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# ONLINE THREATS IN ADOLESCENT CYBERBULLYING ON THE BASIS OF HTTPS://CYBERBULLYING.ORG/STORIES

The aim of this paper is to provide a brief study of online threats in adolescent cyberbullying. Cyberbullying refers to different forms of repeated and intentional electronic aggression. Online threats constitute an important mechanism of electronic abuse.

The paper opens with a brief introduction into the issues of cyberbullying and the speech act of threat. Subsequently, a practical study on the database of 255 cyberabuse testimonies published on https://cyberbullying.org/stories is carried out. The aim of the analysis is to determine the presence of online threats in adolescent cyberbullying, the types of threats and the verbs of harm by which the threats were expressed.

The results of the analysis confirm the presence of online threats in adolescent cyberbullying. The most numerous category reported in the database included death threats, followed by threats of physical violence. The most common verb of harm in the dataset was the verb *kill*, with other verbs significantly less represented.

The analysis of the dataset reveals online threats in adolescent cyberbullying as made in a direct and unrestrained way.

The results of the study also show online threats in adolescent cyberbullying as complex lexical and conceptual events, often perpetrated in connection with other forms of abuse and having important detrimental consequences for the victims.

While acknowledging limitations of the present study, this paper also points to a number of practical benefits coming from further investigations into online threats in adolescent cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, electronic abuse, online threats, adolescents.

## 1. Cyberbullying

*Cyberbullying* – hereafter also referred to as *cyberabuse*, *electronic abuse* and *electronic bullying* is a serious and pervasive problem for contemporary adolescent Internet users around the world (Zhu et al. 2021; Hinduja and Patchin 2023). However, the exact definition of the phenomenon provides challenges (Weber and Pelfrey Jr 2014: 9). According to Andrzejewska (2014: 108-109) cyberabuse is the use of violence by means of information and communication technologies. Smith et al. (2008: 376) define cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself." According to Hinduja and Patchin (2023: 10) electronic bullying is "wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones and other electronic devices."

Several attempts at defining electronic abuse have focused at comparing it with traditional (physical) bullying (e.g. Dooley et al. 2009; Pyżalski 2012; Corcoran and Mc Guckin 2017). However, as Corcoran and Mc Guckin (2017: 176) note, the nature of electronic abuse introduces a set of new methodological and practical challenges. These come from the ubiquity of Internet connection, the capacity for the abuser, the victim and the audience to be online at all times, Internet users' perception of their anonymity, disinhibition of online communication, instantaneous dissemination of data, and the difficulty – or virtual impossibility – to fully delete the content which has previously been uploaded (e.g. Walrave and Heirman 2009; Pyżalski 2012; Andrzejewska 2014; Hinduja and Patchin 2023).

Of considerable importance here is the fact that the unprecedented development of modern technologies and social media has created "a full-time, always-on, community" where young people often assume the roles of content creators, editors, and administrators (Siemieniecka et al. 2020: 34; Hinduja and Patchin 2023: 9).

Cyberbullying may take a number of different forms. Numerous authors list hateful comments, harmful images, flaming, harassment, impersonation, outing (revealing sensitive information about the victim), cyberstalking, sexting, and online threats as common categories of electronic abuse (e.g. Pyżalski 2012: 126-128; Hinduja and Patchin 2023: 20-28; António et al. 2024).

The issue which is also prominent in contemporary literature is the one of consequences coming from electronic bullying. The detrimental effects of cyberabuse can be studied on many levels, including the level of society, institutions, and individuals. However, a substantial portion of these studied have focussed on the effects of electronic abuse for individual victims.

Cyberbullying victimisation has been reliably linked to numerous psychological, emotional, behavioural, and health-related negative consequences. These

include stress, anxiety, frustration, lowered self-esteem, self-alienation, learning difficulties, substance abuse and school misconduct (e.g. Pyżalski 2012; Andrzejewska 2014; Weber and Pelfrey Jr 2014; Gunther et al. 2017; Miller 2017; Siemieniecka et al. 2020; António et al. 2024). Pyżalski (2012: 146-7) also lists a number of psychosomatic effects commonly experienced by the victims of electronic abuse, such as headaches, sleep problems and eating disorders.

Numerous authors link prolonged cyberbullying with increased likelihood of clinical depression. (e.g. Ybarra 2004; Wang et al. 2011; Pyżalski 2012)

Experiences of cyberabuse may force adolescent victims to avoid school, remove themselves from their usual circles of interests and may prompt them to engage in physical or verbal aggressive retaliation acts (Andrzejewska 2014: 21-22; Weber and Pelfrey Jr 2014: 113-119).

Alternatively, cyberbullying victims may resort to acts of self-harm. A number of authors point to studies consistently establishing a connection between cyberbullying and suicide ideation (Pyżalski 2012: 146-7; Hinduja and Patchin 2010; 2023: 64-65; Fekih-Romdhane 2024).

Finally, many authors note that the effects of cyberbullying are frequently more detrimental and persistent than those of traditional (physical) bullying (Andrzejewska 2014; Miller 2017; Siemieniecka et al. 2020; Zhu et al. 2021; Fekih-Romdhane 2024).

## 2. Threats

Threats can be defined – in accordance with Searle (1979, 2008 [1965]) – as a commissive speech act that predicates a future course of action on the part of the speaker and the outcome of this action is assumed to be unfavourable for the addressee (Fraser 1998; Walton 2000; Christensen 2019). Fraser (1998: 161) defines threats as an illocutionary act whereby the following are purposefully expressed:

> C1 . The speaker's intention to personally commit an act (or be responsible for bringing about the commission of the act).
> C2 . The speaker's belief that this act will result in an unfavourable state of the world for the addressee.
> C3 . The speaker's intention to intimidate the addressee through the addressee's awareness of the intention in C1.

These conditions are succinctly conveyed by Christensen (2019: 119) who characterises a threat as "an attempt to intimidate an addressee by communicating that the threatener intends some serious harm to befall them."

Numerous authors note that it is useful to make a distinction between threats and other speech acts predicating a future state of affairs, such as promises and

warnings (Kalisz and Kubiński 1993; Fraser 1998; Walton 2000). A crucial difference between threats and other acts of this category appears to lie in the intention of the speaker and the nature of the real-life outcome for the addressee. As Searl (2008 [1965]) puts it "[…] a promise is to do something for you, not to you, but a threat is to do something *to you*, not for you."

There appears to be no single linguistic formula for threatening. Common syntactical patterns include a declarative (e.g. *I'm going to punish you.*) or a conditional sentence (e.g. *If you don't stop talking, I'm going to punish you*) (Fraser 1998: 167). On the lexical level, Gales (2015) lists a number of rhetorical features commonly accompanying threats. These include name-calling (e.g. *bigot*), adverbials of time (e.g. *soon*, *now*), different verbs of harm (e.g. *punish*, *judge*), second person pronouns (e.g. *you*), and first person pronouns (e.g. *I*, *me*). Moreover, many verbal threats are marked by prolific use of profane language, swearing and insults.

It must be noted, however, that not all verbal threats include the lexical elements described above. Christensen (2019: 115-116) makes a distinction between *direct threats* and *indirect threats* (non-explicit threats in Walton's [2000] nomenclature). In direct threats the speaker, the addressee and the type of harm intended are explicitly mentioned or are easily accessible from the context of utterance, as in *We will kill all of you* (Christensen 2019: 116; after Rugala and Fitzgerald 2003: 779). In indirect threats, on the other hand, any of these elements may be left unmentioned or unspecified, as in *WATCH OUT all of you will reap what you sow* (Christensen 2019: 116, after Gales 2010). Indirect threats are often made in order to express the intention of the speaker by means of implied messages, which are understandable to the addressee, but more vague and difficult to interpret for persons and institutions which could hold the speaker accountable for them. This is reflected in the linguistic studies of illicit indirect threats in different legislative systems (e.g. Christensen 2019; Christensen and Bojsen-Møller 2019).

In the absence of explicit lexical and syntactical elements in indirect threats, it is the evaluation of the context of the utterance, the intention of the speaker and the addressee's inference which dictate whether a given act may be classified as a threat for the purposes of linguistic analysis and legal actions (Storey 1995; Walton 2000). This is often illustrated in literature by *How's David?* (Shuy 1993, as cited in Casula et al. 2021: 153). On the surface the question does not possess any rhetorical features of threats and thus may sound benign to a disinterested party. However, in the context where David is missing or in foreseeable danger and the utterance is directed at a person who is worried at that fact, it may well constitute a threat.

Finally, it must be noted that the speaker may threaten the addressee by expressing the intention to harm a person, animal, item, or property formally, psychologically, or emotionally connected to the addressee. The validity of such

threats is supported by the fact that in different legal systems predicating harm to befall an entity associated with the addressee is considered to be a credible and prosecutable type of threat (Fitzgerald 2005: 2; Walton 2000: 101).

## 3. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to present a short analysis of online threats among adolescents in the context of cyberbullying. The analysis is based on the collection of electronic abuse stories published on https://cyberbullying.org/stories. The website constitutes a part of the educational and research-facilitating project by dr Sameer Hinduja and dr Justin W. Patchin. As one of its features, it encourages victims of cyberabuse to share their electronic bullying testimonies through a dedicated contact form. The reports published on the website include these contributions which are coherent enough to be shown in the form of self-contained short stories.[1]

The website presents a total of 255 unique cyberbullying stories.[2] In order to determine the nature of the contributions, I have conducted a preliminary study of the database. The majority of the database stories (184 testimonies) were provided by adolescent victims of cyberbullying. In thirty (30) contributions the parents of teenage victims reported on electronic abuse aimed at their children. Twenty-one (21) reports were authored by individuals witnessing online bullying committed against their family members, friends, or acquaintances. Seven (7) testimonies were provided by self-described perpetrators of cyberbullying. Other types of contributions were presented in thirteen (13) samples. The contributors of the samples presented on the website were mostly from different states of the USA, with a number of testimonies coming from the UK, Canada, and other, sometimes unspecified, locations.

There are three main research questions that I intend to answer in the following analysis:

– How many samples in the database of 255 cyberbullying stories published on the website included references to online threats?
– What types of harmful acts were communicated in those online threats?
– What verbs of harm were the online threats realised by?

In order to answer these questions, a textual analysis of the stories published on the website is carried out below. For the purposes of this analysis, I have taken

[1] S. Hinduja, Personal e-mail communication with the author, February 6, 2024. However, as of March 11, 2024, I was unable to determine when the contributions published on the website were written or submitted.

[2] As of 11.03.2024 there were 262 stories presented on the website. However, 7 contributions were found to have been listed twice.

into account the contributions provided by victims, witnesses, parents, and other individual, as long as references to online threats were present in them.

The analysis is illustrated by a dataset of samples taken from the website. Non-essential fragments of testimonies, omitted from the excerpts are marked with three dots closed in parentheses "(…)." Otherwise, the spelling in the testimonies and the identification of their authors is presented as originally rendered on the website.

Admittedly, the analysis proposed below has a number of limitations. Firstly, as noted above, threats are often made in an indirect way. There is no universal language formula for threatening, nor is there a fixed collection of lexemes by which online threats could reliably be identified. Understanding and classifying an act as a threat often requires substantial contextual knowledge. The contributions presented on the website do not always offer information which would be sufficient for this purpose. Therefore, with limited contextual data, some of the threatening acts, especially if they were made indirectly, may have been involuntarily relegated from the analysis. In short, the methodology adopted in this paper is more appropriate for identifying and analysing direct threats than indirect ones.

Secondly, the analysis below is based on a collection of reports about cyberbullying incidents. The authors of the samples were unrestrained in the contents of their contributions, and they commented on different cyberbullying-related issues. They were not explicitly required to provide the exact quotations of the abusive language used. In consequence, the reports of threatening communication were often descriptive and succinct. In many cases it was not explicitly quoted or paraphrased how a given utterance was formulated. Even if a testimony provides a verb of harm in the threatening context, there is no guarantee that this exact verb was used in the threatening episode. For instance, in numerous testimonies the victims reported on having been threatened, but no comments were made as to what type of threat they had been addressed with or which verbs of harm had been used. Such inconveniences negatively impact the possibility to fully and comprehensively analyse the data, especially in relation to the types of threats and the verbs of harm in the dataset.

Despite these drawbacks, I believe that the methodology adopted here is sufficient for investigating the three research questions posed above, as well as for formulating a number of additional observations related to the nature of the data.

## 4. Results and discussion

In the database of 255 cyberbullying stories, I have identified thirty-one (31) testimonies which included references to online threats. Therefore, twelve per cent (12.2%) of the contributions published on https://cyberbullying.org/stories

included descriptions of threatening communication in the context of cyber-bullying. Consider the dataset of these samples as they are presented below:

(1)

Miley a girl at my school. Posted something on MySpace that said "I'm going to bring a knife to school and kill Sarah – **11-year-old girl from USA**

(2)

(…) this kid started saying bad words and he said that he was going to kill me i was scared. – **12-year-old girl from Goshen, IN**

(3)

I have been threatened that someone was going to kill me and told me to shut the fuck up (…) – **12-year-old boy from WA**

(4)

A kid was sending my son emails on MySpace and saying that we were going to kill u (…) – **13-year-old boy from USA**

(5)

One girl actually told me she would come and murder my parents and kill me personally. She made me cry so hard that I threw up. (…) – **12-year-old girl from MI**

(6)

(…), I discovered that this one girls (one who bully's) had written about killing my daughter! (…) **- Mother from USA**

(7)

People tell me that i am not good enough for my boyfriend and they mail me saying that they are going to kill me if i don't break up with him (…) – **13-year-old girl from TN**

(8)

I was at my house one day and i texted my friend (…) she said she hated me and she never waned to talk to me again (…) she said (…) I'm a dumb bad word and had no friends and she said that i was lonely and hated by my parents my family and i got scared when she finally said either go kill yourself or she is going to come kill me by herself or someone else will for her**- 13 year-old girl from Marysville, OH**

(9)

(…) the older kids were threatening them. Promising to kill them. (…) – **12-year-old girl from England**

(10)

It happened on MSN Messenger about a year ago...A girl threatened to kill me (…) – **13-year-old girl outside of USA**

(11)

I was walking home from school when i got a text message that read ‘you wait till tomorrow bitch you're going to die' (…) – **18-year-old girl from Victoria, Australia**

(12)

When I was 15, a freshman in high school, I was bullied over the Internet and at school (…) They photo shopped obscene sexual photographs of me and posted them in this profile. I was getting calls and began being stalked by strange men. These girls would make up sexually explicit rumors about me even though at the time I was a virgin. They would instant message me and tell me I was going to die (…). I was afraid to leave the house, to have friends, to pick up the phone. (…) I became recluse, a prisoner in my own home. (…) Now, I am 22 and still have to live with the effects of these cruel girls. Trauma is hard to recover from but I know it is possible and I am stronger now than I have ever been. (…) – **22-year-old girl from Middletown NY**

(13)

I was harassed and teased through Facebook and AIM, told I was ugly, fat, no guy would ever like me, that I was a female dog, to go cut myself, and even received death threats. (…) **– 15 year-old girl from USA**

(14)

When I was 13 in middle school (…) some boys in my Spanish class (were) threatening to rape me, kidnap me, kill me, and kill my dog. It was literally one of the most terrifying things that had ever happened to me (…) I felt miserable for the rest of my middle school career and pleaded with my parents to transfer schools but they wouldn't listen. I did try to commit suicide more than once. The depression carried over into high school (…) Eventually I did get help mid-Senior year and am continuing talk therapy in college. – **18 year-old girl from FL**

(15)

(…) he started talking to me saying that I shouldn't f***k with him because he would beat my a** down in front of his friends"" **- 15 year-old-boy from NJ**

(16)

**(…)** they were threatening to bully me at school, and I got scared about it. (The first girl) said if I came to school she would beat me up during recess, so during that day I hid in the bathroom at lunch. – **12-year-old girl from AL**

(17)

My son has been cyber bullied by the same child that is his age for a while now, he has threatened to beat him up and tells my son to kill himself because no one cares about him. (…) – **Mother of 12-year-old from WI**

(18)

They made threats to beat her up (…) – **20 year-old boy from VA**

(19)

A few weeks later she was sending me text is saying i owe her money if i don't give it her back she will batter me. (…) She written on Facebook that i am a tramp and i eat like a pig and calling me names all my friends at school fell out with me till they found out the truth"" – **11 year-old girl from Manchester, UK**

(20)

I went to check my e-mail and there was a message from some people in my old school sent these threatening e-mails some saying "we'll hunt you down at your NEW school and you'll never know what hit you" i felt very scared and at the same time i wondered how they knew my e-mail address. (…) – **13-year-old girl from Canada**

(21)

(…) she told me if she saw me in school she was going to stuff me in a locker and that no one was going to find me for a very long time. I faked sick for a week and a half until i found the courage deep inside me to go to school. (…) – **18-year-old boy from NY**

(22)

She had been called vile horrible names, accused for things she hadn't done and set up to appear racist. There were threats of bashing. Finally she was provoked and she ended up using language out of character in retaliation. (…) – **11-year-old girl from Australia**

(23)

I was also threatened with physical violence and my house and car were egged – **18-year-old girl from Sydney, Australia**

(24)

She started yelling at me and threatening me over msn instant messenger. – **14-year-old girl from OH**

(25)

(…) she left me a voicemail threating me (…) **– 12-year-old girl from TX**

(26)

People would constantly try to push me around, and threaten me. I felt horrible about the fact that I was white, so much that I started to resent myself for it. (…) I stopped going to school for days at a time **– 18-year-old girl from CA**

(27)

My 11 year old daughter is in fifth grade and was called into the principal's office because a sixth grade girl had received a threatening email. **– Parent of 11 year-old girl from TN**

(28)

I am tired of having him messaging me and saying inappropriate things, threatening, and just being downright annoying! – **16 year-old girl from USA**

(29)

This one guy in my school was bothering me, it involved blackmail (once using the private messaging system in an MMORPG), extortion, threats, name calling, slander, and many other things. – **15 year-old boy from USA**

(30)

I was talking to someone in a chatroom and they started telling me things. Like was I really that stupid and making fun of me. I told them privately to please

stop and they wouldn't. They then told me they were going to harm me and I was scared because I don't know how but they knew where I lived. – **17 year-old boy from CA**

(31)

I was surfing the Internet and decided to look at my email. Kristina, a friend from school, said in a e-mail tomorrow watch your back we are coming for you. It made me feel so bad i started to cry. (…) – **11 year-old girl from CA**

In the dataset of 31 samples, I identified two main types of online threats. They were the threats of death and the threats of physical violence. Apart from these, in some dataset samples the type of threat could not be determined.

The threats of death constituted the most numerous category reported on the website. In the dataset of 31 testimonies, in 14 samples [(1) – (14)] references to death threats were made. Thus, death threats accounted for forty-five per cent (45.2%) of all the dataset samples.

The threats of physical violence predicated diverse types of harmful physical acts aimed at the addressee, or a person, animal or possession associated with the addressee. In the dataset there were 10 such testimonies (32.3% of the dataset). They are presented in (14) – (23), as sample (14) includes death threats and threats of physical violence simultaneously.

In the dataset of 31 stories there were also samples where the type of harm intended by the speaker could not be determined from the wording of the contributions. There were 8 samples of this nature, and they are presented in (24) – (31). Therefore, such cases added up to twenty-six per cent (25.8%) of the dataset. The numerical data concerning the types of threats in the dataset are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Types of harm in the dataset

| **Types of threats** | **Threats of death** | **Threats of physical violence** | **Samples where the type of threat could not be determined** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of samples | 14 | 10 | 8 |
| Percentage of the dataset (31 samples) | 45.2% | 32.3% | 25.8% |

The threats of death were realised by different verbs of harm, with the verb *kill* being the most common. The verb *kill* was used in 11 samples ([1)-[10] and [14]]. Therefore, this verb of harm was present in the threatening context in thirty-six per cent (35.5%) of the whole dataset. The verb *die* was used in 2 samples ([11] and [12), and *murder* was present in 1 sample (5). Sample (5) shows two verbs related to death used in the threatening context (*kill* and

*murder*). In (13) no verbs of threat were used, as the contributor reported on having *received death threats*.

In the category of physical violence threats, different themes of harm were reflected by the use of distinct verbs. The verb *beat* was present in 4 samples ([15] – 18]). In single samples references were made to *rape* and *kidnapping* (14), *bullying* (16), *battering* (19), *bashing* (22), *hunting* the victim *down* (20) and *stuffing* the victim *in a locker* (21). In one sample (23) the victim reported on having been *threatened with physical violence*.

In the collection of samples where the type of harm could not be determined, the transitive verb *threaten* was used in 3 samples ([24], [25], [26]), In one sample (27) the contributor reported on the victim receiving *a threatening e-mail*. In (28) the victim provided an account of the bully *saying inappropriate things, threatening, and just being downright* annoying. A cursory reference to *threats* was made in sample (29).

In the category of eight samples where the type of threat could not be specified, only in two contributions the verbs of harm could be identified. In (30) the victim reported on the bullies expressing their intention to *harm* the victim. However, the type of harm intended was not elaborated on in the testimony. The type of harm intended was similarly not specified in (31), where the threat was communicated through an e-mail in which the perpetrators declared their *coming for* the victim. It is interesting to note that in (31) the threateners introduced themselves with the plural pronoun *we*. This may have been an attempt to hide their own identity, especially if the author of the threatening message was a single person. Alternatively, as Christensen (2019: 116, after Simons and Tunkel 2013: 203) observe, individual threateners may use the plural form in referring to themselves "as if to instil credibility and fear through the invocation of a large and mysterious group."

The table below presents the number of samples in which a given verb of harm was used.

Table 2. Verbs of harm in the dataset

| **Verb of harm** | **Number of dataset samples where the verb was used** |
|---|---|
| *kill* | 11 |
| *beat (up)* | 4 |
| *die* | 2 |
| *murder* | 1 |
| *batter* | 1 |
| *bash* | 1 |
| *bully* | 1 |

Table 2. cont.

| Verb of harm | Number of dataset samples where the verb was used |
|---|---|
| *kidnap* | 1 |
| *rape* | 1 |
| *hunt down* | 1 |
| *stuff (in a locker)* | 1 |
| *harm* | 1 |
| *come for* | 1 |
| Total | 27 |

*Table 2* shows that the most common verbs of harm in the dataset were *kill* (11 samples), *beat* (4 samples), and *die* (2 samples). The remaining verbs of harm were present in single dataset samples.

Apart from the research questions posed in the methodology section, The analysis of the dataset samples has allowed for a few additional observations about online threats in adolescent cyberbullying.

Firstly, online threats may be realised in individual testimonies by different verbs of harm simultaneously. In (5) the lexemes *kill* and *murder* were used in the threatening context. Sample (16) included the verbs *bully* and *beat*. Moreover, different types of harm may be predicated in individual samples. For instance, Sample (14) presented at the same time the threat of physical violence, expressed by the use of *kidnap* and *rape*, and the threat of death (*kill me*, *kill my dog*). This example may also be analysed as involving a series of threats, in which a progression of increasingly violent themes of harm was communicated. It is also worth noting that in (14) apart from the threats aimed at the victim directly, the threat of *killing* the victim's *dog* was formulated. In (5), apart from *killing* the addressee, the intention of *murdering* the addressee's *parents* was expressed. In (23) the victim was threatened with physical violence, but the physical aggression act was realised in the form of vandalising the victim's house and car. Such samples confirm, therefore, the observation that online threats may also express the intention to harm or damage any animate or inanimate entity legally, psychologically, or emotionally associated with the addressee.

Secondly, online threats in the dataset were often presented alongside other forms of electronic bullying. The types of abuse described in the dataset included, among others, insults [(11) (13), (19)], vulgar expletives [(3) (15)], suggestions that the victim should resort to self-harm [(13), (17)], detrimental rumours (12), false accusations (22), and expressions of mockery (30). These and

other types of abuse may accompany online threats in various configurations. Moreover, certain samples may be analysed as cases showing a progression of different, arguably increasingly violent, types of aggression. This is true for (13), where the victim was targeted with insults, comments about being unpopular, suggestions of self harm and death threats. In (14), threats of killing the victim (and the victim's dog) are preceded by declarations of sexual violence and kidnapping. It is important to note that in these samples the online threats were frequently listed as the final element in the strings of abuse.

Thirdly, the online threats described in the dataset were often presented alongside harmful consequences of electronic abuse. These consequences were largely congruent with those commonly cited in contemporary cyberbullying literature. A significantly common emotional reaction described in the dataset was the one of the victims being scared ([2]. [8], [14], [30]). In samples (5) and (31) the victim reported violent psychosomatic reactions as a result of the abuse (*crying*, *vomiting*). In (16), (21) and (26) the victims resorted to self-isolation, and they refrained from going to school as a result of the abuse they have experienced. In (26) cyberabuse resulted in lowered self-esteem of the victim, as the victim reported on having started to resent herself. In (22) the contributor provided an account of the victim having been provoked into *using language out of character in retaliation* for electronic bullying.

Some dataset samples showed notably serious and long-lasting consequences of electronic abuse, as in (12) and (14). In (12) the victim talked about having been afraid to leave the house and having isolated herself to the point of developing a social trauma. In (14) the victim provided an account of having been terrified, miserable, and reported on her depression and multiple suicide attempts. In both of these samples the consequences were described as significantly long-lasting and severe.

It must be noted here that the negative effects presented above were not exclusively linked to online threats. The detrimental consequences experienced by the victims are typically related to different forms of electronic abuse that the victims have endured. Thus, these effects should be considered in the wider context of electronic bullying, although some outcomes, such as the victim being afraid or trying to self-isolate, appear to be prototypical consequences of the speech act of threat, ones which are often predictable and intended by the speaker.

## 5. Conclusions

Cyberbullying, with its pervasiveness and its detrimental consequences, constitutes a serious hazard for the wellbeing of contemporary young Internet users. Cyberabuse can be realised in diverse ways, including threats communicated through electronic means of communication.

The aim of this paper was to propose a short study of online threats in adolescent cyberbullying on the basis of electronic abuse stories published on https://cyberbullying.org/stories.

The website presents 255 unique cyberabuse testimonies provided by the victims, the victim's parents, witnesses, and other individuals.

The aim of the analysis was to determine the presence of online threats in the database, and to discover what types of threats they were and what verbs of harm they were realised by.

In the database of 255 cyberbullying stories, I managed to identify a dataset of 31 testimonies which included references to online threats in the context of cyberbullying. Thus, in twelve per cent (12.2%) of the database references to online threats were present.

In the dataset of 31 samples, I identified two major categories of online threats. These were the threats of death (present in 14 samples), and threats of physical violence (present in 10 samples). In 8 dataset stories the wording of the testimonies was insufficient to determine the type of threat conveyed.

The threats of death were realised primarily by the use of the verb *kill* (11 samples. Other verbs of harm in this category included the verb *die* (used in 2 samples) and *murder* (present in 1 sample).

The threats of physical violence involved several themes of violent physical harm, and they were expressed by a variety of verbs. The verb *beat* was present in 4 samples. In single samples references were made to *rape*, *kidnapping*, *bullying*, *battering, bashing*, *hunting* the victim *down*, and *stuffing* the victim *in a locker*.

In the category where the type of harm was not specified in the dataset, most samples did not include identifiable verbs of harm. However, in two dataset examples, such verbs could be distinguished. In one sample the verb *harm* was used in the threatening context. In another sample, the bullies declared their *coming for* the victim.

There are a number of important conclusions which emerge from the present study.

Firstly, the analysis of the dataset shows online threats in adolescent cyberbullying as made in direct and unrestrained ways with prolific use of verbs related to death, killing and serious body harm. The threats portrayed on the website appeared to constitute intentionally detrimental, intrusive, and taboo-oriented form of abuse aimed at inflicting the highest possible level of discomfort in the addressee. On the one hand, it is the threats of death which proved to be the most numerous category in the dataset. Death and killing constitute some of the most universal cross-cultural human taboos, as they relate to a number of basic human fears (Allan and Burridge 1991: 153). Both biologically and psychologically death serves as a quintessential human trope and a powerful cultural symbol (Allan and Burridge 2006). Threatening to take someone's life,

as a blatant violation of the taboo, constitutes one of the most harmful and consequential forms of electronic abuse (Bessler 2019; Eil 2019). On the other hand, a significant presence of threats predicating serous body harm, sexual violence and other overtly illegal physical activities stands in stark contrast to contemporary attitudes opposing different manifestations of physical violence – including the violence perpetrated against minors and women – and viewing them as deeply unethical illicit acts. Thus, the analysis of the dataset points to the disinhibited, direct, and emotional nature of the language used in threats communicated by young Internet users.

Secondly, online threats in adolescent cyberbullying appear to constitute lexically and conceptually complex events. Different verbs of harm may be present in individual instances of cyberbullying. They may include lexemes of the same category (e.g. *kill* and *murder,* as in Sample 5), or verbs originating from distinct themes of threats (as in *rape*, *kidnap,* and *murder* in Sample 14). Other samples have shown that it is possible to formulate threats aimed at people, animals, or possessions that the addressee is associated with. Both conceptually and legally, such acts may be considered as consequential and prosecutable threats. Certain dataset samples may be analysed as strings of abuse, in which a progression of increasingly aggressive verbal acts is communicated to intimidate and scare the addressee to the maximal possible degree.

Thirdly, online threats may plausibly be considered as part of a more complex network of electronic abuse. Threatening acts in the dataset were often accompanied by insults, vulgar expletives, suggestions of self-harm, detrimental rumours, false accusations, and expressions mockery. In certain samples references to several illegal acts, including blackmail, stalking, extortion, slander, and posting sexually explicit materials were made. In fact, threats may accompany different configurations of electronic and physical acts of aggression. Some dataset samples may be considered as cases presenting strings of increasingly violent and aggressive forms of abuse, with the threat of death commonly constituting the final element in the series.

Fourthly, the threatening communication in the dataset was often accompanied by descriptions of harmful effects of electronic abuse. The consequences were in agreement with those cited in modern literature on electronic abuse and they included emotional distress, violent psychosomatic reactions, lowered self-esteem, self-alienation, and acts of retaliation towards the abusers. In some cases, these consequences were described as significantly severe and considerably long-lasting. They included prolonged and repeated instances of depression, social trauma, and suicide thoughts. While it is important to note that these effects are not exclusive to online threats and they should be viewed in relation to different forms of abuse that the victims have experienced, some of these consequences, including the feelings of fear and attempts at self-isolation may be seen as prototypical outcomes for the addressees of threatening communication.

In view of the pervasiveness of electronic abuse, its complexity and its harmful consequences, further research into online threats in adolescent cyberbullying appears relevant. Such research should ideally involve studies which are free from the limitations of this paper. A more comprehensive study of online threats in the context of cyberbullying would require a richer database, preferably constructed with the use of maximally authentic language data, with exact citations of threatening communication, and with sufficient contextual information. This kind of analysis may lead to a number of important practical observations in the areas of linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, and law enforcement.

In the area of linguistics, quantitative and qualitative studies into online threats may be focussed – among other issues – on the distribution of various lexical categories, syntactic patterns of online threats and different pragmatic mechanisms of expressing direct and indirect threatening acts. Psychological insight into threatening communication may include investigations into different themes of threats, the patterns of their co-occurrence, and the factors causing inhibition and disinhibition of their expression. In the areas of pedagogy some of the most important and pressing developments are related to strategies of effective cyberabuse prevention and intervention. Finally, since illicit threats constitute a prosecutable type of speech, studying authentic contributions produced by the addressees and witnesses is crucial for the purposes of legal classification and courtroom proceedings.

With further development of modern technologies, unrelenting prevalence of adolescent cyberbullying and online threats as a significant mechanism of electronic abuse, continued investigations into these areas appear increasingly valid and welcome.

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