyday life (Vanden Abeele 2016). Simultaneously, digital media and spaces potentially convey new risks and thus require media competency skills by young people (George and Odgers 2015; Strandell 2014). Accordingly, omnipresent mobile media devices and accompanying practices are particularly contested in school environments (Merchant 2012) and often questioned by parents and teachers alike (Paus-Hasebrink and Dürager 2009; Bond 2014). One of the risks children and adolescents increasingly have to face in their digitally connected lives is bullying, which occurs more and more in a variety of spaces and practices across both the digital and the offline sphere.

Researchers focusing on traditional bullying in school contexts have developed typologies to differentiate between relational, verbal and physical practices as well as 'bullying with objects' in

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offline space (Woods and Wolke 2004; Stassen Berger 2007). Cyberbullying researchers meanwhile have come to look into digital practices such as flaming, harassment, impersonation and masquerading, denigration, photoshopping, outing and trickery, exclusion, cyberstalking and cyberthreats (Willard 2007; Betts 2016). Recently, an increased awareness of the interlinkages of bullying in entangled offline and digital spaces has emerged. Yet, what remains unexplored in these predominantly quantitative studies are young people's subjective perspectives and their everyday experiences of the intersecting and conflating spaces that are critical to understanding how bullying enfolds among young people.

In the paper, we want to tackle this gap by analysing narratives written by Austrian pupils. Austria is particularly affected by bullying in school contexts. A recent OECD study found that more than one in five boys (21.3 percent) in Austria report being bullied at school (OECD 2015, 20). Yet, research on (cyber)bullying in Austria is limited (cf. Livingstone et al. 2011). Therefore, this article analyses written narratives of young people on their subjective experiences and emotions as targets, perpetrators, accomplices or witnesses of (cyber)bullying in school contexts (see section 3). The guiding research questions are: Whether and how does bullying in physical and digital spaces intersect in school contexts? What are the distinctive spatialities of bullying in physical and digital spaces in school contexts?

In the following, we discuss and connect three strands of the topic's literature. Firstly, we draw on rich digital geography research reflecting on the interlinkages, commonalities and differences of our social practices and our 'throwntogetherness' (Massey 2005; Leurs 2014) in offline and digital space more generally. Secondly, we engage with research on the relation between digitization and children's geographies, and thirdly, we tap into the interdisciplinary research on cyberbullying and traditional bullying in the context of schools. We apply and specify the concept of 'cON/FFlating situational spaces and places' as suggested by Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh (2017, 93) in framing entangled, interdependent and often conflating ONline and OFFline spaces of bullying. We argue that even when bullying *practices* seem to be restricted to either digital or physical spaces, their embedding into a context of emergent spatialities and relationalities that stretch across inseparable spheres – connecting human actors and their bodies, technologies, and other materialities – has to be acknowledged.

cON/FFlating spaces in young people's lives

Researchers of digital geographies have debated relationships between material, physical or offline spaces and cyber, virtual, digital, or online spaces since the end of the 1980s (see summaries of this debate in, e.g. Kinsley 2014; Zook et al. 2004). Technological determinist perspectives of the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Ogden 1994; Castells 2010), have been challenged by various alternative conceptualisations such as a 'symbiotic relationship' (Kitchin 1998, 403), 'convergence' (Imken 1999) or 'co-creation' (Massey 2005) of digital and physical spaces. Particularly in the age of location-aware mobile technologies and 'spatial media' (Leszczynski 2015), digital and offline spaces need to be seen as highly interwoven (Gazzard 2011; de Souza e Silva 2013). The concepts of 'code/space' (Kicthin and Dodge 2011) and 'datafied space' (Sumartojo et al. 2016) emphasise the role of data, codes, software and hardware in the co-constitution of space.

Still, Plowman (2016, 191) posits that we need a 'more fluid, emergent and multiscale understanding of context without boundaries [that] enables us to think differently about the relationships between practices, people and things'. In line, in this article, we choose as well as refine the cON/FFlating spaces concept developed by Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh (2017). In face of our empirical findings, we perceive the above-named datafied and code/space concepts as either too affects-focused or too techno-centric when compared to the more open conceptualisation of cON/FFlating spaces. We denote cON/FFlating spaces as socio-material-technological rather than socio-technological assemblages only. Further, with, among others, Rose (2017) we criticize that (post-)human agency has been widely neglected in above-named theorisations of space. We posit that data, codes and technologies co-constitute space alongside humans – and their bodies, affects and emotions – and (more-

than-human) materialities, whereby the agencies and powers of these (assemblages of) actants vary widely across multiple and specific cON/FFlating spaces (cf. Thulin and Vilhelmson 2019; Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Schwanen 2020). Also, we emphasise the relationality of these elements, their historicities as well as the role of power and (techno-)politics in the emergence of cON/FFlating spaces (cf. Massey 2005; Kurban, Peña-López, and Haberer 2016; Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh 2017). By employing the active form (cON/FFlating space) rather than its passive counter piece (cON/FFlated space), Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh (2017) stress the need to reflect and embrace the processual dimension and dynamics in these entangled spaces.

In this article, we draw on and refine this concept, by showing how practices and spaces of bullying are co-created in cON/FFlating spaces. As has been noted earlier (e.g. by Crang, Crang, and May 1999; Leander and McKim 2003; Jackson and Valentine 2014; Bork-Hüffer 2016), an analysis of the coming together of digital and offline spaces must not cause us to dismiss their divergent spatialities, specificities, heterogeneities and multiplicities (cf. Massey 2005), which is thus an additional focus of our analysis.

In addition to works on the geographies of children and young people that have pronounced the importance of place and place-making in young people's lifeworlds and identities (cf. Holloway and Valentine 2000; Katz 2004), the number of works engaging with information and communication technologies (ICT) in this process has recently increased (e.g. Jones, Williams, and Fleuriot 2003; Stokes 2010; Bond 2014; George and Odgers 2015; Plowman 2016; Truong 2018; Thulin and Vilhelmson 2019; Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Schwanen 2020).

Relating to communication scholars' and anthropologists' works, Ruckenstein (2013, 478) emphasizes how the 'sphere of influence and activity' of children has been extended through ICT which allow them to capture and create new spaces of their own (cf. boyd 2014; Wilson 2016). Pointing out that this process is not free from power negotiations, Ruckenstein (2013, 477) states that the 'ways in which technologies become part of children's everyday spaces remain heterogeneous: replicating, erasing, downplaying, and emphasizing differences and hierarchies between children and childhoods'. Clearly, mobile digital devices' roles as 'companion[s]' and their 'active and entangled role in the merging composition, rhythms, constrains, and orders of online social interactions' (Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Schwanen 2020, 170) must be recognized in this process.

Thulin and Vilhelmson (2019, 43) argue it is important to understand how young people's offline and online times and practices condition each other. Furthermore, Madianou and Miller (2013), argue that the choice and use of each individual medium depends to a large extent on the subjectively perceived possibilities and limits of all media used in parallel (cf. also Bond 2014). Today's multitude of digital media must be seen as an integrated and converged system, which they call 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller 2013, 170).

Traditional and cyberbullying in schools

Bullying is, for children and adolescents, one of the risks they face as pupils (cf. Kwan and Skoric 2013). Dan Olweus (1996, 266) defines bullying in school contexts: 'A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.' Three characteristics delineate bullying from other forms of violence: the intention to damage the victim; the repetition of bullying practices; and a power imbalance, characterized by a power asymmetry between target and perpetrator (Olweus 2004).

With the proliferation of ICT and social media, bullying has found its way into the digital sphere, where conflicts from school are extended (Kwan and Skoric 2013). While the means may differ, the intention to harm others marks both traditional and cyberbullying. Bullying, both online and offline, is a group dynamic process. Often, there is not only a (circle of) perpetrator(s) and a target but the social field is much more complex. It may, for instance, include the offender(s)' accomplices and supporters, witnesses or bystanders, who are aware of the practices but do not intervene, as well as helpers, who seek to support the target (cf. Stassen Berger 2007; Patterson, Allan, and Cross 2017).

In traditional bullying, the power imbalance often relies on the physical dominance of perpetrators (Heuschen and Teuschel 2013, 120ff.). By contrast, in digital space, it is often based on the perpetrator's anonymity (Winter and Leneway 2008, 1). As a result, targets of cyberbullying are even more at the perpetrator's mercy (Schultze-Krumbholz et al. 2012). Also, due to the omnipresence of mobile media devices and other ICT, there are almost no possibilities for victims to shield themselves from bullying activities (Slonje and Smith 2008). Bullying in digital space can take place repeatedly and permanently, even without the initial perpetrator having to remain active or intending (repeated) harm to the target (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross 2009). In addition, Kowalski and Limber (2007) as well as Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja (2009) argue that the absence of face-to-face interaction inhibits feelings of empathy while encouraging aggressive actions, which as Jackson and Valentine (2014, 199, 201) argue results in a higher risk of escalation.

Recently, bullying research has started to bridge both spheres by looking into the similarities and differences of traditional bullying and cyberbullying (e.g. Antoniadou and Kokkinos 2015). These, usually quantitative, studies aim to understand the mechanisms and roles (e.g. Baldry, Farrington, and Sorrentino 2017), and thus, to predict bullying (e.g. Kowalski, Morgan, and Limber 2012; Casas, Del Rey, and Ortega-Ruiz 2013) as well as to develop effective counterstrategies (e.g. Patterson, Allan, and Cross 2017). Yet, they do not pay attention to the experience of bullying in increasingly conflating spaces from the points of view of children and young people, which are necessary to understand the phenomenon appropriately.

Written narratives as young people-centred approach

In methodological terms, the subjectivity of (cyber)bullying experiences needs to be taken into account. Smith (2019, 23) estimates that only seven percent of all studies on cyberbullying have a qualitative design as opposed to quantitative. Thornberg (2011, 258) even regards the qualitative approach as more suitable when researching bullying as it 'provides opportunities to study bullying and peer harassment as social processes, interactions and meaning-making in the everyday context of particular settings.'

In line with this, we chose written narratives as the study's method. Through narratives, young participants are given an own voice and room for subjective descriptions and interpretations of their experiences and feelings (cf. Atkinson 1998; Pabian and Erreygers 2019). The up-side aspects of narratives are that they are more suited for researching potentially sensitive and hurtful experiences as compared to interviews, as participants do not need to share these experiences facing an unknown interviewer. Thus, participants are put under less pressure to either provide accurate answers or say what seems to be expected of them – which can be advantageous particularly in school-related research with pupils (Heinzel 2010, 711). With narratives, young authors have more time to reflect on, structure and build their thoughts (cf. Schulze 2010). They alone produce the data. The structuring as well as the researchers' meaning making enter the process only during analysis, interpretation and writing. On the downside, researchers are unable to ask participants to refine, deepen or redirect their narratives towards the research questions. Furthermore, narratives are retrospective and there might be long periods between the presence of remembering and of the actual lived experiences. They are subjective reconstructions potentially amplified or abbreviated by their authors and not documentations of an actual past.

Collecting, analysing, handling and writing about data related to (cyber)bullying requires a highly sensitive and ethically reflected approach (Stokes 2010; Bond 2014; Vandebosch and Green 2019). The participants ($N = 61$) in this study attended two school classes of a college for higher vocational education in Innsbruck (Tyrol), Austria, and were about to graduate. Consent for the use and publication of the narratives was requested of, and granted by, the participants, all of whom at the time of asking were legally adults. Both the participation in the writing and the submission of papers were voluntary. Three consecutive school hours during a regular school day were used for data collection. Participants received a task sheet that included directional and narrative stimulating questions.

Participants were offered the option of writing their narratives on paper or on a laptop and were invited to submit their texts anonymously. The seating arrangement in the room did not allow any of them to see what others were writing. The teachers were asked to leave the classroom, which ruled out their presence affecting either or both the work atmosphere and the participants' written endeavours. We found in the narratives, that the young authors were astonishingly frank, expressing a strong interest in and desire for research and knowledge building on part of the young participants in this environment.

Ten of the participants decided, on finishing the task, not to submit their narratives. Of the submitted narratives ($n = 51$), just over half ($n = 26$) involved personal experiences with cyberbullying, either as victims, offenders, accomplices or witnesses. The paper narratives were digitized and then all of those submitted were subjected to a qualitative content analysis following Mayring (2000) using the software MaxQDA. A key point worthy of note is that due to persistent structural inequalities in Austrian society, disadvantaged pupils are underrepresented in the nation's colleges for higher vocational education and thus presumably also in this study. Tyrol also has a comparatively low share of individuals born abroad (11.4% of adolescents in 2018; Migration und Schule 2018, 3). The issue of race only played a role in one of the narratives.

cON/FFlating practices of bullying

Our data was sprinkled with examples, in which *practices* of bullying were conducted in both offline and digital spaces, in a concurrent, sequential or linked process. Tim, for example, described how he fell victim to various forms of bullying in offline spaces during the academic secondary school (lower cycle) – verbal attacks and bullying through urinating on and stealing his school materials (bullying with objects; cf. Woods and Wolke 2004; Stassen Berger 2007). When he tried to seek offline help from the form teacher the bullying extended into digital space, where he was threatened, and shamed on Facebook (flaming; cf. O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003):

> It started in the third grade and ended with my transfer to the present school. […] At that time, I was one of the smallest in the class and could not defend myself. It all started with annoying nicknames. […]At some point I had my things taken away for fun, jokes were being made at my expense, which hurt me deeply. Almost the whole class was involved. […] It climaxed when my locker was broken into and someone decided to urinate on my art-box. […] When I then told my form teacher in the break, he decided to address the topic in front of the whole class in the next lesson with the words: '[Tim] is of the opinion that someone from this class has broken into his locker and urinated in it. But I don't think we have such piglets in the class, do we?' After these words, I was threatened and insulted by everyone in the next break. […] When I arrived home, I saw that eight students from my class had left a hundred entries on my Facebook wall with the words 'Pussy, tomorrow you will be fucked … ' and so on … ! Then I deactivated my profile for three years. I told it to my mother and my stepfather, and they went to the principal and told him that I would not attend classes for the rest of the school year.

Only when Tim attended the college for higher vocational education (upper cycle) was he able to escape what had eventually become cON/FFlating practices of bullying.

Across the narratives, the described emergence of cON/FFlating practices of bullying was multiple. In some instances, similar to Tim's example, bullying was at first practised offline and then moved or became paralleled online. In other narratives, authors portrayed how bullying started online and then became continued (or paralleled) in offline shaming or exclusion. In yet other instances, both types of bullying emerged and lingered on somewhat simultaneously.

A striking characteristic of cON/FFlating practices of bullying resonating through several narratives, is an overall amplification of bullying. Also, open offline bullying was followed more often by digital bullying, when perpetrators were convinced that victims were themselves at blame for being bullied. This aspect was specified by the perpetrators or accomplices with the allegedly provocative behaviour of the victim, e.g. in the form of annoying or disruptive behaviour or the publication of revealing or ambiguous images and videos as well as non-heteronormative practices.

In instances of cON/FFlating practices of bullying, involved pupils usually knew each other. Often, they adopted similar roles (offender, accomplice, target, witness) both online and offline. However, in a few cases, roles were or became switched in digital and offline spaces. In her narrative, Maria outlined how a perpetrator of offline bullying became the subject of other classmates' digital bullying attacks. Another narrative, written by Dani, described how a class bullied a classmate offline, when the bullies at one point received cyberthreats through a newly created, anonymous Snapchat account. The identity of the Snapchat account holder was never revealed, but the connection to the offline bullying seemed obvious to everyone involved. These acts can be seen as part of an interlinked relationality in interdependent cON/FFlating practices of bullying (cf. Shiraldi 2008; Baldry, Farrington, and Sorrentino 2017 for a discussion of role switching in (cyber)bullying).

Bullying in cON/FFlating spaces

We also found that cases, in which the bullying *practices* were carried out *either* in digital *or* offline space, must be contextualized and understood in the interdependence of both spheres. Here, spaces of bullying were still cON/FFlating, even if they were not bridged by bullying *practices* per se. The following narrative exemplifies the close relationality of bullying in cON/FFlating spaces. Kim received serious online threats and insults during her time in her new secondary school by two classmates:

> At the age of twelve to thirteen I created my first e-mail account on Gmail. There was the possibility to chat online and my friend and I also chatted very often in the evening. […] In my high school days, it became more and more common for everyone to have a mobile phone. Then we wrote via SMS. We made our meetings via SMS or phone call and everything became more and more impersonal. My friend was rather easy to disappoint and if, for example, I cancelled a meeting, her choice of words immediately went in a different direction than would have happened face-to-face. Wild insults followed and insults that definitely went below the belt were sent to me more and more often. She teamed up with another friend and they both turned against me, so to speak. Face-to-face at school they didn't let me feel much of it. In the evenings via SMS or in our Gmail chat, they began to insult me again and again. […] I felt terrible, and every day at school and especially when I started chatting again in the evening was a pain. I can't explain why I gave in again and again […] Of course my parents soon noticed, because I really would never be well, and they intervened immediately. They limited the use of SMS for me in the hope that the terror would stop as well. […] Later then came WhatsApp and there, everything got much worse. They [the attackers] never stopped and kept terrorizing me. At some point my mom read the messages and intervened. She talked to my girlfriend's mother and accused my girlfriend of everything. The drama didn't stop properly, but I regained my composure with the support of my parents. It was all definitely over only after high school when we finally parted ways.

Although the bullying practices, described by Kim, were mostly restricted to digital space, they strongly encroached into her public offline spaces at school and private home space in the evenings. It also stretched to the offline relations between Kim and her parents, between Kim's mother and the perpetrator and the perpetrator's parents. Eventually it led to an offline intervention by both sets of parents in their children's digitally negotiated 'mobile youth culture' (Vanden Abeele 2016; cf. Lim 2016).

Nevertheless, Kim was only able to escape bullying after finishing school and proceeding to a college for higher vocational education. Many other participants in our study reported that (cyber)bullying only truly stopped after they had finished school and parted ways from the others involved in (cyber)bullying. Thus, the start and end of bullying were inextricably tied to the offline school situation, in which children pass through sequential levels as part of a fixed class community.

Some types of bullying, labelled as cyberbullying in existing studies, such as photoshopping (O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003), should rather be seen as types that use digital means, yet explicitly stretch across cON/FFlating spaces. Maria, for example, reported how her friend took a picture of a classmate in physical education class with the explicit aim of catching the classmate in an unfavourable position. Afterwards, Maria manipulated the image with an image editing software and uploaded it.

The general offline social context for young people, i.e. the availability of friends and family and the options to make friendships in the school context and beyond, could influence how they navigated online spaces, whether they became targets of cyberbullying and how they responded. For example, Florin was hoping to find friends online because she was isolated in school and had no friends offline. Hence, she opened a user account on the social networking platform Netlog. Even after being subjected to sexual harassment by other users of this platform, Florin continued using it and even uploaded revealing images just in the hope of finding friends and receiving some of the positive attention she did not receive offline.

In some instances of flaming and photoshopping, the perpetrators did not include the targets of bullying in the digital spaces (often closed spaces like WhatsApp groups) in which the shaming took place. Some of the narratives described how the targets nonetheless found out about the digital bullying practices taking place in these closed spaces or were deliberately informed by witnesses. Thus, the targets were still affected. In other situations, they even participated in the digital spaces and were thus directly exposed to attacks. Interestingly, in all these instances, targets reported to not have confronted perpetrators, mostly for fear of spurring more bullying. In very few cases, a seemingly split relationality in online and digital spaces was reported, e.g. when targets offline remained part of the very group that bullied them online (cf. Pabian et al. 2018).

Still, the narratives revealed how practicing or experiencing (cyber)bullying, independent of where the practice took place, encroached on various aspects of the involved individuals' lives online and offline. It changed the self-perception, self-esteem and identities not only of targets, but also of witnesses and even of offenders and their accomplices. It also affected various social practices as well as subjects' strategies of navigating through interconnected online and physical spaces.

Relationality and technological (poly-)mediators in digital spaces of bullying

In addition to the relationality in cON/FFlating spaces, the relationality that exists between digital spaces, digital devices, social media and online groups as well as the dynamics triggered by the emergence of new technologies and media are of importance for understanding how bullying enfolds. Through the specific characteristics of mobile and social media (cf. Martin et al. 2018), digital space allows both space-unbound and time-wise flexible bullying.

A substantial amount of the bullying described in our data was done through WhatsApp. In addition, current social networking sites like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Tellonym, Ask.fm, older platforms like Netlog, and even a school's digital learning platform were reported to have been used for the bullying practices. In most cases, only one platform at a time was used for the bullying, but sometimes media were combined, or the practice moved from one media platform to another. The aforementioned narrative by Kim exemplifies how bullying enfolded in a polymedia setting: a Gmail chat account and SMS were initially used to offend Kim, which resulted in parental prohibition of using SMS as an intended means of protection from further attacks. However, this solution only helped for a short time, because at that time Kim's perpetrators started using WhatsApp, which led to the attacks becoming even worse. Other than the SMS it involved no costs or limits for sending messages. Serving as an integrated and converged system (Madianou and Miller 2013, 170), this exemplifies how several digital media can take the role of (poly-)mediators in bullying.

Mostly, bullying practices were reported to have been conducted in (relatively) closed digital spaces, to which access and membership were managed by administrators and contents not shared publicly on the Internet. This meant simultaneously, as discussed above, that members were usually known to each other and individual online profiles were connected to real names for communication and identity building purposes. Still, there were (a few) cases, in which participants reported to have been unable to attribute online attacks to any known persons. These were cases of masquerading, cyberthreats, harassment and sexting (cf. Ybarra and Mitchell 2004; Willard 2007; Schultze-Krumbholz et al. 2012). Finn, for example, was harassed by an unknown person on Facebook:

> It happened to me about two years ago that my cover picture on Facebook was shared by someone unknown. […] Then I wrote the person privately, 'What's going on? Why do you share my picture without my permission?' As an answer I got 'give me a blow job, then take a shower'. I didn't answer. This was followed by other extremely perverse wordings. All of them played on the fact that I should have sex with him. Of course, I was shocked in the first instant, [because] without warning I got these messages from a completely strange man. In the second instant, I found it a little funny and had to laugh. However, I immediately blocked the person and reported the incident.

Finn particularly worried that his younger eleven-year-old sister might have experienced or could experience similar harassments online, making him share warnings of the potential dangers that young people are exposed to on the internet in his narrative. These cases represent the few instances, in which bullying was confined to digital space with no (revealed) relationality to physical space. Although there was no link to the targets' offline networks, it nonetheless affected and altered (usually confining) their practices and making of relations online and offline. This applied to almost all those participants who had been bullied online independently of the existence of relations to the perpetrators. Even those who practiced cyberbullying themselves or witnessed it as a consequence confined their online activities in one or the other way. Many involved pupils described how they started using their 'digital companions' (Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Schwanen 2020, 170) more reflexively as a consequence.

cON/FFlating yet diverging spatialities

To give the necessary depth to the persisting specificity of digital and physical space against the backdrop of increasingly interrelated and conflating spaces, we turn to discussing diverging spatialities.

Physical body shapes and weight but also deviations from mainstream in terms of dress, modes of conduct, speech or expression in offline spaces were, in our data, alleged reasons named by perpetrators for choosing specific individuals as targets for (cyber)bullying. Toni, who witnessed a case of cON/FFlating bullying specified in a narrative how the physical body (shape) of a girl (Lara) became the focal point of bullying. Lara befriended a clique of friends. The girls in the clique persuaded her to post revealing pictures of herself on Instagram to catch the attention of a particular boy. After the pictures appeared, the clique started criticizing Lara's body shape with the aim of damaging her self-esteem, eventually pushing her into anorexia. In the end, Lara's altered physical appearance, increasingly marked by the illness, was taken as a pretext by the clique to expel her from the clique's WhatsApp group and the circle of friends completely.

As also pointed out by many scholars analysing online verbal communications, the speech in digital space that our young authors described was at times much harsher and far beyond the level of verbal attacks experienced in offline space. Moreover, several narratives (including Tim's) described how bullying eventually 'got out of hand' (Jules) online, ranging from corrosive speech to suicide calls that were unparalleled in the examples of offline bullying.

Alex's narrative delineated how a classmate's speech disorder was imitated both verbally offline and simultaneously in written form in a WhatsApp group, culminating in truly cON/FFlating othering. Still, practices of othering (Harmer and Lumsden 2019) online and offline differ: Maxi reported how local dialect questions posted by classmates in a WhatsApp class group, were repeated by others in the group and mocked with emojis. Despite the indisputable connection between offline mimics and gestures, and online emojis, we postulate that the way the former unfold and are performed as well as the overall context in which they are embedded is much more elaborate when compared to the latter.

Psychological and physical consequences of bullying, such as depression, strong negative feelings, anxiety, sleeping and eating disorders, diminishing self-esteem, bodily discomforts ranging in extremes from stomach pains and headaches up to suicidal thoughts were reported as consequences of bullying often playing out on the physical bodies of bullied subjects.

Discussion and conclusions

Our results indicate the urgent need to theorise and research bullying and cyberbullying not only with regard to common causes, effects and countermeasures, but to conceptualize these phenomena as stretching across cON/FFlating spaces. We argue that the existing, mostly dichotomous research, focusing either on traditional bullying or cyberbullying, has so far disregarded the complexity and relevance of the cON/FFlating nature of bullying. The most likely reason for the prevailing dichotomy in existing research is the narrow focus on the space of *practices*, while neglecting other factors, elements and phenomena, which characterize bullying in cON/FFlating spaces beyond *practices* of bullying.

In our study, it became clear that experiencing, as well as practicing, repeated bullying independent of the actual space where practices were enacted, encroached on participants' online and offline lives. It affected not only their physical bodies and performativities as well as their psychological well-being, but also altered their self-perception, self-representation and identity formation, often affected their social practices and positionality and resulted in overall modified strategies of navigating through interconnected socio-material-technological spaces. In light of these insights, the study revealed how the relationality of bullying stretches across both online and offline spheres, public and private realms, and inseparably connects the embodied and material with the virtual and viral.

Simultaneously, an understanding of the emergence of bullying in the lifeworld of today's young people is only possible if their subliminal and affective relations to their 'digital companions' (Thulin, Vilhelmson, and Schwanen 2020, 170) and the digital media available to them are taken into account. But as our study showed, experiencing, and to a lesser degree practicing or witnessing, bullying through digital means, disrupted this natural relationship for some of the study's young people, often inducing a more consciously reflected relationship with their used devices and digital media. This underlines the relevance of the agency of individuals and groups in practicing bullying and in targets' responses to it. This change also emphasizes the socio-technological relationality in bullying, i.e. the active role of technologies and media as well as the disciplinary power enacted through them. In doing so, digital devices and media adopt roles as (poly-)mediators when bullying enfolds through an integrated and converged set of devices and media. Nonetheless, despite the relevance of underlying coded objects, processes and assemblages on young people's experiences and practices of bullying, the social relationality of space and place (cf. Leander and McKim 2003; Massey 2005; Richardson 2018) is a core feature.

Although mobile devices and media have the potential to enable an anytime-anywhere quality to bullying, in the school context it remained somewhat localised. Our study revealed how it occurs in the social connections and entity of class groups and unfolds from there in a continuum between the offline and digital spheres. The Austrian school system that ties a pre-established group of pupils together in a socio-material classroom setting over the course of their school career, likely fosters group bullying. It is in these socio-material-technological spaces, encroaching both school and private spaces, where bullying can take most effect, and victims struggle to escape either or both the practices and the spaces. Hence, it is likely that cON/FFlating spaces contribute to the escalation and intensity of bullying.

Crang, Crang, and May (1999), Leander and McKim (2003) and Jackson and Valentine (2014) postulate that we need to be cautious and not overlook divergent spatialities of the physical and digital realms. Most clearly, offline bullying involves actual physical bodies and their performativity, whereas cyberbullying involves representations of the body in the form of (manipulated) photos, videos or speech thereof. In cyberbullying, representations of the body (pictures, videos) and their manipulations (photoshopping) are used as a means of bullying, but they are also linked to actual bodies and their performativity in offline space. These actions were employed as practices of 'othering' (Harmer and Lumsden 2019) the victims. Our study showed how the specific ways through which othering is practiced in physical and digital spaces differ. Identities, however, are (co-)constructed through entangled spaces (cf. Cover 2016; Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh 2017).

Those instances in our study, in which bodies, body shapes and performativity became focal points of bullying, correlated strongly to gender and reflected deeply ingrained heteronormative discourses in Austrian society: Girls' bodies were besmirched by photoshopping (cf. Toni's and Maria's narratives above), or were flamed or harassed, whereas boys were bullied for their performative acts of not being masculine.

Notwithstanding, physical bullying that affects the body in offline space through hitting, pushing, kicking, rape or physical sexual harassment (cf. Woods and Wolke 2004; Stassen Berger 2007) cannot be replicated in digital space. In the same vein, bullying with objects, such as hiding or destroying them or the above example of urinating on someone's material belongings (cf. Tim's narrative above) is a specific type of bullying restricted to the offline realm. Physical bodies are rooted in offline space and with them the often entangled physical and psychological consequences of bullying on health (cf. Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja 2009; Spears et al. 2009).

It is all the more encouraging to learn that despite the severity of the (cyber)bullying incidences that our participants reported, the narratives also show that their own experiences with, or witnessing of, (cyber)bullying often resulted in learning processes and heightened media competency. Accordingly, childhood researchers such as Stokes (2010), Ruckenstein (2013) and Bond (2014) have emphasized that adults must try harder to accredit children's and adolescents' knowledge and their learning and decision-making processes. The suggestion is that not only should digital products and platforms be adjusted to the needs, skills and competencies of young people but at best they should be (co)designed by them (cf. Stokes 2010). We extend this claim to offers of support for targets of bullying, e.g. digital assistance services. Further, pupils need to be informed systematically about legal frameworks, in which they move, when they use digital media in order to strengthen their agency. Digital platforms need to have emergency buttons that provide swift and uncomplicated assistance.

Lastly, the analysis of (cyber)bullying requires an advancement of method(ologi)cal approaches that are open to scrutinising bullying as playing out in cON/FFlating spaces. There is a particular need for more qualitative and multi-method studies, which ideally embrace the opportunities offered by digital means to research the 'always-on' lifeworlds of young people more fully.

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