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"It's just a joke": gender, sexuality and trivialisation in adolescent online violence such as cyberhate, cyberbullying, and online grooming

María Reneses [1,2]✉, María Riberas-Gutiérrez[3] & Nereida Bueno-Guerra[2]

The article presents the results of part of the research conducted for the European Union Horizon 2020 project RAYUELA on cybercrime and minors, analysed from a gender perspective. Using a qualitative approach in eight preliminary discussion groups with adolescents in different European countries (Estonia, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Slovakia), and a second phase of further investigation through quantitative analysis of a representative survey in Madrid ($N = 682$) and Estonia ($N = 415$), we expose the gender differences both in victimisation (higher in girls and non-heterosexual youth) and in aggression (higher in boys) related to different forms of online violence including cyberbullying, hate speech, and online grooming. These differences can be understood as forms of violence that are sustained while promoting gender normativity. We discuss three conclusions: 1. Online violence as a practice that reinforces gender roles; 2. The trivialisation of symbolic violence through humour and consequent victim blaming; and 3. The effects that differential discourse on risk can have on the construction of sexuality.

[1] Institute for Research in Technology (IIT), ICAI Engineering School, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, Spain. [2] Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid, Spain. [3] Cardenal Cisneros University Centre, Madrid, Spain. ✉email: mreneses@comillas.edu

Introduction

The aim of the present study is to address the relationship between online violence (in the form of cyberbullying, cyberhate and online grooming) and social inequalities and discriminations, specifically those stemming from gender and sexual orientation. Social media, as a space for socialising young people (Twenge and Martin, 2020), constitutes a key site for the study of gender relations. In addition to the differences in frequency of use, which is higher among girls (Twenge and Martin, 2020), there also seem to be differences in the content that girls and boys upload and share. For example, gender dynamics based on posture, dress, gaze, and distance from the camera are evident in the selection of profile photos (Kapidzic and Herring, 2015). Another key example of online gender differences is sexting, a practice of sending sexual images and sometimes sexual texts via cell phone and other electronic devices (Mitchell et al. 2014), which is usually censured and blamed when it is done by girls, while encouraged and reinforced when performed by boys (Ringrose et al. 2013).

Two of the issues we can address from a gender and feminist perspective with regards to online interactions are online violence and discrimination. While it is true that social media serves as a place of mutual support and for reinforcing esteem, it can also become a source of anxiety when it comes to popularity and image projection (Ging and O'Higgins, 2016). Thus, gender stereotypes are not only reproduced in online usage and shared content, but also reinforced through online interactions.

Cyberbullying and social inequalities

In this regard, cyberbullying is a type of aggression that takes place intentionally through different technological devices (Slonje and Smith, 2008) which activity can vary from insults on social media to usurp accounts or isolating from the group. Although it is one of the most studied forms of online violence, much of the research in the field has focused on psychological aspects, such as personality variables and individual traits (Kelly and Arnold, 2016). However, if harassment is a way of gaining power and status among peers (Thornberg, 2011; Felmlee and Faris, 2016), and bullies choose victims based on their physical and social traits (Dennehy et al. 2020), then these traits are inseparable from the predominant values of the given socio-historical context. It is therefore impossible to address cyberbullying without considering homophobia and gender relations. In fact, Hong et al. (2018) argue that researchers should not separate harassment from social structure and inequalities.

Most studies on the risk factors for cyberbullying (Baldry et al. 2015) neglect the social context in which this form of violence develops. Not only do such studies overlook relevant factors such as socioeconomic position (Beyazit et al. 2017) or race (Mazzone et al. 2018), but the central role of sexual orientation in this type of aggression also goes unnoticed (Elipe et al. 2018). However, this type of violence has always been linked to the reinforcement of gender roles and heteronormativity (Thornberg, 2011). For example, Pascoe (2013) states that the study of homophobic harassment is not only relevant from the point of view of those involved, but also as a socialisation mechanism that reproduces gender inequalities.

Gender roles construction and violence

Adolescents' desire for social connectedness and autonomy is now expressed in social networks, which function as a community. Although distinct from the offline world, when teenagers go online, they bring their friends and social networks with them, so the norms that are reinforced online do not differ much from those that exist at school (Boyd, 2014). Everyday gender interactions mean that boys and girls learn to conform to a single gender category, to do gender, so that gender roles and heteronormativity come to be conceived as something natural (Butler, 2011). Despite advances in equality, norms of heteronormativity, femininity and masculinity remain entrenched in our societies, and digital technologies influence this process (Mahlknecht and Bork-Hüffer, 2022). These discourses target victims of harassment while creating gendered and binary subjects, and rejecting deviant identities and practices.

Many studies point out gender differences in cyberbullying scenarios, such as that boys are more aggressive in their interactions (Maher, 2008); rate abusive behaviours less negatively (Shohoudi et al. 2019); are more likely to perform the role of aggressors (Li, 2007); and report cyberbullying less than girls. However, studies that analyse these disparities from a gender perspective are scarce. Nevertheless, some research has found that negative comments about appearance and sexuality are more frequently addressed to girls (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009; Linares et al. 2019), and relatedly girls need to balance the pressure to look 'sexy' and seek positive likes and comments with not showing so much skin as to attract insults (Sylwander, 2019).

By contrast, insults towards boys are more focused on their lack of physical ability or their sexual orientation (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009, Abouelenin, and Hu, 2022). On the other hand, while boys encourage girls to sexting, they are condemned and shamed when they do it on their own initiative. Gendered moral values regulate girls' sexual expressions, but not boys'. According to the study of Mahlknecht and Bork-Hüffer (2022) this morality is transformed in girls into fear of being punished by cyberbullying through the non-consensual publication of images. The same pressure to conform to gender expectations encourages male adolescents to participate in the non-consensual distribution of sexual images to reinforce their masculinity among peers (Dennehy 2019). Paradoxically, we see dualism in the construction of gender: The boy can derive value from the photo while at the same time devaluing the girl (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013).

Therefore, the authors emphasise the need for gender-differentiated research, as it can provide much information for the prevention of future victimisation (Abouelenin and Hu, 2022). Furthermore, not only gender and sexual orientation, but the full spectrum of affective, sexual, bodily, and gender diversity should be considered according to the risk of victimisation evidence (Ojeda et al. 2023).

Cyberhate and victim blaming

Hence, there is a clear connection between bullying and hate speech, since bullying is a predictor of subsequent homophobic name calling (Espelage et al. 2018). Cyberhate (also known as online hate and online hate speech) is thus defined as a behaviour spreading attitudes devaluing others (because of their characteristics, e.g. race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation etc.) using computer technology (Hawdon et al. 2014). As another form of online violence, it includes power imbalances and inequalities and therefore can adopt different forms such as sexism, racism, and LGBTIphobia. In the case of sexism, online misogyny becomes a means of violently reinforcing gender power relations (Ging and Siapera, 2018). Indeed, the Manosphere uses social channels such as Twitter to promote a misogynist agenda by portraying men as victims, constructing women as monstrous others, and re-establishing gendered power hierarchies through a constant invocation of the female body in rape discourses. However, as a space where gender is negotiated, social networks offer the opportunity to change these constructions (Hopton and Langer, 2022).

Consequently, the main victimisation factors found among adolescents entail those that are the focus of the aforementioned forms of cyberhate, namely gender, migration background, religion, or political engagement on behalf of the queer community (Obermaier and Schmuck, 2022). Again, in online scenarios girls are less likely to report committing and are more likely to witness hate speech than boys (Castellanos et al. 2023).

One of the consequences for victims that must be considered regarding cyberhate is the potential revictimisation through victim blaming. For instance, Bedrosova et al. (2023) found that adolescents tend to blame more the victim of weight-based cyberhate who is plus-size than the victim who is thinner.

Besides, boys tended to do this more than girls, despite the general assumption to the contrary. Similarly, hostile and sexist tweets promote normative beliefs about femininity, such as beauty ideals, while they shame victims who fail to meet these standards. According to Felmlee et al. (2020), online violence toward women reinforce traditional feminine norms and stereotypes.

Gender and online grooming

Finally, another form of violent online interaction, apart from cyberbullying and cyberhate, is online grooming (the cyber enticement of a minor by an adult through electronic communication for the purpose of obtaining sexual material or sexual encounters). As well as affecting girls more than boys (Mitchell et al. 2014; Montiel et al. 2015), this practice is related to gender roles (the behaviour considered to be appropriate to a particular gender according to cultural norms), as offenders use more romantic persuasion strategies with girls and more direct persuasion strategies with boys (Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Lamb, 2016).

In addition, boys are more likely to accept a sexual encounter request as well as take the initiative to talk to strangers—demonstrating less concern about risk—while girls are more at risk of coercion and other forms of violence. Indeed, offenders frequently use fear of abandonment as a coercive strategy with female victims who believe they are in a romantic relationship (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al. 2024), while they tend to be less aggressive when chatting with boys (Grosskopf, 2010). While the Internet can function as a place of freedom for new opportunities for sexual and gender identity, where girls can appropriate, for example, the identity of 'slut', it is also replete with norms and acts of sexual regulation (Ringrose and Barajas, 2011), as we will discuss in the article.

The present study

So far, we have provided disassembled evidence showing that social inequalities, such as those related to gender, seem to underlie different forms of online violence. It's worth noting that such violence is traditionally examined predominantly from an individual perspective. Our aim is to analyse the connection between gender relations and sexual orientation and three specific and prevalent forms of online violence, namely cyberbullying, cyberhate and online grooming, to try to compose the fullest image possible. Specifically, we aim to study: 1. the social context of discrimination, including gender differences, in victimisation and aggression in cyberbullying and cyberhate; 2. understanding how aggression operates—and is accepted—and how victimisation takes place from a gender perspective.; 3. gender differences in victimisation and risk perception in online grooming and ist relation with sexuality construction.

To carry out this study, we used a mixed methodology that includes eight discussion groups with adolescents in five European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Estonia, and Slovakia), Study 1, and a survey in the Community of Madrid of a representative sample of 682 adolescents, and in Estonia of a representative sample of 415, Study 2. This mixed methodology allows us, on the one hand, to recognise young people as experts of their own experience, by understanding their priorities and the explanations they give about online violence. On the other hand, through the survey we could contrast the structural differences of the probabilities of being a victim and aggressor of online violence.

We conducted this study within the framework of the European Union Horizon 2020 project RAYUELA, which has the general objective of educating children on how to avoid the cybercrimes that most affect them (López et al. 2021) through the development of a videogame. To this end, we considered it appropriate to first gather the perceptions of adolescents on online violence from a gender and intersectional perspective. Thus, in the first instance we carried out an exploratory qualitative analysis of categorical content in eight discussion groups carried out in different European countries balancing the participation of both boys and girls with different sexual orientations and ethnic diversity. Second, we conducted a quantitative analysis of a survey with a representative sample in Madrid (Spain) and in Estonia. The Ethics Committee of the authors' university approved both procedures before data collection. In both cases (focus groups and survey), researchers explained the project to the participants and the participants, or their parents, signed their informed consent to participate.

Study 1

The purpose of the focus groups was to delve into adolescents' understanding of online violence in an exploratory manner. Discussions covered the definition of cyberbullying and cyberhate, identifying their primary targets, the most common perpetrators, and the typical manifestation of the violent acts. To establish a conducive atmosphere for participation, the group initiated a conversation about their primary Internet usage. Understanding the key factors driving victimisation and aggression aims to expose the inherent power imbalance associated with aggression.

Method

Qualitative analysis: focus groups

Participants: Eight focus groups (see Table 1 for their characteristics) comprising a total of 47 adolescents aged 12–14 or 14/15–17 years were conducted in five European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Estonia, and Slovakia). The selection of the candidates was made through contact with different schools to offer participation in the study. Once the schools were contacted, the selection of participants was randomised among the age groups of interest, trying to ensure a balance between boys and girls (nonbinary participants were not included in our sample) and, as far as possible, ethnic diversity and sexual orientation. We

Table 1 Characteristics of the focus group participants.

Country	Total number of groups	Number of participants per group and acronym	Age range of the group
Spain	2	6 (SP1)	12–14
		5 (SP2)	14–17
Portugal	1	5 (P1)	15–17
Greece	1	6 (G1)	14–16
Estonia	3	6 (E1)	12–14
		5 (E2)	12–14
		7 (E3)	14–17
Slovakia	1	7 (SL1)	14–16

instructed our trained colleagues responsible for recruiting the sample to meet these diversity criteria. However, for the analysis we did not collect the data for confidentiality reasons. Nevertheless, we did not seek a balance to include different types of schools and population sizes. Regarding data sufficiency, 47 participants constitute a substantial number as a sample, and 8 groups are not inadequate since. Albeit with a different sampling, depending on the level of heterogeneity within a focus group and the intricacy of a topic, according to Guest et al. (2017), a range of three to six groups, or five groups, according to Coenen et al. (2012) could suffice for saturation. However, the data collected proved insufficient to analyse distinctions between regions, age groups, or social classes, a task that would have necessitated a greater number of groups per region and social class.

Measures: Based on the literature review, we designed our focus groups questions (see annex 1 in supplementary material) with the aim of finding out the opinion of participants about which people are more likely to suffer and carry out cyberbullying, cyberhate and online grooming. We also delved into the way these forms of violence occur and are maintained, the reaction of bystanders, and the criteria for adding, blocking or reporting strangers in social media. Some of the questions asked were: "Which people do you think are most likely to be the target of cyberhate?"; "What kind of people commit cyberhate?"; "When you have to decide whether or not to add a person to a social networking platform, what things do you take into account?" (see Annex 1 for the set of initial questions).

During the focus groups, we asked for detailed information and concrete examples and directly encouraged them to position themselves every time (i.e., say whether they agreed or disagreed with the topic dealt) in order to even out the differences in participation. The average length of the focus groups was 72 min (ranging from 55 to 90 min). The outcome categories that resulted from the analysis appear in Table 2.

Procedure: The discussions generated in the focus groups occurred in the native language of the participants by trained researchers. Since the data collection took place while there were certain restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups were conducted online. This way of conducting focus groups has so far been used mainly for hard-to-reach populations or where participants might feel embarrassed. (DuBois et al. 2015). This format includes some advantages such as greater ease of attendance and a greater sense of anonymity, but disadvantages include the lack of face-to-face interaction and lower participation. However, it appears that the content generated is remarkably similar (Reisner et al. 2018). First of all, once the discussion groups started, the researchers introduced themselves and the participants were encouraged to introduce themselves by saying their name, the course they were studying and which social media they use the most. Subsequently, the topic to be discussed was introduced by the researchers and guided through the different questions mentioned above.

Analysis: Our team transcribed and translated the verbal content of the discussions into English.

We then analysed them through a constant comparison analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The first approach to the data was to read the entire transcript and write down the key ideas. Second, we performed a reduction analysis in two steps: segmentation, dividing the text into units, and categorisation, grouping the units conceptually. We drew the categories directly from the initial transcripts of the discussions and inductively from the topics raised during the focus groups. After data reduction, we created a textual matrix with the groups and categories, which allows you to review the information included in a category and compare what is expressed in different groups on the same topic (Miles and Huberman, 1984). When it was possible, we tried to calculate the frequency of certain statements inside a group and between groups as suggested by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009). Nevertheless, promoting adolescent speech is not easy and, on many issues, not all participants gave their opinion. Finally, this analysis was performed at all stages by at least two researchers who discussed and came into an agreement when there were different forms of approach. We adopted qualitative-based measures to assess intercoder reliability, following the guidelines outlined by Cofie et al. (2022). While the criterion specified "a minimum of two coders", we engaged three coders in our process. Furthermore, one coder remained undisclosed in the presented data to mitigate potential bias. At least one coder had expertise and previous experience with coding qualitative data. All coders employed the same inductive framework for analysis. Consensus among coders was sought and successfully achieved through dialogue. Given the absence of unresolved conflicts, no external coders were consulted. The consensus reached by the coders resulted in a matrix applied to code the remaining transcripts.

Results

Cyberbullying

Victimisation. In the focus groups, we found no differences between boys' and girls' use of the Internet, both in terms of the most used applications and motivations, except for a higher use of video games by the former. When researchers asked about cyberhate, participants raised both the topics of cyberbullying and hate speech, although as one of the participants explained, "cyberhate refers to attacking ethnic, social groups, etc. and cyberbullying refers to attacking individuals" (G1). Cyberbullying and cyberhate overlap in the group participants' speech: "Nowadays people shame those who are of another race or do not have the right appearance" (E3).

Focus group participants described several instances in which girls were insulted especially for their physical appearance: "They criticised her for being fat" (P1); "For example, a girl who has flat chest" (SP1). In turn, in one group, being homosexual is referred to as a common insult for boys, while in another group, the connection between sexual orientation and masculinity is elucidated as follows:

> "I see that the girls in my class tend to be more self-conscious about their bodies and the boys tend to… Most of the guys in my class, if you call them gay, they don't want to have anything more to do with you and they don't talk to you again. It's like they have a fragile masculinity" (SP2).

As some participants suggested, this trend does not mean that boys are not insulted about their appearance, but it seems more common for girls: "In fifth or sixth grade, some boys in my class made a WhatsApp group to talk about girls, and above all they hassled one, talking about her body and face" (SP1).

Although the groups pointed out different characteristics of potential victims, this discourse coexists with the idea that "anyone can be a victim" (E3). Both explanations are justified by the connection between victimisation and self-confidence, which implies that it is people with a "lack of self- confidence" (SL1) who become victims. In five groups the victim attitude or behaviour is pointed out for both cyberhate and cyberbullying victimisation (becoming a victim). If defects - especially physical ones- are one of the main reasons to become a cyber victim, some participants say you should also feel insecure about them:

Table 2 Emergent themes obtained from the focus groups.

Theme	Subtheme	Descriptor	Quotes examples	Frequency
1. Internet & Social Media	Uses of internet	Main uses of Internet: communication, entertainment, access to information.	*I'm 17 years old (12°). Study (computer), Movies (Netflix, HBO), Music, Social networks (mobile), chat with friends, socialisation (P1-F)* *I'm 17 years old (12°), Study (computer), Social networks (mobile), chat with friends (P1-F)* *I'm 17 years old (12°). Study (computer), Music (spotify), Movies (Netflix, HBO), Social networks (mobile) (P1-F)* *I'm 16 years old (11°). Online gaming (computer), chat with friends (mobile) (P1-M)* *I'm 15 years old (10°)Online gaming (computer and playstation), Study (computer), Social networks (mobile), chat with friends (P1-M)*	Only three groups talk about online video games, but boys are the ones who mention them the most.
	Uses and frequency of Social Media	Frequency and purpose of social media use: Whastapp, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat, others.	*I use mainly FB messenger, Instagram, Tic Tok. I use them to chat my firends and family, my friends send me videos and just look around (E2-F) Also mainly Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok and FB messenger. In FB messenger I chat only with my family and in other apps i just look around what others do or say-everything (E2-M)* *I use especially Snapchat and FB messenger. I chat with my friends only (E2-M)* *I use Snapchat, whatsapp, Skype. In Skype i can speak with my father and my Findland friends (E2F)* *I also use Instagram, FB and tik tok (E2F).*	Although there are regional differences between groups, in all groups the social networks and purposes mentioned are the same for boys and girls.
2. Online grooming	Criteria of adding strangers	Things they consider when adding strangers	*I only add very good friends of people who are very good friends of mine* (SP1-F). *If I don't know the person, I ask to see who he is* (SP2-M).	In 3 of the 8 groups girls tended to have a more restricted criteria (in the others it is not that clear).
	Online grooming gender differences	Ideas that emerge related to gender and different probability of being a target or an offender, or to enter the grooming	*E: Who do you think responds more girls or boys? The guys because think they're the coolest, like: "I can do it all"* (SP1-M). *They are boys. Because kids harass more* (E1-F).	Although not directly asked in all groups, one group said that boys are more likely to enter in the grooming situation, two groups said that girls are more likely to be targeted, and three groups said that boys are more likely to be groomers
	Experience of online grooming	Spontaneous experiences when talking about online grooming	*I have on situation and the one man about 26 years old came in to my game. I didn't know the person and I asked to see who he was or* (E3-F).	Although not addressed in all groups, five groups reported direct and third-person experiences (all by female participants).
3. Cyberhate	General ideas	General definitions, overlap with cyberbullying	*Saying bad things about someone on Insta* (G1). *Cyberhate involves forms of cyberbullying* (E3).	In four groups bullying and online hate speech overlap when being defined. In all of them through they overlap in the general conversation
	Targets of cyberhate	Targets by race, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.	*In Tik Tok you may be confronted with racism, homophobia, transphobia...* (SP2).	Racism or ethnic background was referred in five groups, sexual orientation in three and gender in one
	Trivialisation and blaming the victim of cyberhate	Trivialisation, justification through humour and victim blaming	*People who are being harassed are the ones who are putting their own lives on the internet, posting pictures, videos of themselves* (E2).	In four groups humour and in five groups the victim attitude or behaviour is pointed out and for both cyberhate and cyberbullying victimisation.
	Who are behind the cyberhate	Cyberhate offender, kind and gender	*White straight men* (G1).	In three groups participants point out (without being asked) that offenders of cyberhate are male.
4. Cyberbullying	Targets of cyberbullying	Physical appearance, sexual orientation, being different, etc.	*Yes, one friend was criticised for being fat, but she wasn't so fat* (E3)-	In four groups participants related bullying to girls to their physical appearance, and only in one it is pointed out for boys. Sexual orientation was referred in two groups.
	Trivialisation and blaming the victim of cyberbullying	Trivialisation, justification through humour and victim blaming	*There are people who pass a photo, and it does not matter if they are all over the school. There are people who care and there are people who say, "I don't care if the whole school sees it", it depends on each person* (SP2).	In four groups humour and in five groups the victim attitude or behaviour is pointed out and for both cyberhate and cyberbullying victimisation.
	Who are behind the cyberbullying	Cyberbullying offenders, kind and gender	*These people want to think they are superior. I: Do you think there are more girls or boys? The boys; The boys* (SP1).	Only in one group the gender of the offenders was directly asked, answering participants that mainly boys.

> "Bodies for example are the most obvious thing. If a person is very fat and feels insecure about their body, people may take advantage of them more than someone who is fat and comfortable with their body and doesn't care. If there is insecurity it is more likely. But there is no specific defect to say, 'that's it', because we all have defects" (SP2).

The same reasoning about the lack of confidence as justification for cyberbullying -which may be a way of blaming the victim-, occurs also with respect to with other types of victims:

> "In my village, there's a guy who's gay. Well, there are two. One has accepted it and is super happy and nobody harasses him because they know that no matter how much they insult him, he doesn't care. But the other is super insecure and super confused and doesn't know what to do.
>
> People take advantage of him and mess with him and make him feel bad. The first one, no matter how much they insult him, he doesn't care, and they know that they cannot hurt him "(SP2).

In addition, according to the results of the focus groups, gender issues are also particularly likely to end up in victim blaming. First, when participants suggest that women are more critical of each other than men:

> "For example, I watch a video on TikTok and get into the comments and many times I see more criticism of girls towards girls, than of boys towards boys. For example, I see a video of a girl who has a really nice body and I see many girls write: "I wouldn't want to have that body", like with more anger of the girls towards other girls" (SP2).

Secondly, as some participants explained, comments about physical appearance occur more often according to the style of the photos: "It depends, for example, on how the photos look. If they show more or less…especially if the girls show more or less" (SP1). Finally, people insult girls more about their bodies and tell girls they are only offended because of their own insecurities.

Aggression. When asked in a group (SP1) about whether cyberbullying aggression was more likely to be perpetrated by boys or girls, the predominant response was boys. In addition, participants described how people trivialise cyberbullying by masking it with humour: "they mess with others through jokes" (SP1). These fine lines are also present in the groups when the participants reflected on their own experience: "Five years ago, we teased friends, we threw each other out of groups, but it was a joke" (E3). In another group, participants justified these behaviours by understanding that "young people are used to talking to each other differently, like with lots of jokes, which can be misunderstood by someone outside" (SL1).

Nevertheless, cyberbullying is recognised as a common problem. For example, explaining that, due to anonymity, harassment is quite common on TikTok and Instagram: "On TikTok people harass lots of young children (9 to 13 years old); on TikTok they harass you the minute you publish something" (E3). Despite the normalisation, participants care about this issue, as evidenced by the testimony of several participants about stories of strangers who ended up committing suicide as a result of harassment experienced online:

> "Recently, in my village, a girl ended up committing suicide because of cyberbullying. There were not many kids [in the school?], and all the kids were against her, and the school was also against her, on social media and in person. And the girl ended up committing suicide" (E2).

Cyberhate

Victimisation. While race and racism were the most frequently discussed topics with respect to hate speech, respondents also mentioned LGBTIphobia ("fat, Asian, gay, black" (G1); "Homosexuality? People pick on that a lot." (SP1). Although most groups did not address online sexism (the stereotyping or discrimination directed at women because they are women), in the two groups that it was dealt with (after a question from the facilitator), the participants recognised the phenomenon as common, giving as examples stereotyping videos in which female roles are exaggerated or "videos in which they make fun of what women do" (SP1). As we will describe later, this content is also often masked in the form of jokes.

Aggression. Although we did not ask direct questions in the focus groups about gender when discussing people who committed cyberhate, in three groups participants pointed out that offenders of cyberhate are male: "insecure men; heterosexual white men; super heterosexuals; conservatives" (G1); "they are boys or men" (E1) "to impersonate older men when they are not" (E3).

In addition, the participants described how peer pressure shapes cyberhate within a group, especially about heteronormativity, starting first as an in-group dynamic and then passing outside the group:

> "In a group of people or friends they feed off each other and that makes them harass people, it doesn't matter if they are girls or boys, although I have seen it more in groups of boys. For example, with homophobia, they feed each other and make a circle of homophobia: no one can be outside, but inside the circle because they call each other faggots, but in a bad way. I think that when it's a group of people it's like they feed off each other and in the end they take it out and harass people outside" (SP2).

The tendency described above in relation to cyberbullying, in which aggression is masked with humour, is also relevant in the case of cyberhate. As one participant explained when talking about sexism:

> "On TikTok there is a lot of humour with the theme of sexism and everything, with homophobia, racism, and everything. I've seen a lot of sexism in humour and people don't take it as sexism because it's humour. So, if someone says something like, 'This is sexist,' everybody says: it's humour, you don't have a sense of humour, and that sort of thing. People see it not as sexism, but as a joke" (SP2).

This questions also came up in a separate focus group, but this time making comments in the form of 'jokes' on social media was viewed less negatively:

> "For example, on TikTok it is like this. Below the video there are lots of comments and usually two groups of people: one for and one against. Comments are usually joking or arguing with people. And you know, there are some people who can take a joke or don't care what other people think, and others who can't take a joke" (SL1).

Sexual violence: online grooming. To better understand the phenomenon of online grooming, we asked in the focus groups for participants' criteria for accepting contact requests from strangers and for their experiences relating to contact requests, thus comparing discourse and practice. Most participants stated that they only add their friends, or friends' friends. However,

slight gender-related differences appeared, with girls being more restrictive than boys: in general, girls only add people who are friends of theirs. When a stranger talks to them, they usually ignore him, and if he insists, they block him. Instead, boys tend, to a greater extent, to ask for more information or to check the individual's social media profile.

While not explicitly addressed in every group, one group mentioned that boys are more prone to engaging in grooming situations. Additionally, two groups asserted that girls are more likely to be targeted by groomers, while three groups indicated that boys are more inclined to assume the role of groomers. It is generally accepted that: "Boys abuse girls, girls never abuse boys" (SP2). Finally, in some groups online grooming related practices appear normalised, and participants girls told experiences that seem to indicate that this online approach from adults to minors took place.

> "I have been messaged by men who were 50 or 60 years old, and I have blocked them and they have not been able to talk to me or anything. You have to be careful with the men who speak to you " (E3).

> M1: "It happened to a friend of mine. A man, an older man, started talking to her… He started talking to her and saying things to her… about sex and so on" M2: "It also happened to a good friend. She added a guy to Instagram, because she saw his profile and she thought he was a good guy, and he started to post many messages on her Instagram, posting stuff as if they were a couple. If she blocked him, he would make another account and do it again "(SP1).

> "I once had a situation in which a person behind a private account wanted me to send him a picture of my breasts" (E1).

> "I don't know if you know this app, it's like a Tinder for teenagers. During the lockdown I was bored, and I installed it to try it out. I met a guy who looked handsome at first and I started talking to him on Snapchat and then I gave him my Instagram. He told me that he was going to live where I lived and after a few months I discovered that everything was a lie" (SP2).

Discussion

Study 1 has approached the perceived profile of cyberbullying victims showing that, although some characteristics are mentioned, there is the idea that anyone can be a victim, and that lack of confidence is key to being a victim, a statement that implies a certain blaming of the victim. Furthermore, it is explained that cyberbullying is often masked as humour. Discourses of cyberhate overlap with those of cyberbullying, as some of the target groups are the same and it is also dressed up as humour. Significantly, while racism and homophobia online were stated spontaneously, sexism was only recognised when asked directly, although it was noted that the perpetrators of hate speech were mostly boys. In addition, girls appear to be more at risk of suffering from online grooming but have more restricted criteria for adding strangers on social networks.

We observe a contradiction in the discourse. On one hand, there's an awareness of a higher likelihood of victimisation based on being a woman, being non-heterosexual or non-white, coupled with a perception of a greater probability of aggression from men. On the other hand, there's a tendency to trivialise this aggression through humour and a certain victim blaming, asserting that it's merely a matter of sensitivity.

Study 2

Given the ambivalence evident in the discourse of Study 1, the objective of Study 2 was to contrast certain results quantitatively and locally, specifically examining differences and risk factors associated with victimisation and aggression in the three phenomena under study: cyberbullying, cyberhate, and online grooming.

Method

Quantitative analysis: survey

Participants: Our aim was to check the findings of the focus groups at the local level. For this purpose, we selected a representative sample of young people from the Community of Madrid (Spain) and Estonia. The sample consisted of 682 participants (Table 3) in Madrid and 415 in Estonia (95% confidence level estimate). We decided to use different population types (one from a sub-region and one from an entire country) as they are closer in number than if we had compared regions or countries (Estonia's population is much smaller than that of the Madrid region). Although we did not cover the five countries of Study 1, the two chosen countries represent some cultural distance (for instance on the individualistic/collectivistic dimension) and have previously shown differences in CB prevalence and in technological implementation (Smahel et al. 2020).

We used a type of stratified probabilistic sampling to select participants. The strata consisted of the type of school to which the participants belonged (public or private) and the type of place in which they lived (large city, medium-sized city, and small city). The participants were between 13 and 17 years old).

Measures: We designed a survey and transferred it to the Microsoft platform to measure the prevalence of different forms of online violence and certain associated risk factors. The survey comprised four main sections. Firstly, participants responded to sociodemographic questions covering age, gender (male, female, non-binary, prefer not to say), migratory background (peripheral, non-peripheral, and none), and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other, prefer not to say, and don't know it yet). Secondly, participants provided information regarding their Internet usage, including the time spent online and the most frequently used applications. Thirdly, they answered questions related to cyberhate, encompassing racism, sexism, and LGTBphobia. Each question included a brief explanation of the scenario. For instance, the racism question was formulated as

Table 3 Sociodemographic characteristics of the Spanish and Estonian samples.

	Spanish sample $n = 682$		Estonian sample $n = 415$		Total $n = 1097$	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Gender						
Male	318	46.6	174	41.9	492	44.8
Female	308	45.2	211	50.8	519	47.3
Non-binary	21	3.1	14	3.4	35	3.1
Preferred not to say	35	5.1	7	1.7	42	3.8
Age						
12–14 years	313	45.9	130	31.3	443	40.3
15–17 years	369	54.1	275	66.3	644	58.7
Sexual orientation						
Heterosexual	515	75.5	258	62.2	773	70.4
LGTBI community	100	14.7	58	14	158	14.4
Still unclear	32	4.7	36	8.7	68	6.1
Preferred not to say	35	5.1	55	13.3	90	8.2

follows: "Have you ever been involved in a situation of racism that took place online (e.g., insulting or laughing at a person because of their accent or skin colour)? Respondents could choose more than one answer, contributing to the variables of victimisation, aggression, witnessing victimisation, and witnessing aggression, with response options like "It happened to me", "I did it", "I know someone who suffered it", and "I know someone who did it". Subsequently, participants addressed questions related to cyberbullying, using the same set of potential answers and variables. The questions included five situations preceded by: "In the last year, have you experienced or witnessed any of the following situations? and were: receiving repeated insults through social media, someone posted an embarrassing photo or meme, account takeover and exclusion from the group, related with denigration, outing, impersonation and exclusion (Willard, 2004). The fifth situation involved receiving unwanted sexual images. Finally, although, due to ethical consideration, we did not directly address online grooming, we indirectly did so by asking how different contacts with adults may occur, concretely if an adult sent a friendship request, if an adult sent a message or photo and if they had an actual conversation with an adult. Here there was not a variable for aggression, only for victimisation and witnessing of victimisation. The complete set of questions is in Annex 2 and the list of variables in Annex 3.

Procedure: Initially, we reached out to several schools, providing a comprehensive explanation of the entire process to those who expressed willingness to participate. Depending on the age of the participant, parental consent was required, and parents were provided with an informed consent form to sign. The young participants were briefed on the voluntary and confidential nature of their involvement and were required to give their consent, both in writing and online—both at the commencement and conclusion of the survey. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, participants were also informed about available support options in case they needed assistance. The survey itself was conducted online, and participants completed it during regular school hours.

Statistical plan: After data collection, we exported the data and analysed it with IBM/SPSS statistical programme version 26. A descriptive analysis of simple frequencies was carried out, and to determine whether there was a relation between the different variables of victimisation and aggression and the socio-demographic information, and between cyberbullying and cyberhate variables. We performed a bivariate analysis using contingency tables and the Chi-square test, verifying the statistical significance between pairs of variables through the corrected typed residuals.

Results

Through the analysis of the results, we aim to determine whether there is an elevated likelihood of experiencing cyberbullying, cyberhate, and online grooming based on factors such as gender, sexual orientation, migratory background, or age. Additionally, we will investigate potential factors associated with an increased risk of engaging in aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, our examination will explore whether there exists a correlation between different forms of online violence.

Cyberbullying

Victimisation. As for the survey, most of the girls reported spending more hours on the Internet during the week and most than boys did (χ^2 [12, 682] = 35.047; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.221 in Madrid sample and (χ^2 [12, 682] = 25.583; $p < 0.017$; CC = 0.240). In addition, the survey measured five different cyberbullying scenarios, asking participants if they had suffered (see Table 4), committed, or observed any of them in the last year. Girls were more likely than boys to report having experienced social isolation by a group and to have received unwanted sexual photos. Belonging to the LGTBI collective was associated with receiving insults on social media, being isolated from a group, and receiving unwanted sexual photos (in a significant way in Madrid and as a trend in Estonia).

Moreover, girls—as a form of indirect victimisation—also witnessed to a greater extent other victims of other cyberbullying scenarios in Madrid: receiving insults ($n = 109$) (χ^2 [3, 682] = 14.55; $p < 0.002$; CC = 0.145), account takeovers ($n = 94$) (χ^2 [3, 682] = 16.06; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.152), and distribution of unauthorised memes and photos ($n = 102$) (χ^2 [3, 682] = 10.37; $p < 0.016$; CC = 0.122). Having a peripheral migrant background was found significant but only in the Spanish sample. It correlated with account takeover ($\chi^2 = 13.15$, $p = 0.004$, CC = 0.138). Since the percentage of immigrant participants in Estonia was very low (2.95%, $n = 12$), no significant results were obtained for any form of victimisation.

Aggression. Likewise, the main factor that was related to insulting on social media (χ^2 [3, 682] = 20.23; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.170 in Madrid and χ^2 [3, 682] = 24.65; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.239 in Estonia), sharing memes and photos without permission (χ^2 [3, 682] = 9.69; $p = 0.021$; CC = 0.118 in Madrid), and account takeover (χ^2 [3, 682] = 10.68; $p = 0.014$; CC = 0.160 in Estonia) was being male. However, it should be noted that the total number of self-described aggressors was very low (between 10 and 25 of boys per sample and situation), and the trend should be studied further.

Cyberhate

Victimisation. The survey found that victimisation by LGBTIphobia (variable "It happened to me") is more common in girls than in boys, and even more frequent in non-binary participants and among those who prefer not to declare their gender (χ^2 [3, 682] = 30.94; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.208 in Madrid and χ^2 [3, 682] = 44.56; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.314 in Estonia). Furthermore, not being heterosexual was detected as a risk factor for being a victim of a sexist situation (χ^2 [3, 682] = 28.44; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.200 in Madrid and χ^2 [3, 682] = 10.73; $p < 0.013$; CC = 0.161 in Estonia).

Aggression. Of the survey cases in which a person acknowledged committing cyberhate, a significant relation was found between being male and acknowledging having committed cyberhate related to LGBTIphobia (χ^2 [3, 682] = 34.77; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.220 in Madrid and χ^2 [3, 682] = 55.12; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.346 in Estonia), with 10.7% and 27% of boys respectively, versus 1% and 1,9% of girls; sexism (χ^2[3, 682] = 27.74; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.198 in Madrid and χ^2[3, 682] = 33.25; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.275 in Estonia), with 10.7% and 17,8% of boys versus 1.4% and 1% of girls; and racism (χ^2 [3, 682] = 31.38; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.210 in Madrid and (χ^2 [3, 682] = 50.17; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.332 in Estonia, with 9.7% and 24.1% of boys versus 0% and 1.4% of girls.

Sexual violence: online grooming. Although due to ethical issues online grooming victimisation was not directly addressed in the survey, we did examine some related behaviours. These included: receiving an adult friend request; receiving photos and messages from an adult; and having direct conversations with adults. As summarised in Table 5, we found that in both samples females received more friend requests, photos and videos from adults. In

Table 4 Factors associated with cybervictimization.

CB situation	Region	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Time spent online
Social media insults	Spain	13-14, 12.1% 15-17, 13% $\chi^2 = 0.116$, $p = 0.734$ CC = 0.013	Male 12.6% Female 12.7% $\chi^2 = 0.099$, $p = 0.992$ CC = 0.012	No LGTBI 11.1% LGTBI 20% $\chi^2 = 10.07$, $p = 0.018$ CC = 0.121	−3 h, 7.7% +3 h, 15.6% $\chi^2 = 9.221$, $p < 0.002$ CC = 0.116
	Estonia	13-14, 23.1% 15-17, 22.9% $\chi^2 = 0.001$, $p = 0.970$ CC = 0.002	Male 19% Female 26.1% $\chi^2 = 6.02$, $p = 0.110$ CC = 0.121	No LGTBI 21.7% LGTBI 32.8% $\chi^2 = 3.35$, $p = 0.340$ CC = 0.090	−3 h, 8.6% +3 h, 26.3% $\chi^2 = 17.65$, $p < 0.001$ CC = 0.205
Group exclusion	Spain	13-14, 28.4% 15-17, 24.7% $\chi^2 = 1.241$, $p = 0.265$ CC = 0.043	Male 14.8% Female 38.3% $\chi^2 = 44.755$, $p < 0.001$ CC = 0.248	No LGTBI 23.9% LGTBI 36% $\chi^2 = 8.461$, $p = 0.037$ CC = 0.111	−3 h, 23.1% +3 h, 28.4% $\chi^2 = 2.378$, $p = 0.123$ CC = 0.059
	Estonia	13-14, 15.4% 15-17, 17.5% $\chi^2 = 0.71$, $p = 0.603$ CC = 0.026	Male 6.3% Female 24.2% $\chi^2 = 24.008$, $p < 0.001$ CC = 0.236	No LGTBI 14.7% LGTBI 27.6% $\chi^2 = 9.73$, $p = 0.021$ CC = 0.153	−3 h, 15.7% +3 h, 17.1% $\chi^2 = 0.076$, $p = 0.783$ CC = 0.014
Account takeover	Spain	13-14, 12.8% 15-17, 17.3% $\chi^2 = 2.730$, $p = 0.098$ CC = 0.063	Male 12.9% Female 17.5% $\chi^2 = 4.194$, $p = 0.241$ CC = 0.078	No LGTBI 15% LGTBI 19% $\chi^2 = 3.889$, $p = 0.274$ CC = 0.274	−3 h, 10.4% +3 h, 18.2% $\chi^2 = 7.694$, $p = 0.006$ CC = 0.106
	Estonia	13-14 4.6% 15-17 6.2% $\chi^2 = 0.404$, $p = 0.525$ CC = 0.032	Male 6.3% Female 4.7% $\chi^2 = 1.50$, $p = 0.680$ CC = 0.061	No LGTBI 6.6% LGTBI 5.2% $\chi^2 = 1.96$, $p = 0.579$ CC = 0.069	−3 h, 2.9% +3 h, 6% $\chi^2 = 1.10$, $p = 0.294$ CC = 0.052
Memes and photos	Spain	13-14 14.4% 15-17 18.2% $\chi^2 = 1.763$, $p = 0.184$ CC = 0.051	Male 12.9% Female 19.5% $\chi^2 = 6.110$, $p = 0.106$ CC = 0.094	No LGTBI 15.9% LGTBI 19% $\chi^2 = 0.821$, $p = 0.845$ CC = 0.035	−3 h 10% +3 h 20.4% $\chi^2 = 12.627$, $p < 0.001$ CC = 0.135
	Estonia	13-14, 18.5% 15-17, 19.3% $\chi^2 = 0.038$, $p = 0.846$ CC = 0.010	Male 14.4% Female 23.7% $\chi^2 = 7.30$, $p = 0.063$ CC = 0.133	No LGTBI 19.4% LGTBI 24.1% $\chi^2 = 4.785$, $p = 0.188$ CC = 0.108	−3 h, 10% +3 h, 21% $\chi^2 = 0.4.50$, $p = 0.034$ CC = 0.105
Unwanted sex photos'	Spain	13-14, 10.2% 15-17, 14.1% $\chi^2 = 2.347$, $p = 0.126$ CC = 0.059	Male 5.7% Female 19.5% $\chi^2 = 28.212$, $p < 0.001$ CC = 0.199	No LGTBI 10.5% LGTBI 26% $\chi^2 = 21.894$, $p < 0.001$ CC = 0.176	3 h, 8.5% +3 h, 0.14.7% $\chi^2 = 5.783$ p = 0.016 CC = 0.092
	Estonia	13-14, 10.8% 15-17, 11.6% $\chi^2 = 0.066$, $p = 0.797$ CC = 0.013	Male 6.3% Female 16.6% $\chi^2 = 11.05$, $p = 0.011$ CC = 0.163	No LGTBI 10.5% LGTBI 20.7% $\chi^2 = 5.732$, $p = 0.125$ CC = 0.118	−3 h, 5.7% +3 h, 12.9% $\chi^2 = 2.886$, $p = 0.089$ CC = 0.084

Table 5 Differences in children's interactions with adults.

	Receiving an adult friend request	Receiving photos and messages from an adult	Having conversations with adutls
Gender Spain	Women (78.2%, $n = 241$) ($\chi^2 = 46.85$; $p < 0.001$, CC = 0.254)	Women 52% ($n = 148$) ($\chi^2 = 60.17$; $p < 0.001$, CC = 0.285)	Not significant ($\chi^2 = 1.45$; $p = 0.694$, CC = 0.046).
Gender Estonia	Women (78%, $n = 165$) ($\chi^2 = 45.91$; $p < 0.001$, CC = 0.319)	Women (59.5%, $n = 125$) ($\chi^2 = 48.3$; $p < 0.001$, CC = 0.326)	Not significant ($\chi^2 = 2.93$; $p = 0.402$, CC = 0.085).
Sexual orientation Spain	Not significant ($\chi^2 = 576$; $p = 0.124$, CC = 0.091).	No straight (48%, $n = 48$) ($\chi^2 = 11.18$; $p = 0.011$, CC = 0.127)	No straight (34%, $n = 34$) ($\chi^2 = 10.01$; $p = 0.019$, CC = 0.120)
Sexual orientation Estonia	Not significant ($\chi^2 = 7.38$; $p = 0.061$, CC = 0.134).	No straight (58,6%, $n = 34$) ($\chi^2 = 9.26$; $p = 0.026$, CC = 0.149)	No straight (67,2%, $n = 39$) ($\chi^2 = 11.98$; $p = 0.007$, CC = 0.169)

relation to sexual orientation, we found that non-heterosexual participants received more photos and messages and had more conversations with adults.

Significantly, concern about online grooming (χ^2 [3, 682] = 66.14; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.297 in Madrid and χ^2 [3, 682] = 86.26; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.419 in Estonia) and cyberbullying (χ^2 [3, 682] = 83.54; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.330 in Madrid and χ^2 [3, 682] = 77.18; $p < 0.001$; CC = 0.400 in Estonia) in the survey is much higher among girls than among boys. Table 6 summarises the variables (gender, sexual orientation, age, origin, hours spent on the Internet, type of center) that were related to being a victim or aggressor of the different scenarios.

Table 6 Summary-table of risk factors for online victimisation and aggression according to the survey results.

Category	Variable	More vulnerability
Gender	Female (Victimisation)	- **Suffering sexism and LGTBIphobia** - **Group isolation and unwanted sex photos** - **Adult friendship request, adult photos and messages**
	Male (Aggression)	- **Committing sexism, racism, LGBTIphobia and insults in social media** - Committing and Memes and photos (Sp) - Committing account takeover (Es)
Sexual Orientation	Straight (Aggression)	- **Committing sexism and LGTBIphobia**
	Non heterosexual (Victimisation)	- **Suffering LGBTIphobia, sexism and group isolation** - Insults in social media and Unwanted sex photos (Sp) - Adult photos and messages and adult conversations
Origin	Peripheral (Victimisation)	- Suffering racism and usurpation of account (Sp)
Hours spent on the Internet	+3 h/day (Victimisation)	- **Suffering insults in social media and memes and photos** - Account takeover (Sp)
Type of center	Charter or private (Aggression)	- Committing insults in social media and memes and photos (Sp)

Bold type for factors common to both samples, non-bold type for those occurring in Spain (Sp) or Estonia (Es).

Discussion

Study 2 has shown some statistically significant factors for being a victim of cyberbullying and cyberhate (being a girl, non-heterosexual or with migrant background) and for being an aggressor (being heterosexual and a boy). Although online grooming was not directly addressed, female participants reported receiving more friend requests, photos and videos from an adult. Non-heterosexual participants also reported receiving more photos and messages and having more conversations with adults. Below we discuss the findings of both studies in an integrated manner.

General discussion

Given that most of the research on cyber-violence comes from Western regions such as the United States or Europe (Backe et al. 2017), the conclusions of this study must be limited to the context in which it was conducted, since both gender roles and violence are highly socio-culturally embedded and can vary widely. Across this study, we have found that the main victimisation factors for receiving online hate speech are also the main factors for suffering cyberbullying: being a woman, a migrant and/or having non-heterosexual sexual orientation. On the contrary, being a heterosexual man seems to be more related to being the perpetrator of aggression. As noted in the introduction, bullying and violence are inseparable from the social structure and inequalities present in the societies where they take place (Hong et al. 2018; Pascoe, 2013). In this sense, the main contribution of our study is that the popular idea of "anyone can be a victim", although it can promote empathy and identification, also hides the power relationships and inequalities that shape the online socialisation of adolescents.

Victimisation and aggression in cyberbullying and cyberhate: Peer cyber-violence and building normative masculinity and femininity. The results show that in our context girls are more exposed to different forms of online violence, specifically, to different forms of cyberhate (sexism and LGBTIphobia), cyberbullying (group isolation and receiving unwanted sexual photos) and receiving friend requests and messages or photos from an adult. This trend is not explained only by the fact that they spend more time online, which has been found in other studies as a victimisation risk factor (Sorrentino et al. 2019) since, at least in the present work, this variable is related to other subtypes of harassment.

This form of cyber aggression not only has different prevalence in boys and girls, but also takes different forms, reinforcing the shaping of gender roles. On the one hand, our results in the case of cyberbullying, similarly to what was found in other studies, show that young people tend to harass girls more frequently in relation to their physical appearance (Linares et al. 2019), a practice that implies that the value of a woman lies in her sexual attractiveness (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017), something central to the construction of femininity. Girls see their sensuality promoted and rewarded in the media, and boys see women portrayed in ways that prioritise their sexual attractiveness (Robnett et al. 2018). Accordingly, Berne et al. (2014) found that while boys are not usually affected by insults based on appearance, girls who suffered from them experienced more low self- esteem and feelings of depression. On the other hand, young people in our sample commented to a greater extent on boys' sexual orientation, as previous studies have found (Berne et al. 2014). Thus, acceptable masculinity is defined and delimited via insults (Platero, 2008) and, to protect themselves from homophobic slurs, boys often engage in behaviours to 'get' girls that may include forms of sexual harassment. According to Butler (1993), gender, as a performative identity, is something that is continually actualised though everyday practices, and is so intertwined with heteronormativity that deviations from normative gender roles become suspicions of homosexuality. Thus, if girls' gender attitudes are determined by how their appearance and sexuality are policed, boys are restricted not because they are boys, but because they are the wrong kind of boys. Encouragingly, however, some studies report the questioning of stereotypical gender norms by many adolescents, implying that these are amenable to change (Kågesten et al. 2016).

The overlap between questioning sexual orientation and questioning gender roles is evident in our results in the percentage of participants in the survey who have suffered from homophobia and who do not want to identify with a specific gender, or who identify as a non-binary gender. Participants in the focus groups also stated that heteronormativity shapes identification as men in boys' groups. In fact, the practice of using homophobic epithets among friends, despite being understood as something benevolent and even affectionate, continues to act as a gender shaper (Slaatten et al. 2014). Indeed, there is a link between the use of homophobic insults and committing bullying in early adolescence and sexual harassment years later (Espelage et al. 2015).

However, we should remember that although homophobia is also directed at people who do not comply with the prescription of their gender role (Laner and Laner, 1979; Durell et al. 2007),

we cannot ignore that it is primarily focused on non-heterosexual sexuality (Schope and Eliason, 2004), as the results also show. Considering recent changes in the acceptance of sexual diversity, especially relevant among young people, Pascoe and Diefendorf (2019) state that homophobic practices should be understood as increasingly complex. Accordingly, even when used as a way of transgressing male mandates -as not to express affection-, they might still continue to reinforce these expectations.

On the other hand, males broadly recognised that they have been aggressors both of the different forms of cyberhate studied (racism, sexism and LGBTIphobia) and of harassment on social networks and sharing photos and memes without permission. They are also identified as responsible in focus groups. In this respect, discriminatory behaviours have been found as a pattern of affirmation of masculinity during youth (Dueñas-Cid et al. 2016), being that less gender typical adolescents also tend to offend other less gender typical adolescents to validate their own social position (Nielson et al. 2022).

This tendency contradicts the myth of the "bad girl by nature" and of relational violence as typically feminine. According to authors such as Barlett and Coyne (2015), although due to this myth girls were expected to harass more in cyberspace, most studies have contradicted this hypothesis. Even though the difference between the percentage of male and female aggressors does seem smaller when it comes to the virtual world, Ging and O'Higgins (2016) have suggested that it may be due to the taboo imposed on girls to show aggressiveness in face-to-face relationships.

How aggression is supported and maintained: symbolic violence, trivialisation through humour, and victim blaming. The fact that participants did not spontaneously raise sexism as an issue when discussing cyberhate, although they did recognise it and suffer from it, may be related to what we have called the normalisation of aggression and victim blaming. As we have seen, several participants suggested the idea that aggression is ultimately in the hands of the victim, since hurtful comments, from their perspective, would only annoy the 'sensitive' people (those with little confidence) or those who have 'no sense of humour'.

This masking through humour is relevant in two ways. On the one hand, sexist jokes might have the potential to exclude women from virtual social spaces by silencing them (Nasreen, 2021). On the other hand, the association between sexism and humour has been broadly studied as related with the construction of men's in-group cohesion, but also with victim blaming (Thomae and Pina, 2015). Victim blaming in girls is stronger as well due to the centrality of criticism of physical appearance in them, as the comments include the style of the photos (clothing and posing). Moreover, the blame for feeling offended might be greater in relation to stepping out of the physical normativity.

In addition, as the results show, people often blame girls and attribute co-responsibility for sexist comments. This discourse might reflect the dynamic of symbolic violence described by Bourdieu (2002). Symbolic violence implies a certain "complicity" on the part of the victim since it can only be exercised in people predisposed by their habitus to feel it, having incorporated a feeling of inferiority. In other words, symbolic violence means that people accept the framework of domination that oppresses them and incorporate structural inequality. This sort of complicity might also explain the suffering of victims who feel hurt by comments that criticise, for instance, their sexual orientation.

In the face of comments on networks, the trivialisation implied whether "you know how to accept a joke" or whether "you care about the opinion of others" is also relevant insofar as they reinforce the idea of not responding so as not to "feed the troll." Lumsden and Morgan (2017) explain how this is a silencing strategy that prevents the victim from resisting. As we have shown, online violence masked by humour produces a more perverse effect on victimisation, given that the subject of the harassment will attract further criticism if they challenge the abuse.

Different victimisation in online grooming and the potential effects on the configuration of sexuality and the perception of risk. Finally, the normalisation of being approached by adults for sexual purposes may affect the development of sexuality in girls. Their greater exposure to messages and contact requests from unknown adults occurs together with the unwanted sending of photos of sexual content by people of similar age.

Other behaviours not included in this study, and which also affect girls to a greater extent are sexual harassment among peers (Villacampa and Gómez, 2016) and revenge porn (Estébanez, 2010).

More importantly, we should consider how these issues are addressed through prevention. Educational interventions help young people to position themselves in relation to these behaviours and to attribute a meaning to them. Particular attention should be paid not to blame the victim, as previous research has found that, for instance, campaigns to prevent sexting tend to target girls more than boys, despite the evidence showing that boys and girls sext to the same extent, and that boys are primarily responsible for sharing images without consent (Karaian, 2014). Similarly, Bay-Cheng (2003) has shown how sexual education programmes tend to focus on the dangers and risks associated with teen sex, meaning that sex ends up being inseparable from guilt. Insisting on victimisation in these programmes may make it more difficult for girls in particular to build their own sexual autonomy (which paradoxically leaves them more exposed to victimisation). The association between sexual victimisation and girls also creates an image of femininity linked to powerlessness, which the media often promote in the form of moral panic (Thiel-Stern, 2009).

All these threats form an idea of sexuality intimately linked to the risk that adolescent girls must accept even though it contradicts the pressure to display an attractive and empowered image of themselves (Ringrose et al. 2013; Zurbriggen et al. 2007). This difference in risk perception perpetuates the classical double standard that accepts male desire as irrepressible and labels female desire reprehensible (Chmielewski et al. 2017). Although within feminism there has been a debate about what sexual empowerment of young women means in the context of their increasing sexualisation, authors such as Tolman (2012) prioritise defending their right to self-knowledge and sexual self-expression, away from the usual guilt and shame.

This dynamic, in the case of boys, favours playing down risks that, in our study, imply a greater willingness to accept contact from strangers online and to converse with adults. This trend, in which boys are less likely to be contacted by an adult but are at greater risk of abuse, has been reported in previous research (Riberas-Gutiérrez et al. 2024). On the one hand, the tendency shows that adolescent boys are more likely to engage in risky behaviour online (Lau and Yuen, 2013), which is closely related to the construction of normative masculinity itself. The same pressure to conform to gender expectations, according to Dennehy (2019), encourages boys to engage in non-consensual distribution of sexual images as a way of reinforcing their masculinity among peers. On the other hand, it is also reinforced by the dual construction of sexuality. According to this duality, women must learn to construct their desire as something

imbricated with fear, while men must do so from the perspective of omnipotence and the absence of limits, which entails not only greater exposure to risks, but also to frustrations.

The mixed methodology, although allowing us to contrast the concrete results in an exploratory way, placing the young people's own explanations first, has also implied a series of limitations. As this is a multi-country study, it was not possible to have a balanced sample in the focus groups and the survey could not be replicated in all the countries where we conducted the focus groups. Another limitation we found was that some topics were only addressed in some groups, as they were not part of the initial script and arose during the discussions. In addition, although for the survey a previous sampling was carried out that allowed us to ensure that the results were representative of the studied population, for certain behaviours (such as cyberaggression) or sample sectors (such as non-heterosexual people) a larger sample would better confirm our results. Furthermore, the two samples did not match exactly in age range as we have to facilitate the schools' participation. Moreover, in light of the results, it would be interesting to address online violence from an intersectional perspective.

Our data point to clear trends previously described in the literature: cyberspace is a place of socialisation, especially for young people, where social structures of domination, including gender roles, are perpetuated. In terms of prevention, we consider it essential to address these inequalities as well, so that the label "cyberbullying" was not in practice a way of hiding racist, sexist and homophobic aggressions. Prevention programmes should also take into account, on the one hand, the tendency of observers to trivialise aggression and blame the victim. On the other hand, sexuality education should not perpetuate stereotypes of men as the only desiring subject and women as potential victims who must construct their sexuality around fear.

Conclusion

When it comes to cyberbullying and other forms of online violence, it is common to state that "anyone can be a victim". Despite the potential identification and empathy that such a statement can generate, our work has shown how online violence is deeply imbricated with gender roles and heteronormativity; these forms of aggression not only reproduce stereotypes but also reinforce them, acting as mechanisms that reproduce and enforce compliance with gender mandates. A relevant element that has emerged to understand how cyberhate is expanded and trivialised is its masking in the form of humour. Victims are often blamed for being humorless or overly sensitive. Finally, the effect of online sexual violence in the construction of female adolescent sexuality requires further study.

Data availability

Anonymised survey data can be found at: http://hdl.handle.net/11531/75763.

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Author contributions

María Reneses: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing, and supervision. María Riberas-Gutiérrez: Methodology, investigation, data curation and visualisation. Nereida Bueno-Guerra: Conceptualisation, methodology, and investigation.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

All research was performed in accordance with relevant guidelines/regulations applicable when human participants are involved (Declaration of Helsinki). Approvals from the ethics committees of the different regions involved are attached. They were specifically asked to cover both tasks (focus groups and the survey): Research ethics committee of the University of Tartu (359/T4; 03/03/22 and 351M/11; 18/10/21); Comillas University Ethices Committee (2021/38; 05/04/21); Ellinogermaniki Agogi 9/6/21; Bratislava Police Institute (15/10/21).

Informed consents

All participants and/or their families (depending on the participants' age and the national law) signed an informed consent form prior to the scheduled activity. In the consents we included the objective of the study, the voluntary participation, the access and confidentiality to the data, the rights over the data and the contact information. As the participants were minors, the language was adapted to their understanding and the information contained in the consent form was reviewed with them before the activity was carried out. The purpose of the project and the voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained to them in advance. In both the focus groups and the survey, researchers provided a thorough explanation of the project before the activity began. For the survey, young participants were informed about the voluntary and confidential nature of their involvement. They were required to provide their consent both in writing and electronically (in April 2022 in Estonia and in January 2022 in Spain), at the beginning and again at the end of the survey. Similarly, at the start of the focus groups (September 2021 in Spain, October 2021 in Portugal, Estonia and Slovakia, and November 2021 in Greece) participants were asked to provide their assent in addition to the prior written consent. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to skip questions or withdraw from the process at any time.

Additional information

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Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to María Reneses.

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