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An Analysis of Bullying among Students

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of bullying among students in Romanian schools through a cross-sectional, descriptive design, aiming to understand forms, frequency, causes, consequences of bullying, and the ways students and teachers respond to such incidents. The research is grounded in the socio-ecological theory and the growing concern over the emotional and psychological impact bullying has on school-aged children. The methodological approach consisted of a questionnaire developed by the authors and applied to a sample of 103 participants, including students from various school levels. Results indicated that bullying is a prevalent issue in Romanian schools, with verbal and physical bullying being the most commonly reported forms. Teacher reactions were mixed, while some responded by addressing the conflict, others showed indifference or failed to act. In some cases, respondents believed that the type of bullying or the victim's gender could influence the reaction of school staff, although statistical significance was not always clear. The findings confirmed that bullying can have serious emotional and psychological long term consequences over the victims. Individual characteristics (gender, education level) and contextual factors (field of study, place of residence) were not confirmed in our study as significant influences on respondents' experiences with bullying; these results may be attributable to sample size or the specific Romanian context. Further analysis is recommended to gain a deeper understanding of the influencing factors and the mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of bullying.

Keywords: bullying; educational environment; aggression; violence; students; social relationships.

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Introduction

Bullying is a social phenomenon that has been present throughout human history, manifesting itself in various forms in different contexts. Although the concept has been defined and studied systematically only in recent decades, aggressive behaviors based on intimidation, humiliation, and abuse of power have existed in societies since ancient times. In the past, these behaviors were often viewed as part of natural social hierarchies or as methods of strengthening character, being tolerated or even encouraged in certain environments (Olweus, 1993). However, modern research has demonstrated the negative impact of bullying on the individual and on society, which has led to increased interest in preventing and combating it (Moore et al., 2017; Gaffney, Ttofi & Farrington, 2019).

Bullying is aggressive behavior, repeated over time, characterized by an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim. It is not a simple conflict between individuals, but a type of systematic aggression, with significant consequences on the mental and emotional health of the victims (Olweus, 1978). Bullying is not limited to physical aggression, but also includes subtle forms such as insults, social manipulation and psychological intimidation. It is not just an individual problem, but a systemic one, influenced by social norms and values (Olweus, 1993).

Today, bullying is recognized as a global problem that requires effective prevention and intervention measures. International organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations (UN) and UNICEF have developed programs and guidelines to combat bullying, emphasizing the importance of awareness and education in its prevention (UNESCO, 2019; WHO & UNESCO, 2019).

The evolution of the perception of bullying reflects a major change in society. If in the past such behaviors were considered natural or inevitable, today they are recognized as a serious problem that can have negative consequences on the health and well-being of individuals (Moore et al., 2017; Gaffney, Ttofi & Farrington, 2019). Research conducted in recent decades and the development of evidence-based prevention programs have contributed to increasing awareness and developing strategies aimed at combating bullying in all its forms (Olweus, 1993; Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019; Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Olweus (1993) defined bullying as intentional, negative, repetitive behavior directed at a person who cannot easily defend himself, emphasizing essential elements such as the intention to cause harm, repetitiveness and an imbalance of power. Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist and Pelton (1988) consider that an isolated incident can represent bullying behavior when the victim has feelings of humiliation and fear for a long period after the incident.

Bullying can also be analyzed from the perspective of an imbalance of power. Olweus (1993) emphasizes that the term bullying cannot be applied when two individuals with

the same influence and strength come into conflict. It is essential to understand that, in childhood, competitive or conflict-like interactions are common and, often, are part of a social “game” that helps develop relationship skills and release energy. The fundamental difference lies in the emotional reactions of the participants. For example, in playful social interactions, the relationships between the participants remain intact, and the behavior has no negative consequences for them.

To recognize a behavior as bullying, it is essential to identify the aggressor’s intention to cause physical or psychological harm to the victim. Thus, two fundamental criteria underlie the definition and identification of bullying: the repetitiveness of the actions and the imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim. A flexible approach, which takes into account the specific circumstances and the impact on the affected person, is essential for the correct understanding of bullying and for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies (Eleni, 2014).

Bullying can be simply described as negative and intentional behavior, which is repeated and is directed against a person who cannot easily defend himself. This definition shows that bullying has three main features: it is aggressive and intends to harm the targeted person; it is repeated over time; it is not an isolated incident and imposes an imbalance of power, whether real or perceived, between the aggressor and the victim (Olweus, 2010).

Bullying has devastating effects on both victims and aggressors, causing profound psychological, social and behavioral problems. Victims are often affected by anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness and difficulties in developing social skills, which can lead to depression and serious psychosomatic manifestations. Social stigmatization and feelings of isolation are associated with increased risk of running away from home, alcohol or drug use, and in severe cases, suicide (Moore et al., 2017; Cuesta et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2023). Educationally, bullying reduces school performance and intensifies feelings of insecurity. Aggressors, on the other hand, also face long-term negative effects, manifesting destructive behavior, including involvement in arguments, vandalism, substance use, theft and absenteeism. In some situations, they resort to the use of weapons, and their violence can escalate to serious acts, such as murder (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Ttofi et al., 2012). Thus, bullying deeply affects both parties involved, leading to emotional and social imbalances that are difficult to correct (Turchina, 2011).

Bullying worries both parents, children, and teachers. Managing this phenomenon is important for the learning process to function well. Aggressive behaviors and situations in which some children are victims strongly affect the lives of children and adolescents (Micle et al., 2020).

The school environment plays an important role in the social, intellectual and emotional formation of children, but unfortunately, it can also become a place where bullying behaviors are frequently encountered (UNESCO, 2019). This phenomenon has complex effects on all those involved – victims, aggressors, witnesses – and also influences the entire educational community. Bullying can have negative consequences

on the emotional and psychological state of students, while also affecting their academic performance and deteriorating interpersonal relationships, as well as the general atmosphere in the educational environment (Moore et al., 2017; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010).

Bullying is more frequently analyzed in the school context, but relatively limited attention has been paid on the influence of school factors on victimization among peers (Saarento, Boulton & Salmivalli, 2015). Various factors (school size; environment (urban or rural); level of teacher training; disciplinary strategies applied; proportion of students belonging to ethnic minorities) can determine such behaviors in schools, and it is very important that they are correctly identified in order to be correctly prevented (Olweus, 1993).

When students perceive school as an environment where they do not receive acceptance, support, respect, or fair treatment, the incidence of bullying increases significantly (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

A study by Zequinão et al. (2016) highlights the problem of bullying in areas with high social vulnerability. The research, which involved 409 students aged 8 to 16, showed that almost 30% of boys and over 40% of girls had been victims of bullying, and approximately 32% of boys and 25% of girls admitted to having engaged in bullying behavior. The results show that verbal aggression is the most common, being more frequent among girls, while boys tend to be more involved in physical aggression. Bullying most often occurs in classrooms, during breaks and during physical education classes, which highlights the need for better supervision in these places. Girls also reported more often feelings of loneliness and exclusion, while boys showed more confident and aggressive behavior. Importantly, victims were more willing to offer help to peers who are being bullied, even if they do not know them, while aggressors were less inclined to support someone. At the same time, the study revealed low involvement from teachers and school staff, with half of the students reporting that they do not intervene or do so very rarely. This lack of intervention contributes to the perpetuation of the problem and highlights the need for better training of staff and a closer relationship between school and students.

According to UNICEF (2014), almost one in three students aged 13 to 15 reported having been involved in a fight in the past year. At the same time, over a third of students in the same age group reported being bullied frequently. In Europe and North America, approximately one in three adolescents aged 11 to 15 admitted to having bullied or harassed someone at school at least once in the past two months (Abu-Ria, 2016). Krug et al. (2002) showed that the majority of 13-year-olds in 27 countries had been involved in bullying behavior at least once. Nansel et al. (2004), analyzing bullying in 25 countries, including USA and Canada, found that bullying involvement varied between 9% and 15%, with an average of 11%. In some countries, such as Sweden, only 5% of children have been victims, while in Lithuania the percentage reaches 20%. In Ontario, a study

indicated that about one in three students (29%) reported being bullied at school (Chirev, 2014).

In OECD countries, 11% of students are frequently teased, 7% are socially excluded, and 8% are the target of defamatory rumors. Although all forms of bullying are common, physical aggression is the most common, perceived by teachers as more serious than verbal or relational aggression. On average, boys are more likely than girls to be victims of bullying, with the exception of social isolation and the spread of gossip (INSP, 2018).

Therefore, bullying is not only an individual problem, but also one influenced by social, economic and environmental factors. According to studies, bullying is a problem that affects many students, regardless of their background. A large number of children are either victims or aggressors, with clear differences between boys and girls, but also between the regions where it occurs. The lack of involvement of school staff exacerbates the situation, as they should identify and stop the phenomenon, but most of the time this does not happen. Preventing this phenomenon requires integrated measures, including better education, social support policies and coordinated interventions, to create a safe and friendly school environment for all students (Zequinão, 2016).

In Romania, the phenomenon of bullying in schools has only been superficially analyzed, without extensive studies exploring it in detail. Most research has focused on school violence as a whole (UNICEF, 2006). Although it is known that bullying has a negative impact on the emotional and psychological health of children, there is very little research examining the extent to which social support, especially that from the family, can contribute to reducing these effects. Therefore, it is essential that prevention and intervention against bullying become a priority, especially given that effective solutions in this area have not yet been sufficiently well researched (Ciucă, 2019).

Almost half of students have been victims of bullying, and most of them have seen such behaviors at school. The most common forms of bullying are verbal, followed by social exclusion and physical violence (World Vision Romania, 2021). In 2023, almost half of students (49%) were victims of bullying, and approximately 81% witnessed such incidents. These statistics highlight the need to implement more effective programs to prevent and combat bullying in schools (Save the Children Romania, 2023).

The novelty of the present study lies in its broader approach to the phenomenon of bullying in Romanian schools. While reports published by UNICEF, World Vision Romania (2021), Save the Children Romania (2023) have primarily focused on the prevalence of bullying and its main forms of manifestation, the present research simultaneously examines multiple dimensions of the phenomenon. In addition to identifying the different forms of bullying, this study investigates victims' experiences, bystanders' reactions, teachers' responses, and the psychological consequences that bullying may have on students. Furthermore, the research tests a series of statistical hypotheses regarding the relationship between bullying and variables such as gender, place of residence, educational level, and high school specialization. Through this comprehensive approach,

the study complements existing research and provides a more detailed understanding of how bullying is perceived and experienced in the Romanian school environment.

From a theoretical standpoint, our article is grounded in the socio-ecological model (Espelage, 2014; Swearer Napolitano & Espelage, 2011), which posits that bullying results from the interaction between individual characteristics (gender, education level, place of residence), interpersonal relationships (with peers and teachers), school environment factors, and the broader social context. Bullying is not merely a personal experience but a social phenomenon shaped by a multitude of contributing factors.

Methodology

The aim of the present study is to analyze the phenomenon of bullying in Romanian schools. For this purpose, we opted for a quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive design, guided by the following objectives:

Ob.1. To analyze the differences in prevalence and forms of bullying victimization in Romanian schools according to students' socio-demographic and educational characteristics.

Ob.2. To examine whether students' and teachers' responses to bullying incidents differ according to gender, the type of bullying, and victim characteristics.

Ob.3. To investigate the consequences of bullying on students

In direct relation to these objectives, we formulated the following research hypotheses:

H.1. There are statistical differences in the phenomenon of bullying depending on the area of residence and the level of education.

H.2. Girls experience a higher level of bullying than boys.

H.3. There is a statistical association between the specialization followed and the level of bullying experienced.

H.4. Verbal bullying is more present than physical bullying.

H.5. There is a statistical association between the gender of the respondent and the form of bullying experienced.

H.6. The main form of reaction of witnesses to bullying is indifference.

H.7. There are statistical differences in the way of reacting to bullying depending on the gender of the respondent.

H.8. There are statistical differences in the way teachers react depending on the type of bullying and the gender of the victim

H.9. Experiencing bullying has long-term consequences on the mental health of victims.

Based on the objectives and hypotheses formulated in this research, a questionnaire consisting of 26 questions was developed. 20 questions with multiple-choice or 5-point Likert scale responses aimed to analyze the presence of bullying in schools (forms, frequency, role of respondents (victim/aggressor), consequences, reactions,

management methods); the last six questions collected socio-demographic data of the respondents (ANNEX 1).

Although the literature includes several validated instruments for measuring bullying, these tools were developed for different research purposes and primarily focus on assessing the frequency of victimization and aggressive behaviors. The objectives of the present study were broader, aiming not only to identify the forms of bullying but also to examine bystanders' reactions, teachers' responses, students' perceptions of how teachers manage bullying situations, and the psychological consequences of bullying. For this reason, a self-developed questionnaire was designed specifically for the purposes of this study, ensuring that each research objective was addressed through specific items.

Data collection was carried out by applying the questionnaire online (Facebook, WhatsApp, email) over a period of approximately four weeks, between February and March 2025. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of their responses and their use exclusively for the academic purpose of the study.

Population

Considering that a study on minors presents a series of difficulties, including emotional ones, given the subject of our research, we opted for a study on adults. The target group was represented by people aged between 18 and 30, given that in these age ranges we could find both individuals who are still in high school and those who have already entered the university. Being relatively close to their school experiences, respondents will have a fresh memory and a clear perception of the bullying phenomenon, which will allow them to answer the questions accurately. For this research approach, we used a random, non-probabilistic sampling method (the "snowball" method). 103 responses were collected. Most of the respondents are young, in their first years after graduating from high school or during their university studies. Therefore, it is possible that their interest in completing the questionnaire is related to previous experiences during high school, when the phenomenon of bullying is more common. The gender distribution is balanced. Regarding the area of residence, most of the subjects come from urban areas (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Age	62,1% - 18-25 years
	37,9% - 25-30 years
Sex	50,5% - Male
	49,5% - Female
Residence	74,8% - Urban
environment	25,2% - Rural
Education level	56.3% - University
	25.2% - Post-

	university
	18.4% - High school
Graduated high-school	73.8% - Theoretical
	26.2% -
	Technological

Results

The first objective of our research aimed to analyze the differences in prevalence and forms of bullying victimization in Romanian schools according to students' socio-demographic and educational characteristics. The majority of respondents, almost 70%, stated that they observed bullying in school to a great or very great extent, which indicates a high and visible presence of the phenomenon in the educational environment. Over half of the respondents (52.4%) indicated that bullying occurs weekly, and 24.3% reported a daily frequency. This suggests that, in the perception of students, bullying is a frequently encountered phenomenon in the school environment. A smaller percentage (10.7%) mentioned that bullying occurs monthly. Regarding the frequency of bullying, 61.2% of those surveyed answered that bullying happened often or very often, 27.2% answered that it happened occasionally, and the remaining 11.6% said that bullying happened rarely or very rarely. These results show us that bullying happens quite often in schools.

Approximately 47.5% of respondents stated that they had been victims of bullying to a medium, high or very high extent, which suggests that almost half of the participants had faced this phenomenon to a significant extent. The remaining 52.5% stated that they had been affected to a lesser extent.

37.8% of the participants carried out bullying activities at least to a small extent. In other words, approximately one third of the people who participated in the research were, at least once, in the position of aggressor.

In direct connection with the first research objective, we have formulated the first research hypothesis (there are statistical differences in the phenomenon of bullying depending on the area of residence and the level of education). To verify the validity of our assumption, we used an independent sample T-test (Figure 1). The test results showed that the difference between the groups according to area of residence (urban vs rural) is not statistically significant, $t(101)=1.21$, $p=.229$. Although the average of reported forms of bullying is slightly higher in urban areas ($M=2.32$, $SD=.99$) compared to rural areas ($M=2.04$, $SD=1.18$), this difference is not large enough to be considered statistically significant. Therefore, it can be said that the area of residence does not significantly influence the perception of the forms of bullying experienced personally.

In what concerns the level of education (high school vs. university), the results (Figure 2) showed that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups, $t(75)=-1.28$, $p=.206$. The mean of the responses is lower among respondents from

high school ($M=1.79$, $SD=1.08$), compared to those from university ($M=2.14$, $SD=1.02$), which indicates a tendency for students to have encountered forms of bullying more frequently. However, this difference is not large enough to be considered statistically significant. Therefore, the level of education does not significantly influence the perception of forms of bullying personally experienced.

Also in relation to the first objective of the research, the hypothesis 2 (girls experience a higher level of bullying than boys) was formulated. We conducted two T-tests: the first T-test is between the gender variable and the question "To what extent have you been a victim of bullying during school?" (Figure 3), and the next T-test is between gender and the question "How do you rate the severity of the acts of physical bullying you have encountered?" (Figure 4). None of the results revealed significant differences between the answers provided by the respondents ($t(101)=0.76$, $p=.447$, respectively $t(101)=-0.18$, $p=.858$).

To test whether there is a statistical association between the specialization followed during high school and the level of bullying experienced (H.3.), we resorted to a correlation analysis (Figure 5). However, this revealed a very weak and statistically insignificant positive correlation between the two variables ($r(103)=.089$, $p=.372$). We also conducted a Pearson correlation to examine the relationship between the profile of the high school attended and the degree to which participants reported being victims of bullying during school (Figure 6). The results also indicated a very weak and statistically insignificant correlation ($r(103)=.041$, $p=.681$).

Regarding our hypothesis referring to the forms of bullying (H.4. Verbal bullying is more present than physical bullying), out of the total of 103 respondents, almost half (49.5%) stated that they had been exposed to both verbal and physical bullying. This is the most frequently reported combination, suggesting that in many cases bullying does not manifest itself in a single form, but through a mixture of physical and verbal abuse. In second place in frequency is verbal bullying, experienced by 37.9%. This indicates that verbal aggression is a very common form of bullying in schools. Only a small percentage (5-6%) reported only physical bullying, and another similar percentage stated that they had not encountered any form of bullying, therefore our research hypothesis is invalidated.

The second objective of our research aimed to examine whether students' and teachers' responses to bullying incidents differ according to gender, the type of bullying, and victim characteristics. In terms of the forms of verbal bullying encountered, the majority of respondents indicated that they were exposed to insults (72.8%). This is the most common type of verbal bullying reported, followed by negative or humiliating nicknames (67%). Degrading comments about physical appearance were also reported by a significant number of respondents (55.3%), and sexist comments were experienced by almost 40% of participants. Less frequently mentioned forms were inappropriate jokes and comments about clothes, each reported by only one respondent (1%). These

results show that the most common forms of verbal bullying are direct and visible ones, such as insults, nicknames and comments about appearance.

Concerning the presence of physical bullying in schools, most responses focused on the area of high perception of the phenomenon. 35.9% of respondents indicated that they observed physical bullying to a great extent, and 25.2% stated that they observed it to a medium extent. A smaller percentage (14.6%) mentioned a very great extent, indicating that some respondents consider physical bullying to be a serious and frequent problem.

The most frequently reported forms of physical bullying behaviors were pushing (67%) and hitting (49.5%). These results show that direct and obvious forms of physical aggression are the most common in the school environment. The use of objects for hitting was mentioned by 25.2%, indicating a more serious and dangerous form of bullying.

Regarding the forms of bullying, we found it relevant to investigate whether there is a statistical association between the gender of the respondent and the form of bullying experienced (H.5.). For this, we performed a Pearson correlation analysis that indicated a weak and statistically insignificant negative correlation, $r(103) = -0.184$, $p = .062$ (Figure 7).

Students' reactions to bullying are diverse. Most of the respondents said that they tried to help the victim (46.6%). Also, 15.5% said that they actively intervened to stop the bullying. These answers show that many students choose to get involved and not remain indifferent when they see a bullying situation. On the other hand, 23.3% said that they were only witnesses, that is, they saw what was happening, but did not intervene. Only one person said that they were most often the victim, which shows a different personal experience. As we can see, most students react positively when they see bullying, either helping the victim or intervening. However, there is also a fairly large number of students who choose not to get directly involved.

Regarding the reaction of peers to an act of bullying, the largest number of respondents (37.9%) said that their peers laughed and encouraged the aggressors, which means that many students choose to do nothing, but worryingly encourage bullying behaviors. 22.3% said that some peers tried to help the victim, showing empathy and a desire to help. Another group, of 15.5%, said that they had peers who actively intervened to stop the bullying. A smaller number (8.7%), said that they saw peers who alerted a teacher, which shows a positive thing, but unfortunately these cases are very few in number. One person said that a peer noticed the situation but did not intervene. Our hypothesis (H.6.) that "The main form of reaction of witnesses to bullying is indifference" is therefore not validated, since the majority of 46.6% of respondents answered that they intervened trying to help the victim.

To verify whether the reaction of witnesses to bullying is influenced by their gender (H.7.), we used two T-tests on independent samples, between the gender variable and the two situations - the witness and his colleagues. For the situation in which a person witnessed an act of bullying, the results show that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Boys had an average of 1.76 (with a standard

deviation of 0.91), and girls an average of 1.80 (standard deviation of 0.94). The difference between these averages is very small and is not statistically significant: $t = -0,228$, $p = 0,820$ (Figure 8).

For the question "How did your classmates react when they witnessed an act of bullying?", the results show that the mean for male respondents was 2.23, and for female respondents it was 2.57, suggesting that girls tend to perceive the reactions of their classmates as more involved (more positive). However, this difference is not statistically significant, as $t = -1.63$ $p = .106$ ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, we cannot confidently say that there is a real difference between the groups from a statistical point of view (Figure 9).

Regarding the reaction of teachers to bullying, the largest number of respondents (39.8%) said that teachers talked to the victim and the aggressor. This suggests that in many cases, teachers choose a communication-based approach, trying to understand both sides and mediate the conflict; 25.2% said that teachers intervened immediately, which shows a quick and direct reaction from teachers, a positive sign in terms of their active involvement in managing bullying; 17.5% said that parents were informed, which indicates a collaboration between school and family, but in a lower percentage compared to direct interventions from teachers. On the other hand, 15.5% of the respondents said that teachers did not react at all, which raises an alarm regarding the lack of involvement or ignoring bullying in some situations. A very small number of participants said that teachers sided with the aggressor, and another insignificant percentage mentioned that they did not know about the cases, which shows that such situations are rare, but still present.

The majority of respondents (45.6%) believe that teachers react differently depending on the type of bullying. Specifically, teachers may treat physical bullying more seriously than verbal bullying; 27.2% considered that the reaction is influenced "to a very large extent", which reinforces the idea that many students notice a clear difference in the way teachers react to different forms of bullying; 18.4% of the respondents chose the option "to an average extent", which means that some students believe teachers can be influenced by the type of bullying, but not always.

Most respondents (34%) considered that teachers' reaction is influenced to a very large extent by the gender of the student involved. This result suggests that some teachers may react differently depending on whether the victim is a girl or a boy; 20.4% answered that the influence is very small, which shows that there are also respondents who believe that teachers treat cases equally, regardless of the sex of the victim; 15.5% chose both the "average measure" and "small measure" options, indicating a perception of a moderate or low impact. And 14.6% of the respondents indicated that teachers' reaction is largely influenced by the sex of the victim, which reinforces the idea that some teachers may adopt a different approach depending on gender.

To see if the way teachers react differs depending on the type of bullying or the gender of the victim (H.8.), we used a frequency analysis. In general, participants believe that teachers' reactions are influenced by the type of bullying, especially when it comes

to physical (more visible) forms compared to verbal (subtler) ones. The fact that most of them answered "to a great extent" and "to a very great extent" (72.8% cumulative) supports our hypothesis that the type of bullying influences teachers' reactions.

35 respondents (34%) believe that teachers' reactions are influenced to a great extent by the gender of the victim, and 15 people (14.6%) chose the option "to a great extent". These percentages show that almost half of the students believe that the gender of the victim can influence teachers' reactions. On the other hand, 16 people (15.5%) chose the option "medium measure", another 16 people (15.5%) said that the influence is small, and 21 people (20.4%) believe that the teachers' reaction is influenced to a very small extent. The results show that students have divided opinions. Although a significant part believes that the victim's gender influences the teachers' reaction, an almost equal number of participants said that the influence is small or very small.

Our final objective (Ob. 3.) was to investigate the consequences of bullying on students. The majority of respondents (73.8%) said that verbal bullying greatly affects the emotional and mental state of those who go through such situations. Another 17.5% said that it affects them a lot, which means that almost all students agree that verbal bullying is a serious problem, even if it does not leave physical traces. Only a few people (9 persons) said it had moderate, little or very little effects, which shows that very few believe that verbal bullying is not a serious problem.

Among the consequences that physical bullying has/can have on victims, most respondents (64.1%) said that pain is one of the main consequences. This response was expected, given that physical bullying involves hitting or other forms of aggression that can cause immediate suffering; 59.2% selected social isolation, but also decreased school performance, which shows that the effects are not only physical, but also emotional and educational. Affected students end up withdrawing, avoiding classmates and even having poorer results at school due to stress or fear; 42.7% of respondents indicated physical injuries as an effect of physical bullying, which confirms that aggressions often leave visible traces and can endanger health.

For the long-term consequences that bullying has/can have on the psyche of the victims, most respondents (83.5%) said that anxiety is one of the most common consequences. This means that most students believe that victims of bullying can remain with fears, anxieties and stress even after the aggressions stop; 62.1% said that bullying can lead to a decrease in self-esteem, and 61.2% indicated depression as another serious consequence. These answers show that bullying can deeply affect the way people see themselves and the way they feel in general. Also, 53.4% believe bullying can lead to long-term professional adjustment problems, i.e. difficulties at work, lack of confidence or difficulties in social relationships as an adult.

59.2% of the respondents said that the acts of physical bullying were serious and very serious. This means that almost 60% of students believe that the physical bullying they saw or experienced was not at all easy, but on the contrary, it was serious and worrying; 26.2% considered the acts to be of medium severity, which shows that for some

students the incidents were not extreme, but not negligible either. Only 12.6% of the respondents considered them easy and very easy, which means that only a small portion of students did not perceive these situations as problematic.

The data obtained also validate the hypothesis (H.9.) that experiencing bullying has long-term consequences on the mental health of victims, since most respondents ticked the options: anxiety, depression, decreased self-esteem and professional adaptation problems, respectively, which shows us that as a result of bullying, victims can be left with long-term traumas such as those mentioned above.

Discussions

The research theme of this paper was the analysis of bullying among students, aiming to highlight the way in which this phenomenon is perceived, experienced and managed in the school environment. Following the analysis of the information collected from a convenience sample of 103 participants, we can say that the phenomenon is significantly present in the school environment, the data collected confirming that most students have been exposed to different forms of bullying, either as witnesses, victims or, in some cases, even as aggressors. The behaviors most frequently encountered were verbal and physical, and the participants' responses indicate that these manifestations are not random or isolated, but represent a constant reality in school life.

Following the testing of the research hypotheses, we were able to conclude that there are no statistical differences in the phenomenon of bullying depending on the environment of residence, in other words that the environment of residence is not a factor that influences the presence of bullying, as it can be encountered in both urban and rural schools. This is partially confirmed by the study conducted by Nansel et al. (2001) and also by Cabrera, Larrañaga and Yubero (2024). We say "partially" because the authors' findings regarding differences based on the place of residence are nuanced. Although no significant differences were identified regarding the frequency of bullying victims, Nansel et al (2001) found differences concerning the bullies, with higher percentages recorded in urban compared to rural areas, while Cabrera, Larrañaga and Yubero (2024) found that physical bullying is more present in the urban area, while in the rural area most of the victims are schoolmates. Crouch, Smith and Andersen (2025) argument that in the case of the residential environment, there is a need to refine the analysis, even if an initial analysis might or might not reveal significant differences between the two residential settings. The inclusion of additional factors in the analysis could offer a completely different perspective on bullying in these environments.

No significant statistical differences were found between respondents in terms of education level or gender, and the specialization they followed during high school is not associated with a certain level of bullying.

Regarding the level of education, studies (Bradshaw, Sawyer & O'Brennan, 2007; Nansel et al., 2001; Inchley et al., 2020) have conversely highlighted the existence of statistically significant differences among pre-university students (primary, middle, and

high school levels). One explanation for the current situation relates primarily to sample size and, secondarily, to the fact that the responses forming the basis of our analysis came from adults—specifically, high school graduates and/or current university students. The comparison was not actually made between the two educational levels themselves, but rather between the perceptions of individuals who had completed high school and those currently pursuing university studies. Retrospective studies investigating individuals' perceptions throughout their schooling (such as Lund & Ross, 2017; Su et al., 2022) have shown that respondents reported a decrease in the level of bullying experienced by the time they reached university, although the phenomenon persisted—albeit not with the same intensity or in the same forms.

Regarding gender, our research focused on analyzing differences, particularly concerning the status of girls as victims. Although studies (Nansel et al., 2001; Inchley et al., 2020) indicate a higher prevalence of the phenomenon among boys—both as victims and as aggressors—the cross-national analysis conducted by Craig et al. (2009) across approximately 40 countries, including Romania, highlighted specific regional variations; it revealed that Romania recorded high levels of bullying—in terms of both victimization and perpetration—among both boys and girls. Regional characteristics can, therefore, constitute an important factor in shaping and explaining students' behaviors regarding bullying.

Our third hypothesis, unconfirmed (“There is a statistical association between the specialization followed and the level of bullying experienced”) was formulated on an exploratory basis, without being grounded in prior studies. We do not consider its invalidation at this stage of the investigation—given the small sample size—to be sufficient grounds for rejection; rather, it warrants further exploration of this possibility, at least within the context of the school-age population in Romania.

The most common forms of bullying identified by students are physical and verbal. The most common physical behaviors include pushing, hitting and using objects for aggression, while verbal bullying is manifested by insults, nicknames or humiliation in front of classmates. From the data analysis, we found that the highest percentage of respondents experienced both physical and verbal bullying, which shows us that both forms of bullying are used frequently. Although we started from the hypothesis that there is a statistical association between the gender of the respondent and the form of bullying experienced, we found that regardless of the gender of the victim, they experienced both physical and verbal bullying. Although previous studies (Olweus, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001; Bradshaw, Sawyer & O'Brennan, 2007) identify verbal bullying as the predominant form, the analysis by Craig et al. (2009) highlighted that the situation is not identical across all countries. Even though the authors did not specifically analyze the situation in Romania in this regard, we do not rule out the possibility of a regional peculiarity that requires further in-depth investigation.

Regarding how students react to bullying, the analysis of the responses showed that many students choose to get involved in a positive way, either by helping the victim or by

actively intervening to stop the bullying. However, a significant percentage of students remain passive, stating that they were simple witnesses without intervening or that they completely ignored the situation. This suggests that, although there is a level of empathy and involvement among students, there is still a need for education and support to develop social responsibility and the courage to act in the face of injustice. The gender of the respondents does not influence the way they react to bullying. Following the analysis of the data, we could observe that the highest percentage of respondents stated that they tried to help the victim, therefore they are not indifferent, as we assumed. However, it remains worrying that a significant percentage of people responded that they noticed that witnesses to bullying not only did not help the victim, but also laughed and encouraged the phenomenon.

The formulation of our research hypothesis—that the primary reaction of witnesses to bullying is indifference—was based on a series of prior studies (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013) highlighting that non-involvement is the most common reaction among those witnessing bullying, and that intervention is driven primarily by moral factors. This concept also appears in more recent studies, such as those by Choi & Park (2021) and Campbell et al. (2023). However, the analysis of the 103 responses we collected revealed instances of witness involvement and assistance provided to the victim. What our study did not address was the witnesses' motivation, which may be moral (as argued by Thornberg & Jungert (2013) or Choi & Park (2021)) or linked to other factors—such as the relationship with the victim or aggressor, or the gender of the victim or aggressor (as suggested by Thornberg, Pozzoli, & Gini (2022); Eijigu & Teketel (2021) or Campbell et al. (2023)). Consequently, a more in-depth analysis that considers the factors influencing the attitudes of those witnessing an act of bullying, and not only the reaction itself, is essential.

Our research did not reveal a difference in reactions based on respondent gender, despite such differences being highlighted in the literature (Eijigu & Teketel, 2021; Campbell et al., 2023; Thornberg, Pozzoli, & Gini, 2022). A possible explanation could be the small sample size, as well as the fact that the previously mentioned factors—such as moral engagement or the relationship with the victim—were not taken into account; these factors could provide a much clearer picture of attitudes toward bullying.

Most teachers choose to get involved, but reactions vary. The most common reaction identified by respondents was that teachers discussed with the victim and the aggressor, adopting a mediating attitude. Most respondents indicated that the gender of the victim does not influence teachers' reaction, while the type of bullying influences teachers' reaction; teachers tend to respond more quickly and firmly in the case of physical bullying, while verbal bullying is likely to be treated more superficially. Our results confirm the findings of previous studies (Yoon & Kerber, 2003; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006) highlighting that teachers' reactions to bullying vary and are influenced by diverse factors—among which the type of bullying is the most significant, due to its direct implications.

The last objective pursued in this research highlighted that verbal bullying is perceived by most respondents as having profound emotional and psychological effects. Specifically, respondents believe that this type of bullying greatly affects the psychological state of victims. Physical bullying has also been associated with serious consequences, such as physical pain, social isolation, decreased school performance and, in some cases, visible physical injuries. In the long term, participants indicated consequences such as anxiety, decreased self-esteem, depression and difficulties in professional adjustment, which shows that the effects of bullying do not stop with the end of the episodes, but can mark the victims for a long time. This is in line with previous research (Moore et al., 2017; Copeland et al., 2013; Takizawa, Maughan & Arseneault, 2014), showing that bullying has long term effects on adults' mental health.

Conclusions

In this study, we sought to analyze bullying in the school environment by drawing on the retrospective recollections of adult respondents—specifically high school graduates and university students—guided by the socio-ecological model. This model considers not only the phenomenon itself but also the factors contributing to its emergence and manifestation. We examined variables such as place of residence, gender, field of study, and education level, as well as their potential influence on the intensity and types of bullying, and on the reactions of both peers and teachers. As observed, not all research hypotheses were confirmed; the small sample size offers one possible explanation for this, though specificities of the Romanian context may also play a role. Nevertheless, the study highlights the need to analyze bullying not as an isolated phenomenon, but as the complex outcome of a multitude of interdependent factors. Integrating these factors into the analysis can help explain the mechanisms underlying the emergence and manifestation of bullying in the school environment.

Limitations and future research

A major difficulty in the research was the fact that we did not have direct control over how respondents completed the questionnaire, since the application was carried out online and not physically. The online application implies that only people who had access to an internet-connected device were able to participate. In this context, certain social categories, such as those affected by marginalization, did not have access to the research tool. In addition, the research was applied on the Facebook platform, without including other online platforms, which could influence the results, given that not all internet users access the same social networks.

The sample used was a convenience sample, which means that it is not representative of the entire population, and this limits the degree of generalization of the results obtained. Also, the research was subjective, rather reflecting the perceptions of the respondents, which may not always be in line with objective reality. A possible bias would be that the study looked at school experiences from the perspective of young adults, who reflected retrospectively on their experiences and their perceived impact. Retrospective

memory can introduce errors, the intensity of some experiences can be over- or underestimated and causal relationships cannot be established.

Expanding the quantitative study—potentially by employing a mixed-methods approach—to include a nationally representative sample that also comprises pre-university students (i.e., those under the age of 18) could deepen the current study, offering a far more complex picture of the reality within the Romanian educational system.

The instrument was author-developed, non-validated, which could also represent a limitation, as a standard validated instrument could have ensured comparisons with similar studies. Future research could consider using validated scales or even the instrument designed for the present study, developed and adapted to the Romanian context. A pre-testing of the instrument, which has not been performed for the present study, should be taken into account for a future research. Direct administration could also be an option for reducing bias associated with self-administration or difficulties accessing the internet, particularly for rural respondents.

Future research could also consider a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon in relation to the variables under discussion (such as place of residence, level of education, gender, factors influencing attitude towards bullying), which have been insufficiently explored.

Statement on the use of tools based on generative artificial intelligence

AI tools (ChatGPT) have been used for generating ideas and identifying academic sources.

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ANNEX

23. Residence environment		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?	Urban	77	2.32	.993	.113
	Rural	26	2.04	1.183	.232

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?	Equal variances assumed	1.972	.163	1.210	101	.229	.286	.237	-.183	.755
	Equal variances not assumed			1.109	37.610	.274	.286	.258	-.236	.809

Figure 1. Independent sample T test - types of bullying according to residence environment

24. Level of education		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?	High school	19	1.79	1.084	.249
	University	58	2.14	1.017	.133

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?	Equal variances assumed	.187	.666	-1.276	75	.206	-.348	.273	-.892	.196
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.234	29.097	.227	-.348	.282	-.926	.229

Figure 2. Independent sample T test - types of bullying according to level of education

	22. Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
3. To what extent were you a victim of bullying during your school years?	Male	52	2.62	1.223	.170
	Female	51	2.43	1.221	.171

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
To what extent were you a victim of bullying during your school years?	Equal variances assumed	.000	1.000	.764	101	.447	.184	.241	-.294 .662
	Equal variances not assumed			.764	100.969	.447	.184	.241	-.294 .662

Figure 3. Independent sample T test – self-perceived bullying victimization according to gender

	22. Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
11. How do you rate the severity of the acts of physical bullying you have encountered??	Male	52	2.29	1.333	.185
	Female	51	2.33	1.194	.167

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
How do you rate the severity of the acts of physical bullying you have encountered?	Equal variances assumed	.944	.334	-.180	101	.858	-.045	.250	-.540 .450
	Equal variances not assumed			-.180	100.187	.858	-.045	.249	-.540 .450

Figure 4. Independent sample T test – perceived severity of bullying according to gender

		High school profile	How do you rate the severity of the acts of physical bullying you have encountered?
High school profile	Pearson Correlation	1	.089
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.372
	N	103	103
How do you rate the severity of the acts of physical bullying you have encountered?	Pearson Correlation	.089	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.372	
	N	103	103

Figure 5. Correlation – high school profile - perceived severity of bullying

		High school profile	To what extent were you a victim of bullying during your school years?
High school profile	Pearson Correlation	1	.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.681
	N	103	103
To what extent were you a victim of bullying during your school years?	Pearson Correlation	.041	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.681	
	N	103	103

Figure 6. Correlation – high school profile - - self-perceived bullying victimization

		22. Gender	6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?
22. Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	-.184
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.062
	N	103	103
6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?	Pearson Correlation	-.184	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.062	
	N	103	103

Figure 7. Correlation – types of bullying - gender

	22. Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
14. How did you react when you witnessed an act of bullying while you were a student?	Male	45	1.76	.908	.135
	Female	45	1.80	.944	.141

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		Lower	Upper
How did you react when you witnessed an act of bullying while you were a student?	Equal variances assumed	.329	.568	-.228	88	.820	-.044	.195		-.433	.344
	Equal variances not assumed			-.228	87.871	.820	-.044	.195		-.433	.344

Figure 8. Independent sample T test – reactions to bullying according to gender (witnesses)

	22. Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
15. How did your colleagues react when they witnessed an act of bullying??	Male	44	2.23	1.075	.162
	Female	44	2.57	.873	.132

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		Lower	Upper
15. How did your colleagues react when they witnessed an act of bullying?	Equal variances assumed	5.723	.019	-1.632	86	.106	-.341	.209		-.756	.074
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.632	82.526	.106	-.341	.209		-.756	.075

Figure 9. Independent sample T test – reactions to bullying according to gender (classmates)

QUESTIONNAIRE
Bullying in Romanian schools

1. To what extent have you observed bullying situations during school?
 - ☐ Very high degree
 - ☐ High degree
 - ☐ Medium degree
 - ☐ Low degree
 - ☐ Very low degree
2. How frequent was bullying?
 - ☐ Daily
 - ☐ Weekly
 - ☐ Monthly
 - ☐ DK/NR
 - ☐ Other:
3. To what extent have you been a victim of bullying during school?
 - ☐ Very high degree
 - ☐ High degree
 - ☐ Medium degree
 - ☐ Low degree
 - ☐ Very low degree
4. To what extent have you participated/carried out bullying-type activities during school?
 - ☐ Very high degree
 - ☐ High degree
 - ☐ Medium degree
 - ☐ Low degree
 - ☐ Very low degree
5. How frequently does bullying occur/does it occur?
 - ☐ Very often
 - ☐ Often
 - ☐ Occasionally
 - ☐ Rarely
 - ☐ Very rarely
6. What forms of bullying have you personally encountered in schools?
 - ☐ Verbal bullying
 - ☐ Physical bullying
 - ☐ Both verbal and physical bullying
 - ☐ None
7. From the list below, select the forms of verbal bullying you have encountered (multiple answers can be selected).
 - ☐ Insults and insults
 - ☐ Sexist comments

- ☐ Negative or humiliating nicknames
- ☐ Degrading comments about physical appearance
- ☐ Not applicable
- ☐ Other:

8. To what extent do you consider that verbal bullying has emotional/psychological consequences on victims?

- ☐ Very much
- ☐ Much
- ☐ Moderate
- ☐ A little
- ☐ Very little

9. To what extent have you observed the presence of physical bullying in schools?

- ☐ Very much
- ☐ A lot
- ☐ Average
- ☐ A little
- ☐ Very little

10. From the list below, select the forms of physical bullying you have encountered (multiple answers can be selected).

- ☐ Pushing
- ☐ Hitting
- ☐ Using objects to hit
- ☐ I don't know / I don't answer
- ☐ Other:

11. How would you rate the seriousness of the acts of physical bullying you have encountered?

- ☐ Very serious
- ☐ Serious
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Mild
- ☐ Very mild

12. From the list below, select the consequences that physical bullying has/can have on victims (multiple answers can be selected).

- ☐ Pain
- ☐ Physical injuries
- ☐ Social isolation
- ☐ Low school performance
- ☐ Other:

13. From the list below, select the long-term consequences that bullying has/can have on victims (multiple answers can be selected).

- ☐ Anxiety
- ☐ Depression
- ☐ Low self-esteem

- o Problems with professional adjustment
- o Other:

14. How did you react, as a student, when you observed an act of bullying?

- o I tried to help the victim
- o I intervened actively
- o I was a simple witness
- o I ignored the phenomenon
- o DK/NR
- o Other:

15. How did your colleagues react when they witnessed an act of bullying?

- o They tried to help the victim
- o They actively intervened
- o They laughed and encouraged
- o They alerted a teacher
- o DK/NR
- o Other:

16. What do you think is the most effective way to respond to bullying?

- o Direct intervention by students
- o Intervention by teachers
- o Support from parents
- o Other:

17. In the cases you encountered, what was the reaction of teachers to the act of bullying?

- o They intervened immediately
- o They talked to the victim and the aggressor
- o They informed the parents
- o They did not react at all
- o Other:

18. To what extent do you think that the reaction of teachers is influenced by the type of bullying (verbal/physical)?

- o Very high degree
- o High degree
- o Medium degree
- o Low degree
- o Very low degree

19. To what extent do you think that teachers' reactions are influenced by the victim's gender?

- o Very high degree
- o High degree
- o Medium degree
- o Low degree
- o Very low degree

20. Which of the following do you think would be the most effective way to reduce bullying in schools in Romania?

- ☐ Educational campaigns for students
- ☐ Training teachers in bullying management
- ☐ Stricter legislation against bullying
- ☐ Creating an anonymous reporting system
- ☐ Encouraging a safe and inclusive school environment

21. Age

- ☐ 18-25 years' old
- ☐ 25-30 years' old

22. Sex

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other:

23. Residence environment

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Rural

24. Education level

- ☐ High school
- ☐ University
- ☐ Post-university

25. What major did you study in high school?

- ☐ Social sciences
- ☐ Natural sciences
- ☐ Mathematics-computer science
- ☐ Philology
- ☐ Other:

26. What high school did you graduate from?

- ☐ Theoretical
- ☐ Technological