

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The mobile internet as a tool of education and as a means of intimidation and victimization in the field of Ecclesiastical Education

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**Abstract:** The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has undoubtedly influenced children, adolescents, and young people's social interactions and behavior. The use of technology has not only positive but also negative consequences. In recent years, research has shifted from traditional bullying to new forms of bullying, such as cyberbullying. In Greece, there is a research gap in investigating this phenomenon among students of Ecclesiastical Schools. This paper investigates the frequency of bullying and victimization of these students through digital means, as well as their views on the role of Ecclesiastical Education in the prevalence of cyberbullying.

**Keywords:** mobile learning, victimization, Ecclesiastical Education

## 1 Introduction

Daily internet use through computers, tablets, and mobile phones can be a means of entertainment, communication, education, or work for most people. The appropriate technologies such as Apps facilitate active and creative use by both students and teachers. However, abusive activity can lead to physical, emotional, and psychological damage (Papadakis, 2021; Kapaniaris & Zampetoglou, 2021). Research on cyberbullying may focus on age groups ranging from high school to university students, but that does not mean it is not observed in elementary school students and adults. The evolution of technology in combination with broadband communication and the lack of defined boundaries of using the internet has contributed to the transformation of bullying into electronic bullying or internet bullying or cyberbullying.

This paper investigates the phenomenon of cyberbullying and the corresponding victimization of secondary religious education students. The extend and frequency that students of this age are bullied or offended via the internet or mobile phone and how it differentiates depending on gender, as the association between cyberbullying and gender is unclear in the literature. The research sample consisted of 88 students of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums of Greece.

### 1.1 The internet as a tool of cyberbullying

One of the most well-known definitions of cyberbullying is that of American researchers Hinduja and Patchin as "intentional, repetitive, and harmful activity by using a computer, cell phone, and other electronic media" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Cyberbullying, a modern form of bullying, can manifest itself in various ways, such as abusive messages (personal or public), posting fake websites or social media profiles, threats, blackmail, etc. (Castile & Harris, 2014; Kopecký & Sztokowski, 2017; Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016). Regarding the school environment, victims in the case of cyberbullying do not offend their victims only in the schoolroom and during the school day, as is the case with school bullying, but also after it, even on weekends (Jackson, 2006).

There are three prominent roles of participants in bullying incidents, namely that of the offender (bully), the recipient (victim), and finally, the person who observes a cyberbullying incident (bystander) who is not actively involved in the deployment of the incident. Some individuals may have a dual role (Andreou, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 2006; Slonje *et al.*, 2013).

Cyberbullying is characterized by a wide variety of forms and expressions. The most common forms of cyberbullying, according to Kyriacou and Zuin (2016) and Willard (2007), are the challenge (flaming) by sending rude or vulgar messages via e-mail or other text messages aiming

at quarreling, online harassment in order to cause emotional and mental pain and cyber-stalking; in addition, denigration or trolling, i.e., sending harmful, false or harsh statements or rumors about a person to other people or posting them on the internet in order to damage his reputation, as well as masquerading which includes pretending to be someone else, and sending or posting material about that person putting the victim into a difficult position, etc.

According to the international literature, cyberbullying of students is associated with low academic performance, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, high levels of depression, loneliness, emotional distress, and alienation (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003).

The evolution of technology over the years has resulted in a dramatic expansion of cyberbullying (reference needed), as the consequent development of a great variety of tools and digital means allows exercising cyberbullying more easily.

It is a fact that it is easy to hide the identity of users in cyberspace. Therefore, it is expected that the research findings on gender differences in cyberbullying will be somewhat contradictory. Some research has concluded that students, regardless of gender, are just as likely to engage in acts of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Williams & Guerra, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and other than boys are prone to cyberbullying, while girls to cyber victimization (Dehue et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Walrave & Heirman, 2011; Wang et al., 2009). There have been studies that have found that boys are more likely to play the role of the perpetrator than girls, but they did not mention gender differences in victimization (Li, 2007). However, rarely the conclusion was that boys are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying than girls (Aricak et al., 2008).

Barlett and Coyne (2014) highlighted gender and age interaction in the manifestation of cyberbullying and concluded that girls were more likely to commit cyberbullying during early adolescence while boys during adolescence.

Adolescents' excellent relationships with their parents act as a deterrent to their victimization (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Accordino & Accordino, 2012). On the other hand, the problematic relationships of adolescents with their parents and the indifference and rejection they may experience pushes them to seek the recognition and attention they lack on the internet, in some cases manifesting aggressive and consequently bullying behavior (Makri-Botsari & Karagianni, 2014).

## 1.2 Studies on cyberbullying of students

Empirical research on ICT abuse and its harmful effects on Internet victims focuses mainly on children and adolescents (Bruno, 2004; Cowie & Colliety, 2010; Wolak et al., 2010). Findings indicate, therefore, that almost one in five students is a victim of cyberbullying (Wright et al., 2009), and about the same proportion of students are responsible for bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). 25% of bullies and victims appear to be in the same school (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Sending abusive messages is the most common form of cyberbullying, while boys are the protagonists of these acts (Lazouras & Ourda, 2012).

Antoniadou & Kokkinos (2013) have carefully studied the phenomena of cyberbullying and cyber-victimization in Greece, adding that comparing the findings of various surveys is difficult because there was no standard definition for cyberbullying. In addition, research tools used in Greece have not been weighted, and therefore they have not been verified for their validity and reliability. For this reason, these researchers selected a few years later an internationally widespread and widely accepted questionnaire for cyberbullying of students and weighed it in the Greek reality. According to the results of a study by Antoniadou & Kokkinos (2013), cyberbullying and cyber-victimization appeared to positively correlate with the frequency of ICT use, the lifting of the Internet ban, social personality traits, and a negative correlation with emotional empathy.

The rate of cyberbullying in children and adolescents ranges from 2% to 35% (Diamanduros et al., 2008; Kowalski et al., 2014; Laftman et al., 2013) and in several cases varies considerably from country to country. Literature reviews by Kowalski et al. (2014) and Aboujaoude et al. (2015) show that victimization rates range between 10% and 40%. This significant discrepancy is due to the means of cyberbullying that every study has included in data collection. Some researchers, for example, focus on social media (Kwan & Skoric, 2013) and limit the occurrence of cyberbullying by studying the phenomenon in an isolated context. The differences in percentages may also be due to the different definitions of the phenomenon by researchers and the various tools they use to measure it (Olweus, 2012).

In most cases, the greater the use of the internet, the greater the experience of cyberbullying (Kwan & Skoric, 2013; Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). However, this positive correlation between cyberbullying experiences and internet use is not observed in all surveys,

such as in the case of Facebook use, which did not show a significant correlation between the use of this social medium and victimization (Kwan & Skoric, 2013).

Cyberbullying has negative effects on the psychological, social, and physical health of both victims and perpetrators involved (Bauman et al., 2012; Tokunaga, 2010). Foody et al. (2015) conducted a literature review of the psychological effects of perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying. They identified various possible symptoms: low self-efficacy, low level of empathy, poor psychological well-being (Wong et al., 2014), school aggression, feelings of insecurity at school (Mishna et al., 2012), as well as and poor quality of life (Fletcher et al., 2014). In some cases, there were identified suicidal tendencies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

### 1.3 Measures to prevent or/and combat cyberbullying

Apart from students themselves, in preventive or/and aggressive measures towards the phenomenon of cyberbullying, their educators, the school administration, the parents, etc., are also involved. Educating students on the safe and responsible use of ICT is of great importance, and if they realize that on the other side of the screen, people are suffering and feeling real pain, they can prevent practicing cyberbullying (Matos et al., 2017).

The role of the school in preventing cyberbullying is catalytic. Educators within a school are the key to confronting cyberbullying (O'Moore, 2000). Unfortunately, studies show that educators are ineffective in dealing with the phenomenon, and students do not trust them easily to confide their experiences with cyberbullying, and they are more likely to turn to their friends or classmates.

Ideally, educators should be trustworthy for students and act as role models to whom they will turn as victims or when they want to report the perpetrators. It is undeniable that counseling intervention in school is a valuable process since it is evident that the supportive culture in the school is a remarkable strategy for student participation in the prevention of both conventional and cyberbullying (Eliot et al., 2010).

School-based intervention programs, such as TABBY (Threat Assessment of Bullying Behavior on the Internet for Youngsters), or online, such as Online Pestkopenstoppen, could help those involved with the psychological trauma of cyberbullying. Although cyberbullying training and awareness-raising programs have been gradually developed in recent years, it is unclear whether they are guided and designed on a theoretical basis or simply follow existing European prevention and intervention programs.

Parental involvement and support of students-victims and students-perpetrators of cyberbullying are significant. Establishing and maintaining open communication channels between school and family seems fundamental and is recommended in past studies (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014). Regarding family context, sharing ICT with parents from an early age, repeated discussions about cyber risks, and establishing boundaries and filters are some of the possible supportive strategies (Campbell, 2007; Campfield, 2006; Livingstone et al., 2011). Monitoring their children's cyberbullying, applying rules for internet use, and knowing what to do in case children's involvement in cyberbullying is part of parent education to combat cyberbullying (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

The present study focuses on cyberbullying of students of Ecclesiastical Education in Greece, so comparative data regarding this specific kind of education are presented below.

### 1.4 Ecclesiastical Education in Greece

Ecclesiastical (religious) Education has been part of the educational system since establishing the modern Greek State (Resolution 410, 3-2-1830, N.W. 25-1-1843), which aimed to educate clergy. The term *Ecclesiastical Education* refers to the education provided by the Greek State in institutions dedicated to the training of prospective and active priests to successfully fulfill their multifaceted duties and benefit both the Church and the Nation (Perselis, 2000).

With the law 476/1976 "On Ecclesiastical Education" (Government Gazette 308 - 18.11.1976), Ecclesiastical Education officially becomes part of the State that supervises and provides financially for Ecclesiastical Schools.

Nowadays, Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums (E.G.) and General Ecclesiastical Lyceums (GEL) belong to the Secondary Ecclesiastical Education. General Ecclesiastical Lyceums were established in 1998-99, with article 1 of PD 407/1998 offering a diploma equivalent to that of General Lyceums after three years of study. In a reform effort during the school year 2013-2014, the Rizareios School accepted girls for the first time in its student body; this was also adopted by the General Ecclesiastical Lyceum of Vella (P.D. 26/9/1931- Government Gazette 352/issue A /7-10-31).

Regarding the schedule of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums, it becomes clear that in addition to the 2 hours of teaching the course of Religion, another 6 hours of courses of Religious Specialization are taught per class. In the first and second class of the General Ecclesiastical Lyceum, the course of Religion is taught 2 hours per week, while in the third class 1 hour per week. As in the case of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums, General Ecclesiastical Lyceums also offer additional courses of Religious Specialization concerning the other Lyceums of the Secondary Education.

## 1.5 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the study was to investigate the frequency in which students of Secondary Ecclesiastical Education are bullied or offended using electronic media and whether they consider that attending alternative schools acts as a deterrent to cyberbullying. The phenomenon of cyberbullying has not been investigated so far in Ecclesiastical Education, and there is a lack of research data on this topic.

The research questions derived by the research design were the following:

- a) Do male Ecclesiastical Lyceum students exercise cyberbullying more often than female ones?
- b) Are female Ecclesiastical Lyceum students more often victims of cyberbullying than male students?
- c) Is attending church schools an inhibitory factor in students exercising cyberbullying?
- d) What coping strategies usually adopt the victims of cyberbullying who attend Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums?

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants and data collection process

The research took place in Greece on April and May 2021 in Gymnasiums and Lyceums of Ecclesiastical Education. 88 male and female students participated, and the selection of participants was based on the ease of accessing them during the research period, so this is a convenient sample. Gymnasium students made up 6.8% (N = 6) of the sample and Lyceum students 93.2% (N = 82). The number of girls in the sample was much smaller than that of boys because they could attend only two Ecclesiastical Lyceums. Table 1 presents the students who participated in the research by gender and school class. The completion of the questionnaire was short and voluntary and was done either through google forms or through a distributed hardcopy.

**Table 1** Distribution of student frequencies by gender & class

| Class        | Frequency (rf) |       | Relative Frequency (rf) |       |
|--------------|----------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
|              | boys           | girls | boys                    | girls |
| B' Gymnasium | 2              | 0     | 2.9                     | 0     |
| C' Gymnasium | 4              | 0     | 5.7                     | 0     |
| A' Lyceum    | 32             | 4     | 45.7                    | 22.2  |
| B' Lyceum    | 14             | 4     | 20.0                    | 22.2  |
| C' Lyceum    | 18             | 10    | 25.7                    | 55.6  |
| <b>Total</b> | 70             | 18    | 100                     | 100   |

### 2.2 Research tool

In the present quantitative research, the design of the research tool was based on the Cyberbullying and Cyber Victimization Experience Questionnaire (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Smith et al., 2006). It is about a self-report questionnaire, including two subscales that assess, respectively, experiences of direct and indirect cyberbullying as well as direct and indirect cyber victimization in pre-adolescent and adolescent students, which are carried out using a mobile phone or/and the internet (Antoniadou & Kokkinos, 2013). In total, students were asked to answer 24 questions regarding the frequency of occurrence of each of the behaviors described using a five-point Likert scale. At the end of the main questionnaire, additional statements were added to derive data specifically concerned students of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums. In addition, a short questionnaire concerning student demographics was integrated. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.85, which indicates that the scale has a good level of internal coherence.

### 3 Results

In the main part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to answer 24 questions in order to evaluate experiences of cyberbullying and cyber victimization. To facilitate answering the questions, a five-point Likert scale was used with the following options: 0 = never, 1 = once or twice, two = sometimes, 3 = many times, and 4 = every day. The statistical package SPSS revealed that the participants scored low for the cyber victimization dimension (mean= 0.54, s.d. = 0.24) in the range of answers 0-4. Dimension 5. *Sending a message to others to fool you into saying bad things about you* scored the highest average (M = 0.98), followed by dimension 1. *Receiving mocking / offensive messages* (M = 0.89) and dimension 3. *Receiving a message from someone pretending to be someone else* (M = 0.80).

The averages of the 12 dimensions of the scale related to cyberbullying are presented in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2** Descriptive statistical indicators of cyber-victimization dimensions

| Dimensions of electronic victimization  | Mean | SD   |
|---|------|------|
| 1. Receiving mocking or offensive messages  | 0.89 | 1.03 |
| 3. Receiving a message from someone pretending to be someone else   | 0.80 | 1.20 |
| 5. Sending a message from someone to others in order to fool you into saying bad things about me              | 0.98 | 1.16 |
| 7. Sending your photos or videos to others without my permission in order to make fun of me                   | 0.32 | 0.77 |
| 9. Sending my messages to others without my permission in order for them to make fun of me or speak ill of me | 0.66 | 0.96 |
| 11. Download a file with a deliberately sent virus  | 0.41 | 0.72 |
| 13. Loss of a mobile phone and its use by third parties   | 0.32 | 0.77 |
| 15. Receiving mocking / ugly posts on social media profiles   | 0.30 | 0.70 |
| 17. Deleting, blocking, or disliking friends on the internet due to defamation                                | 0.52 | 0.87 |
| 19. Receiving threatening messages  | 0.57 | 0.94 |
| 21. Posting my details on the internet by someone I did not want to be disclosed                              | 0.36 | 0.78 |
| 23. Use of my account by third parties without my permission  | 0.39 | 0.86 |
| <b>Set of victimization dimensions</b>  | 0.54 | 0.24 |

[Table 3](#) presents the total number of cyber-victims and cyberbullying by gender in percentages, as reflected by students’ reported experiences. A percentage of 42.8% of boys have been victims of cyberbullying at least once. The corresponding cyber victimization rate for girls was 55.5%. 13 boys (18.6%) and two girls (11.1%) stated that they had bullied other students at least once.

**Table 3** Cyber victimization and cyberbullying rates by gender

| Gender              | Cybervictimization  | Cyberbullying       |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| boys (N=70)         | 42.8% (N=30)        | 18.6% (N=13)        |
| girls (N=18)        | 55.5% (N=10)        | 11.1% (N=2)         |
| <b>Total (N=88)</b> | <b>45.5% (N=40)</b> | <b>17.1% (N=15)</b> |

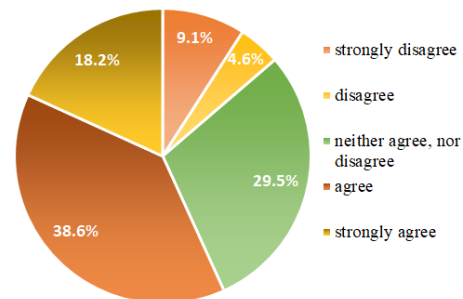
A percentage of 50% (N = 44) of the respondents answered never to the question “*Has anyone sent you a question (on your cell phone or via the internet) to make fun of you or speak ill of you?*”, which aimed to reveal the cyber victimization experiences. However, they reported that they experienced such incidents *one to two times, sometimes* 20.5% (N = 18) respectively and 9.1% (N = 8) *many times*.

A percentage of 63.6% (N = 56) of the respondents answered *never* to the question “*Has anyone sent you a message (on your cell phone or via the internet) pretending to be someone else, to make you feel bad?*” never answered. Another 13.6% answered *many times* (N = 12), while one person (2.3%) reported that something happens *every day*.

A percentage of 50% of the respondents (N = 44) to the question “*Has anyone sent a message (on mobile or via the internet) to others, in which he/she is making fun of you, saying bad things about you or things that are not true?*” answered that such a thing has *never* happened and 84.1% (N = 74) stated that they have *never* sent such a thing.

One of the two statements in the questionnaire regarding the students’ attendance at the Ecclesiastical Gymnasium/Lyceum investigated whether this type of school makes them feel safer from cyberbullying. As shown in [Figure 1](#), 38.6% (N = 34) of respondents agree with the statement that attending an Ecclesiastical High School makes them feel safer from cyberbullying. A percentage of 18.2% (N = 16) completely agree with this statement, while 4.6% (N = 4) disagree and 9.1% (N = 6) strongly disagree.

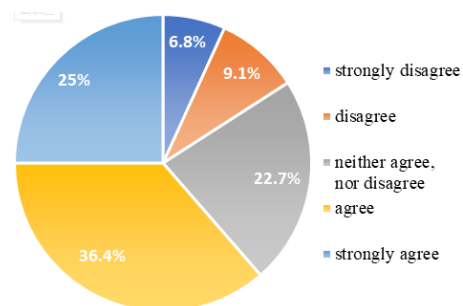
The average response of female students to this statement, that is, “*My attendance at Ecclesiastical High School/Lyceum makes me feel safer from cyberbullying,*” reached  $M = 2.52$  and  $SD = 1.12$  for the range of values from 0-4 (0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree).



**Figure 1** Ecclesiastical Gymnasium / Lyceum provides security against cyberbullying

The second statement, related to attending Ecclesiastical Gymnasium/Lyceum, sought to examine whether male and female students feel that this type of school prevents them from committing cyberbullying attacks. The results are presented below in Figure 2. A percentage of 61.4% of the students who participated in the survey strongly agree that attending Ecclesiastical Gymnasium/Lyceum acts as a deterrent to cyberbullying on others.

The average response of the students to this statement, that is, “*My attendance at Ecclesiastical Gymnasium/Lyceum prevents me from committing cyberbullying*”, reached  $M = 2.64$  and  $SD = 1.16$  for a range of values from 0-4 (0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neither agree nor disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree).



**Figure 2** Attending Ecclesiastical Gymnasium/Lyceum prevents me from cyberbullying

A percentage of 37.5% (N = 18) of the victims sought the help of the police, and 29.2% (N = 14) preferred a change in the passwords of the electronic services they used. A percentage of 25% (N = 12) of the participants stated that they took revenge on the perpetrators without using electronic means, and 12 students (25%) stated that they avoided using any strategy to deal with the issue. Reporting incidents to colleagues, the principal, the perpetrator’s parents, and the students in the classroom was rarely chosen as a coping strategy by students.

## 4 Discussion and conclusions

Research on cyberbullying experiences among young people in Greece is still in the early stage. To date, most data come from studies that do not focus exclusively on cyberbullying or from studies conducted with small convenient samples in specific geographical areas usually involving adolescents. Significant efforts and steps have been made in recent years. However, undoubtedly, more research is needed in order to get a clearer picture of the incidence of cyberbullying, the most common forms, types, and means used, the possible correlations with demographic characteristics (e.g., age, geographical area, educational level of parents, etc.), but also data on the psychosocial profile of the participants.

Relevant studies show that the prevalence of cyberbullying incidences varies considerably and is mainly due to the operational definition given to cyberbullying and what is measured each time. In the present study, the victimization rate of male and female students of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums was 45.5%, close to the upper limit of other surveys. Girls were



victimised more often than boys, and other studies confirm the frequent victimisation of girls through electronic media. The rate of bullying was lower in girls than in boys, and it was much lower than the corresponding victimisation rate. It could be assumed that students of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums are often victims of cyberbullying but more rarely bullies, resulting in high vulnerability compared to students in other schools. However, although bullying incidences are relatively high, most of them occur once or twice. Thus, according to several researchers, no repetition characterizes the phenomenon of cyberbullying, and it is instead of a mild form. Consequently, it could be considered that students confuse cyberbullying with aggression, which by definition does not include the recurrence of the incident. In a new issue of the questionnaire, it would be well first to provide a brief definition of cyberbullying, including the notion of the recurrence of the incident, so that students refer to their statements on incidents that have occurred more than once or twice.

Data analysis revealed no correlation between parents' educational level, neither with the manifestation of bullying nor with the victimisation. The small percentage of female students in the sample and the general population in Gymnasiums and Lyceums of Ecclesiastical Education did not allow safe conclusions to be drawn regarding the effect of gender on bullying and victimisation.

Regarding the strategies for victims dealing with cyberbullying, most respondents stated that they contacted the police and changed passwords as a reaction. In a future repetition of the research, it would be essential to investigate why students of Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums address the police more easily. Of course, as shown in previous studies, several students reported that they kept the bullying incident secret and did not address anyone for help. As in previous research, few students discuss such issues with their classmates, teachers, or the school principals.

The majority of students in Ecclesiastical Gymnasiums and Lyceums agree that attending this type of school makes students feel safer from cyberbullying and prevents them from manifesting similar behaviors. Very few are those who disagree or strongly disagree with the above. These perceptions of students of the Secondary Ecclesiastical Education could be attributed to the increased number of teaching hours in courses of religious specialization that they follow, but also in the general context of religiosity and virtues (such as empathy, acceptance, respect, etc.) that these schools try to diffuse on to their students.

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