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Empowering Young People and
Youth Workers to Become
Active Upstanders in the
Prevention of Violence Towards
LGBTIQ+ People in the
Digital Era

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Module 2:
Bullying and Violence against LGBTIQ+ Youth in the Digital Era

To understand the specifics of digital or digitized bullying one must first understand the 'classical' or analogical bullying framework and conceptualization, and the bridging to the distinct digital arenas. Furthermore, it is important to understand how especially younger generations have transformed the interpersonal aspects of bullying to several virtual settings.

Bullying, understood as a continued interpersonal and intentional aggression has since the 1970's been defined as the malicious interactions between two or more individuals, where one side specifically and continuously targets the other. There is a real or perceived power imba-

lance among the involved individuals, where the victim(s) will be in a vulnerable position and feel unable to defend themselves[1]. Recent research[2] [3] has since reformed this narrative to pertain to a group- and setting-oriented focus, which in turn allows a much easier understanding of bullying in a digital setting.
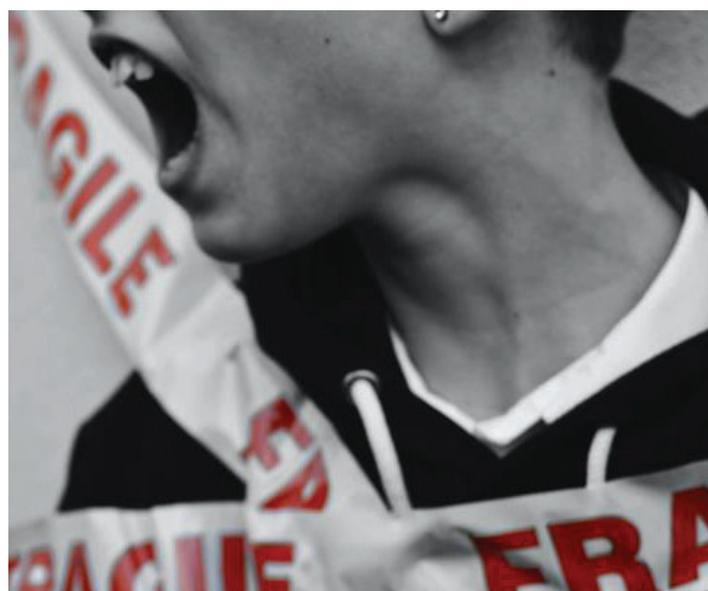
By understanding bullying as a social phenomenon rather than an interpersonal issue:

1. a focus on upstander engagement to mitigate or solve malicious social dynamics is allowed and

2. solutions can be thought of in the context of 'healing' or reforming communities, rather than targeting the perpetrators.

These factors promote a healthy and collective anti-bullying strategy, and mitigates some of the dangers in encouraging upstanders to simply stand up, and put themselves in the midst of conflicts.

It is important to understand that the most targeted traits and attributes in bullying are 'otherness'. Any distinct characteristics differentiating the victims from the perpetrators (in a classical understanding of bullying) or any difference among the two in regard to social norms (in the newer understanding of the term). **In the digital era, this**

can either be identifiable traits from the little information that is available on social media platforms (**skin and hair colour, clothing, political or sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, etc.**), or what is known about the victim from other environments (often sexual orientation, socio-economic status, popularity among peers or other comparable factors) that are used maliciously online.

In a survey of nearly 140,000 LGBTQI+ people in Europe, between 7 and 15% indicate having experienced online harassment[4], with the youngest age group (15-17 years old) experiencing more online harassment (15%) than the older age groups (12 %, 18-24 years old), 9% (25-54 years old), and 7% (55+ years old) respectively). For the youngest respondents (aged 15-17 years) 51% of incidents of harassment involved perpetrators they were somehow affiliated with – i.e. through school, college or university. Furthermore, within this age group, 38% indicate that the perpetrator was a teen or a group of teenagers. This underlines the important role teachers and educators play in preventing harassment and bullying against LGBTIQ+ youth.

Adults, be it professionals or parents, often see "cyber"bullying and other types of malicious digital behaviour, as less severe than their "real" counterparts. Many adults believe the digital aspects of the lives of children and adolescents to be able to simply be turned off. However, this is seldom, if ever, the case. For most children and adolescents, it becomes very important to participate in certain social media platforms, if they want to be part of communities and circles with their peers, and if they want to stay on close social relations with them. Even communities based in local environments have a digital component (e.g., local football club, school-wide A/V class, or just a class-based Snapchat-group), creating an expectation for youth to be ever-present, and thus always online and always approachable. There is a distinct **social pressure** to be available and active on media such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, to a lesser degree Facebook and, especially for the boys, gaming services. Such social pressure also enforces a **digital adherence that children and adolescent users cannot abstain from participating in potentially bullying environments,** without also abstaining from a social connectedness to their peers.

As an example of this, many young people use Instagram to connect with their friends and peers, sharing photos of

their lives and commenting on each other's posts. However, Instagram can also be a place for both public and private humiliation and harassment. For instance, if a person posts a picture of a friend group, where everyone is tagged, except you, this can be a clear signal saying: "you might be in this picture, but you're not part of the group." Furthermore, hate pages can be created targeting single individuals. This is especially seen with **LGBTIQ individuals, who are also often the targets of hateful, discriminatory, derogatory, and/or demeaning posts** and comments on social media.

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Homosexuality is a disease of the heart and mind #MuslimDragQueens

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2:44 PM - 24 Aug 2015

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Direct messages (DMs) can also be the source of positive as well as negative content. For instance, DMs can be the direct contact to and primary way of maintaining social relationships, or they can be the source of bullying, harassment, or "ghosting" (not answering the victim's messages). In this way, most social media have as many positive as negative sides, depending on your social standing within your peer group and within society at large.

Digital bullying as the new norm

Re-framing bullying as a social phenomenon counters one of the primary weaknesses of the classical approach - that the aggression stops when the victim removes themself from the confrontationally laden settings (e.g. classroom, youth club, sport event, etc.). Young people are expected to participate in digital settings constantly, and can therefore simply not "just" remove themselves from a critical

context. Even when not actively using social media or gaming apps, young people are indirectly available through messaging services built into most apps, e.g., via direct messages (most apps), "walls" (like on Facebook), public outing (tags like on Twitter) or in public posts containing the victim's name (like on Jodel* and more). Furthermore, **digital bullying can happen without the victim's knowledge in that it can consist of rumour spreading or sharing of photos without the victim's consent.**

Professionals working in digital youth care have been addressed by children and young people expressing a propensity for turning to digital environments to bully or engage in different types of comparable behaviour. They express it as being easy and relatively consequence-free for the perpetrator, while at the same time having the potential of a far reach and quick traction.

Digital bullying can also be understood as a certain kind of socially opportunistic malevolence. As social media platforms are built up around promoting oneself, through comments, images, videos, or any other kind of self-ex-

*Jodel is a public, anonymous messageboard that shows users what is happening in their geographical area in real time

posure, bullies or *trolls*** seldom have to resort to acting out towards their victims, and are digitally empowered to merely re-act against them. For instance, a trans person creating vlogs on YouTube regarding being trans, coming out, transitioning, etc. might have a (large) community of people who support and understand them, but that still does not make them immune to trolls, who might continuously post demeaning or derogatory content. This can make it extra hard on the trans person, who is already in a vulnerable and very exposed position.

One young person expressed digital communication and its propensity for misunderstandings, as 'trying to talk to someone a full kilometre away'. Meaning that you simplify the points you're making, turn up the volume (digitally expressed with exclamation marks, and more direct phrasing) and you repeat your point until you are sure it is understood, as the listening signals in physical spaces (nodding, verbal confirmation etc.) are not possible online.

Digital bullying can include

1. Harassment (insults or threats)
2. Spreading rumours
3. Impersonation
4. Outing and trickery (gaining an individual's trust and then using online media to distribute their secrets) and/or
5. Exclusion (excluding an individual from activities, such as games).

Furthermore, digital distance can be understood as the masking of one's emotional responses regarding conversations and the actions of others. When engaging in physical spaces, humans perceive each other in emotional frameworks where facial micro-expressions, body language, tone, timing, and more are used to decode emotional levels and responses in social participants.

Digital conditions fostering vulnerable situations that may facilitate violence
Distancing
The digital distance can make the users over exaggerate their sentiments, to make sure they are understood. When doing informal communication via a digital medium, **most authors risk a tendency to over-exaggerate the emotions and sentences expressed[6], which poses a risk for jokes, memes, or sentiments to be misunderstood as antagonistic behaviour.** This in turn potentially risks from the initial victims, sparking digital feuds based on misunderstandings.

Anonymity
When engaging with online communities, most youth and adolescents play around with different kinds of anonymity[7]. Some forums and digital structures actively enforce this (Jodel, 4Chan, Reddit etc.), whereas some allow it (Instagram etc.) and others try to enforce only named and identifiable digital participants, but with ineffective structures to do so, thereby allowing fake (and thus anonymous) profiles (Facebook). **Therefore, one condition of**

***For a definition of the term "trolls" and "trolling" see the section "Anonymity"

digital social engagements is, that users often have the possibility of anonymity and that some chose to use it.

The anonymity bred through online social spaces can exert an increased level of bravery in the participants[8], allowing them to test the limits of permitted and acceptance speech, as well as employing anonymity as a tool for targeted bullying behaviour. This effect is often referred to as the *online disinhibition effect*[9], which, when coupled with adolescent explorations of social norms and boundaries, can create a toxic or unhealthy community. In this regard, especially digital users with no relation to the social media platform, have been known to engage in 'trolling'. **'Trolling' is a bullying-like behaviour focused on creating the largest uproar, with the least amount of effort.** This can often be seen when anonymous profiles engage in political discussions, but can also be used as a bullying strategy when directed at people.

As many platforms are built up around social currencies in the form of likes and dislikes (Facebook), loves (Instagram) etc., and almost always supported by a comment-section, these systems are both built to let users engage with content, but furthermore for algorithms to navigate in which content to promote and highlight. This risks the effect, that trolling (bullying) content is promoted as more users

engage with it because of its aggressive and provoking content, which will either result in likes (for those amused by the trolling) or dislikes (for those trying to fight the troll) - both of which are measurable engagement, and thus promoted by the algorithms.

The online disinhibition effect can also be furthered by a **lower level of social empathy on digital media[10]**, making the users experience a larger emotional divide between each other, as emotional responses to behavior (also bullying) are masked by the digital distance. Therefore, users do not necessarily know when they have transgressed the emotional thresholds of those that are the target of a joke, or the victim of bullying, which eludes to the possibility of either misunderstood or accidental bullying in digital spaces.

It is therefore **crucial that educational professionals foster spaces for dialogue that educate young people on the many aspects of the digital environments,** on what is permitted, on what cannot be tolerated, on what precautions to take, and on which pitfalls to be aware of.

What is being done at the moment

Several different strategies targeting online hate and harassment are already being employed. However, many of them are coming up short in terms of creating permanent change.

- **Moderation:** Most platforms are being moderated, but most perpetrators work around this by either being faster than the moderators, or by creating new profiles, when their old ones are shut down or banned.

- **Deplatforming:** i.e. the process of closing entire platforms with the intent of eliminating harmful or discriminatory content, is another strategy, that many turn to. However, deplatforming only works as a way of "treating symptoms", and not the root cause, seeing as many perpetrators will just take their followers and go elsewhere. In this sense, hate and hateful content might decrease within a certain platform, but will usually be expressed on another.

- **Education:** Initiatives such as SELMA – Hacking Hate, Stopp Hatpratt, Mobbestop, and national and international campaigns against bullying all target the environment in which bullying, hate speech, and discrimination take place, and focus on how each individual contributes to the current online climate with their behavior – regardless of whether they are active, passive, upstanding, bystanding, perpetrators, victims, or other. Initiatives and campaigns such as these focus on bullying as a social phenomenon, and underlines the importance of each persons role – and the difference each person can make.

In most cases, it only takes one person to have the courage to take the first step for others to follow. Being the first to say no is vulnerable, uncomfortable, and difficult, seeing as you are putting yourself in the line of fire. But it often pays off in that it paves the road for other people, making it easier for them to stand up as well.

How to stand up – digitally

When participating in online discussions or digital social environments, one very seldom does so in a 1-to-1 setting. **Comments, engagements, or posts are spectated by dozens or even hundreds of onlookers; this makes the social amplification of any bullying exponentially bigger, but also increases the potential for onlookers to engage and become participants in an upstander role.** This potential is increasingly mitigated by the relation between the victim and the digital arena, as this will most often also determine the potential relation between onlookers and victims. If the bullying is done via the victim's wall or on their profile, onlookers here are more likely to take the victim's side in the quarrel. But the bigger the platform on which the bullying is taking place, the larger the potential amplification of the effects will be.

All of these effects and relations formulate several strategies for potential upstanders to engage. These strategies can either be employed by the upstanders themselves or can be enforced by those seeking to strengthen or inspire such reactions.

'Like' the upstander

As digital bullying will often take place on platforms with vast outreach potential, upstanders can be taught to use this mechanism to help stop bullying. It is easier to simply 'like' something online than to comment on it, so most observers to digital bullying will simply refrain from liking the bullying comments if they disagree with them – it is too large and demanding a task to counter-argue them.

This means that most digital bullying will be unopposed and only liked by those (hopefully) few agreeing with it, and ignored by those disagreeing with it. Therefore, it becomes important to underline the fact, that the first upstander - **the first observer taking the time to argue against the bullying comment(s), will give all the other observers something to easily 'like'.**

One could argue, that a 'dislike' button would be an easily accessible way to show social disapproval. However, the dislike button comes with certain drawbacks, and can easily be misused. For instance, it can be used to dislike every single post or comment by a single individual, thereby making digital bullying even easier for the perpetrators. Furthermore, for onlookers, it can be hard to determine whether someone dislikes a post because of the content of the said post, or dislikes it because of the person who posted it.

Negative experiences weigh a lot heavier on the conscience than positive ones. The same goes for likes and dislikes, positive comments, and negative comments. Therefore, one positive comment does not cancel one negative comment out. For the victim to feel safe and supported it takes a lot of positive engagement from peers to drown out the (hopefully few) negative voices. **It is vital for the well-being of the victim and for their ability to overcome the bullying behaviour, that they not feel alone in the fight against the transgressions.**

Increased visibility

Most young LGBTIQ+ people have an ingrained sense of insecurity or shame concerning their identity. When this sexual identity is targeted in bullying, even in the smallest matter, the risk of them taking it is increased, simply because the topic is already so vulnerable. This means that bullies can "camouflage" their attacks in private messages, far down in comments on pictures, or through other digital obscurities. One strategy upstanders can employ, is to bring these pseudo covert bullying attacks to light. This can be done either by sharing them via their profiles, or directly on the profile of the victim(s) (for increased support). It should be noted, though, that in order to protect the victims from further negative exposure, their identity should be hidden from the re-exposed post. Instead, this post should focus on the wrongness of the bullying, not what the bully thought to be wrong with the initial victim.

Building on the former point, this strategy allows observers to simply like the upstanding efforts, whilst not having to do them themselves. This will prove to both the bullies and the victim, that they are heavily supported.

To mitigate the digital distance online spaces can afford their users, upstanders can be encouraged to engage with both the victim or the bully outside of the digital space. This can feel like a larger commitment in either regard but can also have a much larger effect.

Liking upstanding comments shows support for both the victim, the upstander, and the upstanding approach

Increasing visibility lessens vulnerability and shows public disapproval of bullying

Cultural shift

Whichever strategy is employed, it must be noted that they should all be targeted at the social culture in the digital spaces, rather than at the perpetrators. The modern understanding of bullying draws less focus on those who commit it, and more on the environment in which it is done. If **LGBTIQ+ youth are targeted in certain online spaces, it must be a priority to focus on those communities rather than the individuals therein.** This can be done by either inserting adult supervision or mentoring within the community; directly by having an adult visibly participating in the digital platform, or indirectly by simply articulating a curiousness and openness towards the platform. As young people often look to mentors and relevant adults for moral and ethical guidance, this strategy will allow peers to feel brave enough, to stand up for victims on the platforms.

If the malicious culture is expressed in local digital communities (class chats, private servers, etc.), the tacit consent for bullying can be fought by simply listing rules for socially acceptable behaviour. This makes it so, that the upstanders (rule makers), don't have to face the bullies head-on, but rather the bullying qualities of the community, which can feel less threatening.

Digital spaces allow users - not only bullies and victims – to interact. This provides the opportunity for an upstander to engage other potential upstanders privately (via direct messages), before committing to the actual upstanding behaviour. By coordinating an upstanding action with others, it can both be easier to perform it, as one does not do so alone, and it can potentially have a greater effect on both bullies and victims respectively.

The digital aspects of modern social life allow young people to build and maintain unprecedented social reach.

This comes with a risk of digitally distanced bullying, online anonymity, and feelings of being alone in a crowd of observers.

If used properly though, all of these factors can be turned around, and become the force behind upstanding behaviour.

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Activities

Being a professional working with youth requires the ability to tackle a multitude of tough questions and situations. Professionals, be it, teachers, educators, or others, have a responsibility in regards to the formation and well-being of the youth they work with. The following is to be seen as a guide for dealing with bullying and harassment in social settings (be they digital or analog) among youths. The list of questions is therefore not finite, as it can and should be adapted to the situation and the composition of youths in the current group. The questions are intended for inspiration and can be utilized as both questions for group or classwide discussions as well as for individual work or work in smaller groups among the students.

- How do you determine if something you see online is bullying?
  - Make a list of markers you would look for

- How would you react if online bullying happened to someone you know?
  - What types of reactions are there?

  - How are the different types perceived by the victim, by bystanders, by members of the LGBTIQ+ community, by your close, personal friends, etc.?

  - What if the bullying happened to someone you didn't know?
    - Would your reaction differ?

  - Does the relationship between you and the victim affect your reaction?
    - If so, how? And why?

It is important to give students the language to talk about discrimination and bullying online. Because only by being able to talk about it will you fully understand it. And only by fully understanding it will you be able to prevent it. Follow-up questions and activities could therefore be:

- How can you help create a safe, supportive, and positive environment online?
  - Make a list of "rules of engagement" for you and your class.

- If you were to campaign for LGBT+ rights, how would you go about it?
  - Would you have social, political, democratic, legal or other perspectives?

- Which virtual tools would you draw on?

- How would you get your message across?

- Which societal group would you target, in order to get the highest impact?
  - Would you divide people by gender, gender identity, sexuality, race, social class, ages, etc.?

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