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Online chat-support for bullying prevention and follow-up: an analysis of the characteristics of chat-users and their experiences

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine data registered at an online bullying support chat-service over a three-year period to determine the characteristics of users and their experiences. The service was contacted 12,687 times during this period, leading to 7,641 chat-dialogues with counsellors, 57% of which ($n = 4,388$) were directly related to bullying. Findings indicate that 76% of chat-users were female and 89% were victims of bullying (ages 12–17). The extent of bullying experienced was extensive, typically occurring on a daily basis at school. More than 30% had not sought help prior to contacting the service. Verbal, relational, and physical bullying were all common, although verbal bullying was by far the most prevalent, occurring in 65% of cases. Consistent with survey research on bullying, boys were significantly more likely than girls to have been the victims of physical bullying, while the opposite was true for relational bullying.

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Chat-support; bullying; adolescence; helpline; youth

Recent data obtained through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), indicate that approximately 20% of 15-year-olds in OECD countries report being bullied at least a few times a month (OECD, 2019). These data further show that students subjected to frequent bullying have higher rates of school truancy, while students who experience a positive school environment and greater emotional support are more likely to value school (OECD). In Norway, yearly national surveys show relatively stable patterns of bullying, with about 13% of students in both primary and secondary school reporting that they are bullied 'occasionally,' and less than 3% reporting that they are bullied weekly (Wendelborg, 2021).

Research has found that bullying begins at an early age and tends to peak in adolescence (e.g. Currie et al., 2012; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). In addition, the form that bullying takes varies with age and a range of other factors, such as the gender of those involved and the context within which bullying occurs (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010). For example, evidence suggests that boys are more often exposed to physical bullying, whereas girls are more often involved in relational bullying, such as exclusion and rumour-spreading (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2010). The type of bullying that children and youth experience also has consequences for follow-up and intervention efforts. For example, teachers and parents tend to focus on physical bullying compared to more hidden forms of bullying, such as cyberbullying (Hazler et al., 2001; Iraklis, 2020; Veenstra et al., 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003).

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Regardless of the form that bullying takes, research has shown that victimization can lead to significant negative outcomes, including social withdrawal, drop-out, poor academic performance, and diminished social and mental well-being (e.g. Card et al., 2007; Copeland et al., 2013; OECD, 2019). These findings underline the need for research into ways to improve the quality of support provided to children and youth exposed to bullying.

One approach that has received little attention in the research literature is the use of online chat-support for young people dealing with the issue of bullying. This type of service is a natural extension of earlier telephone helplines aimed at supporting people in difficult life circumstances who are facing a wide-range of emotional, mental, and health-related problems (e.g. suicide risk, child abuse, addiction). In recent years, the breadth of such services has expanded in accordance with advances in technology, including smart phones and social media. Today, services can be found in many countries, as well as those with an international outreach. For instance, Child Helpline International was established in 2003, and operates 168 different lines in 141 countries and territories worldwide (Child Helpline International, 2020). Indeed, helplines for children and young people who are exposed to violence, abuse and neglect have attracted attention in many regions of the world, including the United States (Drexler, 2013; Mokkenstorm et al., 2017; Predmore et al., 2017), Australia (Danby et al., 2011; Pirkis et al., 2016), Canada (Haner & Pepler, 2016), and South Korea (Oh, 2020). Despite these developments, little is known about the outreach of services aimed specifically at supporting children exposed to bullying.

A common feature of both telephone helplines and online chat-services is that operators or counsellors are expected to respond to people in need under anonymous conditions in a respectful and non-judgemental manner. Based on their experiences with different counsellors, young people must weigh the risks and benefits of exposing their vulnerability (Danby et al., 2011). However, compared to telephone helplines that require callers to speak directly to a help provider, chat-support services allow a high degree of anonymity, which may lower the threshold for first-time 'callers' to seek help. This may explain findings indicating that young people generally prefer chat-services to telephone and face-to-face counselling; and are more likely to use the former when seeking help for more serious concerns, such as mental health issues and suicide prevention (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009; Haner & Pepler, 2016). Similarly, a report from the Norwegian Directorate of Health (2018), found that anonymous online support with professionals was the preferred type of help among young people. Adolescents and young adults in that study placed emphasis on the fact that such services tend to have high credibility, a simple means of initiating contact, and a short response time. Anonymity when seeking help may be particularly important for young victims of bullying, as research suggests that children and youth exposed to bullying often worry that involving adults will lead to increased bullying or other negative outcomes (Boulton et al., 2017; Naylor et al., 2001; Smith & Shu, 2000).

The quality of support provided is also likely to influence the frequency with which individuals seek help from a given service. For example, Pirkis et al. (2016) found that 'frequent callers' represent a minority group that nevertheless comprise a large proportion of calls to helplines. These 'frequent callers' may have a weak system of social support and, thus, seek out sympathetic listeners who they can relate to – albeit for only a brief period. Depending on the policies or specific goals of the service, counsellors may offer advice or other forms of guidance. However, there may also be benefit to counsellors having a relatively passive role as listeners, or simply being 'someone to talk to' who is familiar with the challenges that the caller or chat-user is experiencing.

Talk about bullying

SnakkOmMobbing.no (in English, 'Talk about Bullying') is a Norwegian, national chat-support service that specializes in bullying prevention and follow-up. The service was established by Blue Cross Norway in September 2015. The target group for the service is children and adolescents, aged 9–19 years. Blue Cross is an international non-profit organization that focuses on care for people with

substance abuse problems, as well as preventative work in the field of mental health and related issues. 'Talk about Bullying' (TAB) offers the opportunity for children and young people in Norway to contact counsellors anonymously. The intention is to offer the lowest possible threshold to talk about bullying, so that those dealing with bullying can get help early, before situations spiral into dangerous conflicts with long-term, detrimental outcomes. Counsellors listen, acknowledge, support, and encourage users to talk about their experiences regardless of whether they have been bullied, know someone who has been bullied, or whether they have bullied someone themselves. The service also offers chat-users information about individual rights and protections and how users can access further support.

Purpose of the study

Across the world, there has been a significant growth in the number of services providing help to young people both online and through traditional helplines. More recently, studies have emerged that examine online chat-support for young people dealing with mental health challenges (van Dolen & Weinberg, 2019), with particular emphasis on suicide prevention (Mokkenstorm et al., 2017; Salmi et al., 2021). A recent systematic review of research on the use of helplines, including an array of communication technologies, identified 52 studies in which three major themes were highlighted: (a) awareness and use of helplines, (b) the nature of problems faced by young people, and (c) service-related factors (Mathieu et al., 2021). The authors concluded that there is a need for more research regarding the effectiveness of these approaches, particularly with respect to on-line chat-support. Indeed, we were unable to identify any previous studies that specifically investigated the use of chat-services for bullying prevention and follow-up. Thus, there is a clear need to develop a better understanding of the population that these services may reach and the conditions surrounding their experiences with bullying.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine data registered by counsellors at a Norwegian bullying support chat-service to gain insight into who uses the service and their experiences. We developed the following research questions to guide the investigation:

- (1) What are the primary characteristics of chat-users, and have they previously told anyone about their experiences with bullying before contacting the service?
- (2) What are the forms, context, and extent of bullying that chat-users experienced?
- (3) Are there differences between chat-users in relation to gender (i.e. male vs. female) and previous use of the service (i.e. first-time vs. repeat users) with respect to help-seeking behaviour and the forms, context, and extent of bullying they experience?

Methods

Sample

The study is based on an analysis of registered chat dialogues with users of the TAB-service recorded by 17 counsellors in the three-year period between 1 January 2018, and 1 January 2021. Each time a chat was initiated by a visitor to the service, the responding counsellor completed a digital log entry to record information about the interaction. Within the three-year period, the service registered 12,687 contacts. However, approximately 40% (4,577) of these ended abruptly, before any dialogue began, or were of an unserious nature (469) and were therefore excluded from further analysis.

Of the remaining 7,641 dialogues, 4,388 (57.4%) dealt with the chat-user's experiences with bullying, of which 3,463 were first-time contacts. While we examine trends related to the number of chats as a whole, the primary focus of the study is on these 3,463 individuals who contacted the service for the first time regarding their personal experiences with bullying. Excluded from the analyses are individuals who were looking for information on bullying or the service in general or

seeking help with other issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, concerns about sexuality, family relationships, and alcohol or drug abuse).

Chat counsellors

The chat counsellors comprise a group of interdisciplinary professionals who hold a bachelor's degree or higher in a relevant field, including social work, special education, child welfare protection, and nursing. The counsellors are considered healthcare professionals with respect to the Norwegian Health Personnel Act (1999) and Norwegian Patient and User Rights Act (1999), which require confidentiality with respect to patient and user information, as well as other standards of practice. Criminal record checks are conducted for all counsellors before they begin working for the service. Although TAB recognizes the individual characteristics of each counsellor, it has established a common platform and understanding of the primary task as a low-threshold, anonymous support for the prevention and follow-up of bullying. The counsellors also receive training in suicide prevention and are kept abreast of other support services to which they can refer users if additional assistance is needed.

Data collection

Before starting a chat, users were asked whether they had used the service before and to provide their age, gender, and county of residence. At the time of data collection, there were 19 counties in Norway with populations ranging from 76,000 to 670,000 inhabitants. No other data was collected directly from users of the service. Instead, counsellors recorded log entries after each dialog using a digital logbook with items designed primarily as categorical variables, such as yes/no questions and checklists describing different features of the problems that were discussed. Variables included types of bullying (e.g. verbal, physical, relational), the chat-user's role in the situation (e.g. victim, aggressor, bystander), whether the user had told someone, where the bullying occurred (e.g. school, free time), whether the person had been referred to other support services, and so on.

Log entries were stored in a secured, password protected database. We consulted the Norwegian Centre for Research Data with respect to ethical considerations for the study. The agency agreed that the study met ethical standards for research in the social sciences given that the database containing counsellors' log entries did not contain personal identifiable information from users, nor were the chat-dialogues themselves accessed directly by the researchers. In addition, data collection was conducted after the dialogues had ended and only contained information that arose naturally as part of these conversations, with the exception of the general background information described above. This approach is an important limitation with respect to interpretation of the findings, as unanswered items in the log entries are not necessarily an indication of non-occurrence; rather, they may simply reflect that the information did not emerge during the dialog between the chat-user and the counsellor.

Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square goodness of fit tests to assess whether observed frequencies differed from expected when the distribution of groups for the sample as a whole was taken into account (i.e. male vs. female, first-time vs. repeat contacts). We summarized frequencies of behaviours and conditions that were coded from first-time contacts related to bullying ($n = 3,463$) and report valid percentages based on the total number of observations within each area (e.g. verbal, physical, or relational bullying as percent of total observations for 'form of bullying').

In the second phase of analysis, we compared male and female first-time users on the frequency of observations for the primary areas of interest, as indicated in research question 3. Users who

reported their gender as 'other' were not included in this analysis due to the low number of observations for this group. In contrast to gender, most categories are not independent at the participant level, as different behaviours and conditions could be coded for the same chat-user simultaneously. This is part of the reason for focusing on first-time chat users. However, we also conducted comparisons of dialogues between first-time and repeat users to the chat-service based on the distribution of these two groups.

Results

Time of year

Across the three years, first-time contacts related to bullying ($n = 3,463$) were highest in the fourth quarter ($M = 319.7$; $SD = 131.9$) and lowest in the third quarter ($M = 234.3$; $SD = 96.8$), which includes the summer months. For all 7,641 dialogues, including repeat contacts and those not directly related to bullying, there was an average of 634 dialogues per quarter ($SD = 229$) and 2,537 per year ($SD = 900$), where the average number of dialogues was highest in the first quarter ($M = 695$; $SD = 249$) and lowest in the third quarter ($M = 514$; $SD = 228$).

Demographics

Results indicate that 93% of users were between the ages of 12 and 17 ($M = 13.9$; $SD = 1.9$). Only 102 cases (2.9%) were below 9 or over the age of 19. A large number of first-time chat-users did not provide information on their gender (630; 18.2%). Of those that reported gender, 75.5% ($n = 2139$) were female, 21.9% were male (620), and 2.6% indicated the category 'other' (74). The mean age for the three categories were similar (M range = 13.4–14.0 years).

Roles and forms of bullying

Information on the roles of chat-users (i.e. victim, aggressor, bystander) was available for 2,890 first-time contacts related to bullying. The majority of these (2,557) were victims (88.5%). Thirty-nine chat-users reported that they had themselves engaged in bullying others (1.3%), whereas 165 (5.7%) were coded as bystanders or witnesses to bullying. The remaining 172 contacts dealt with questions about bullying (5.9%), such as fears of being bullied or interest in prevention efforts.

The form of bullying that took place was coded for 2,510 dialogues. Of these, 1,643 (64.5%) reflected verbal bullying, 1,170 (46.6%) relational or indirect forms of bullying, and 573 (22.8%) were coded as physical bullying. These categories are not mutually exclusive and multiple forms were often reported for individual cases. For example, 40% of indirect bullying and 67% of physical bullying occurred simultaneous to verbal bullying. All three behaviours were noted in 4.3% of valid cases. In addition, verbal bullying included written communication, such as text messaging, which were coded for 182 dialogues (11.1% of verbal bullying).

Context

The context or location in which bullying occurred was coded for 2,434 first-time dialogues. The vast majority of cases (2,128; 87.4%) described bullying as occurring at school. Bullying via social media or in other digital forms were coded in 319 cases, comprising 13% of dialogues in which the location or context was identified. There were 301 incidences of bullying during free time activities (12.3%) and 189 (7.7%) in which the situation was related to the user's home situation. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Bullying at school often occurred alongside bullying in other contexts. For example, 60.8% of digital bullying and 59.8% of bullying during free time activities were coded simultaneously with bullying at school. Moreover, 14% of bullying in the

home environment involved cases where the child experienced difficulties at school (e.g. conflicts with siblings).

Frequency and exposure

Only 584 of the 3,463 first-time dialogues (16.9%) contained information regarding the frequency of bullying. Of these, 453 (77.6%) indicated that the behaviour occurred daily, 65 (11.1%) were coded as occurring weekly, while 64 (11.0%) indicated that it took place 'periodically.' In contrast, 'monthly' bullying was coded on only 2 occasions, or 0.3% of the 584 dialogues in which the frequency of bullying was recorded.

Log entries also included information on when the bullying began and there were 1,070 dialogues in which this information was recorded. Approximately 1 in 3 (327; 30.6%) chat-users revealed that bullying began in lower primary school (grades 1–4) or earlier. There were 157 users (14.7%) who reported that bullying began in upper primary school (grades 5–7), while 517 of the 1,070 coded dialogues (48.3%) indicated that bullying had begun in lower secondary school (grades 8–10). Only 69 (6.4%) indicated that bullying began in upper secondary school (grades 11–13).

Help-Seeking

There were 2,016 dialogues in which users clearly indicated whether or not they had told someone about their situation. Most of these (1134; 56.3%) reported having informed someone, although 210 (10.4%) indicated that they had only partially revealed information about their situation. In contrast, 672 (33.3%) had not told anyone about the bullying they experienced prior to contacting the chat-service. Of the 2,016 dialogues, 1,479 (73.4%) contained information about whom they had told. Among those who were contacted, the following categories occurred most frequently: 640 = teachers (43.3%), 467 = parents (31.6%), 181 = peers (12.2%), and 125 = health professionals (8.5%). In addition, 37 (4.4%) were coded as 'others'. Several users indicated multiple individuals; thus, these frequencies are not mutually exclusive.

Gender differences

We found no significant differences between males and females with respect to overall exposure to bullying, $\chi^2(1) = .90, p = .344$, after accounting for the proportion of male to female first-time contacts for the entire sample. As with the sample as a whole, the vast majority of chat-users who had previously contacted the service reported their gender as female. Of 925 repeat contacts, 761 were female (82.3%) and 110 were male (11.9%). This difference was significant after accounting for the distribution of gender across total dialogues, $\chi^2(1) = 29.58, p = .000$, revealing that girls were proportionally over-represented among repeat users of the service.

Results of additional comparisons for gender are presented in [Table 1](#). Significant differences were found between male and female users of the service, with males reporting significantly higher incidence of physical (24.4% vs. 15.1%) bullying and females reporting higher levels of relational bullying (39.3% vs. 25.5%). Girls also reported significantly greater exposure to digital (cyber-) bullying and bullying in the school context than did boys. In addition, girls were significantly more likely to have reported the experience to a teacher or other professional prior to contacting the chat-service (26.1% vs. 17.9%).

Table 1. Differences between male and female users of the chat-service.

	Female (<i>n</i> = 2139)		Male (<i>n</i> = 620)		Chi-square	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Bullying form						
Verbal	1034	48.3	288	46.5	1.10	.294
Physical	322	15.1	151	24.4	21.27	.000*
Indirect	840	39.3	155	25.5	30.95	.000*
Bullying context						
School	1381	64.6	349	56.3	7.81	.005*
Digital	225	10.5	46	7.4	5.56	.018*
Home	113	5.3	37	6.0	.24	.627
Free time	184	8.6	69	11.1	2.61	.106
Help-seeking						
Told someone	750	35.1	203	32.7	1.55	.213
Parent	223	10.4	76	12.3	.99	.320
Professional	559	26.1	111	17.9	15.66	.000*
Peer	136	6.4	36	5.8	.42	.518
Frequency						
≤ weekly	407	19.0	111	17.9	.72	.395
≥ monthly	45	2.1	21	3.4	2.90	.089
First exposure						
Primary school	337	15.8	61	9.8	13.23	.000*
Secondary school	396	18.5	132	21.3	1.19	.275

Table 2. Differences between first time and repeat users of the chat-service.

	First time (<i>n</i> = 3643)		Repeat (<i>n</i> = 925)		Chi-square	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Bullying form						
Verbal	1643	45.1	415	44.9	.04	.857
Physical	573	15.7	126	13.6	1.70	.191
Indirect	1170	32.1	285	30.8	0.16	.694
Bullying context						
School	2128	58.4	556	60.1	.86	.354
Digital	319	8.7	83	9.0	.11	.746
Home	189	5.2	51	5.5	.23	.624
Free time	301	8.2	70	7.6	.30	.586
Help-seeking						
Told someone	1344	36.9	431	46.6	20.34	.000*
Parent	354	9.7	109	11.8	3.63	.057
Professional	805	22.1	302	32.6	36.68	.000*
Peer	193	5.3	38	4.1	1.82	.177
Frequency						
≤ weekly	617	1.7	141	15.2	.93	.336
≥ monthly	74	2.0	14	1.5	.92	.337
First exposure						
Primary school	475	13.0	123	13.3	.12	.728
Secondary school	586	16.1	159	17.2	.84	.359

First-time vs. Repeat chat-users

In the final analysis, we compared chat-users who had previously contacted the service on issues related to bullying (*n* = 925) to those who were identified as first-time users. Weighting was based on the proportion of the two groups comprising the total sample of bullying related contacts (*n* = 4,388). As can be seen in Table 2, there were no significant differences between these groups, with the exception of help-seeking behaviour, where repeat chat-users were significantly more likely to have told someone about their experience (46.6% vs. 36.9%). Seeking help from teachers or other professionals accounted for the majority of this difference (26.1% vs. 17.9%).

Discussion

Online chat-support has many potential advantages. Ideally, when children and young adults are given the opportunity to express embarrassing, uncomfortable, or threatening topics through a service that is anonymous, easily accessible, and safe; the path to later in-person help becomes shorter. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine data recorded by counsellors at a Norwegian chat-service to gain a better picture of its users and their experiences with bullying. The discussion that follows is organized around the study's three research questions, which address: (a) the characteristics of chat-users, including the degree to which they sought help prior to contacting the service; (b) the forms, context, and extent of bullying that chat-users experienced; and (c) potential differences across gender and previous access to the chat-service among its users.

Characteristics and help-seeking

Regarding the first research question, we found that approximately three quarters of chat-users were female, nearly 90% of dialogues related to bullying were with victims, and users of the service were primarily in the age range of lower secondary school (12–16 years in Norway). The finding that 30% of chat-users were 12 to 13 years of age suggests that a large portion were in the transition between primary and lower secondary education. This is consistent with research indicating that this transition is typically associated with an increase in bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Evans & Eder, 1993; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000) as new social structures are formed, and affiliation is amplified among peers who already are involved in bullying (Farmer et al., 2015).

In addition, we found that as many as one-third of bullying victims had not told anyone about their experience prior to contacting the chat-service. This percentage is similar to that which has been observed in earlier studies of help-seeking among adolescent victims of bullying (e.g. Cameron et al., 2021; Naylor et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Among those chat-users who had sought help, they had most often turned to their teachers or other school professionals. This is perhaps to be expected, given research suggesting that victims of school bullying believe that their teachers are the ones who are most able to intervene (Dowling & Carey, 2013). However, studies show that as youth move from adolescents to adulthood, they tend to avoid seeking help when exposed to bullying for fear that adult involvement will make matters worse (Boulton et al., 2017; Cameron et al., 2021; Smith & Shu, 2000; Trach et al., 2010). Together with evidence from the current study, these findings underline the importance of anonymity for users of the chat-service.

Form, context, and extent

With respect to research question 2, bullying was reported as being primarily direct and verbal in nature and occurring mostly at school. Yet, users of the chat-service also experienced relational and physical bullying that carried over into non-school contexts (e.g. social media and free-time activities). Data showing that the chat-service had most contacts during the school year, from late fall to early spring, supports the finding that school was a central arena for bullying. Given that school is where children and adolescents spend most of their time, and often have little choice with respect to with whom they are grouped, the significance of school as a major context for bullying is to be expected (Cameron et al., 2021).

Although it is important to note that data on bullying frequency was available from only a small portion of the sample, among those for whom such data was available, we found that almost 8 of 10 chat-users experienced bullying on a daily basis, and approximately one-third indicated that the bullying had started in primary school or earlier. Although verbal bullying was the most prevalent, relational forms of bullying were also common (47%). Moreover, physical bullying as an isolated category, was reported by 23% of chat-users. While this percentage is alarming, it appears to be within the range of several previous studies reporting the extent of physical violence towards victims

(e.g. Cameron et al., 2021; Tharp-Taylor et al., 2009). Such extensive exposure to bullying in everyday life can lead to feelings of shame, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour (Ford et al., 2017).

Of course, it is important to recognize that the users of the chat-service were a self-selected sample who were actively looking for support. In other words, chat-users may be among those individuals who face the most severe bullying-related challenges. Similarly, Haner and Pepler (2016) found that compared to those individuals who sought help through a telephone helpline, users of a chat-service had more extensive mental health problems, discussed topics of a more serious nature, and were found to have a higher risk for self-harm and suicide. The authors underline the importance of training for counsellors to deal with these more intensive issues while using the more 'ambiguous communication' form of online chat-support (Haner & Pepler, 2016, p. 142).

Gender and previous access

After accounting for proportional differences in the total number of contacts, we found no significant difference between males and females with respect to the frequency with which they contacted the chat-service because of bullying. Yet, it is clear that girls were by far the primary users of the service overall. Previous research has consistently found that girls and women more often seek help for mental health, emotional, and social problems than do boys and men, whether it be through helplines and online services (Haner & Pepler, 2016; Mokkenstorm et al., 2017; Watling et al., 2021) or by directly contacting teachers or other professionals (Boulton et al., 2017; Raviv et al., 2009).

Several hypotheses have been put forth as to why women and girls more often seek help under these and similar circumstances. Broadly summarized, it is suggested that girls and women rely more heavily on relationships for emotional support and tend to view social problems as more serious than do males (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Raviv et al., 2009). In contrast, boys and men are more likely to perceive the risk of sanctions from peers if they express vulnerability and tend to believe that they should handle such problems on their own (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

Consistent with this pattern, males in the current study were over one and half times more likely than females to have been the victims of physical bullying, while the opposite was true for relational and digital bullying. These findings are consistent with years of bullying research indicating that girls are more frequently involved in relational bullying, whereas boys are more often identified as both perpetrators and victims of physical bullying (e.g. Iloa et al., 2016; LaFreniere et al., 2002; Morales et al., 2019). Space does not allow for an in-depth discussion on the potential socio-cultural or biological explanations for this trend. However, it is worth noting that the prominence of this pattern can be seen across cultural and regional boundaries. For example, in an international study involving eight countries (Brazil, Canada, China, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States) and over 4000 preschool children, teachers universally reported that boys were more aggressive and less socially competent than were girls (LaFreniere et al., 2002), illustrating that these differences begin early in children's developmental and educational trajectory.

Gender differences also have implications for bullying intervention and follow-up, whether they are in online or physical spaces. A number of studies have found that compared to relational bullying, adults tend to focus on and intervene more often in physical and verbal bullying, which is more easily discovered and recognized (Hazler et al., 2001; Iraklis, 2020; Veenstra et al., 2014; Yoon & Kerber, 2003). In addition, relational bullying is viewed by many as being a less severe or dangerous form of bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Hazler et al., 2001). Thus, the preponderance of digital and relational bullying among girls in the current study may reflect the challenge that victims of this behaviour face in gaining access to help in dealing with these issues in their everyday lives. Consequently, it is feasible that young women and girls may seek help through the chat-service

precisely because the bullying that they are exposed to has not been picked up on by adults or, if it has been identified, has not been properly addressed.

A caveat to this interpretation is the lack of significant differences in comparisons of repeat and first-time chat-users with respect to the frequency with which they were bullied and how long they had been exposed to bullying. Although these are rather imperfect measures, this finding seems to suggest that repeat users of the service were not necessarily more severely affected than were first-time users. The one significant difference revealed that repeat users were more likely to have told someone about their experience prior to contacting the service than were first-time users. This seems logical given that those who access the service multiple times would likely be more open to talking about or seeking support for dealing with their problems also in other arenas.

Limitations and implications

Several limitations of the present study should be noted. First, it is extremely difficult to gauge the impact of this type of anonymous support, as it is impossible to know whether chat-users sought additional help after their dialogues or to what degree these dialogues were helpful in the long-term. Second, due to ethical considerations, we did not have direct access to the transcripts of communication between counsellors and chat-users. Thus, it was not possible to check the accuracy of counsellors' coding of the variables of interest, nor were we able to explore more nuanced, qualitative aspects of their dialogues. Relatedly, the fact that only the occurrence of a specific event, behaviour, or experience was coded – and not the absence of these – likely resulted in an underestimation of certain variables. For example, it is possible that a chat-user may have been the victim of physical bullying, yet simply failed to discuss this issue with the counsellor. Taking this into consideration, the high numbers of chat-users reporting extensive exposure to different bullying behaviours is all the more concerning. Finally, these data contain limited information about the complexity of bullying and its potential consequences for chat-users. We believe that future research examining the transcripts of chat-dialogues using qualitative approaches could contribute to a better understanding of the positions of young people seeking help and potentially improve the quality of the chat-support that they receive.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study adds to the existing knowledge base in several ways. The results provide a picture of who uses online chat-services, what types of bullying they experience, and under what contexts. Albeit to a limited degree, this study also gives some indication as to where such services may fall short. For example, males were substantially under-represented among users of the service. While previous research in other contexts has also found that males are less likely to seek help, this finding is important because it indicates that the availability of an anonymous chat-service does not change this pattern. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that it is not necessarily the risk of being 'discovered' that is keeping boys from seeking help. In addition, the current study provides empirical evidence that a large proportion of bullying is connected to school and that victimhood often starts much earlier than trend data typically indicate (i.e. peaking in the early teenage years). These findings underscore the importance of school practitioners in primary school being attentive to forms of bullying that are often hidden from the eyes of adults, especially considering that social media and smartphones are increasingly a part of early childhood.

A relatively novel finding from this study is the large percentage of chat-users who had not sought help elsewhere prior to contacting the service. It is unfortunate that so many children and adolescents are either unable or reluctant to seek direct help from parents, teachers, or other caregivers about the challenges they face. Thus, this finding highlights the importance of alternative channels, such as chat-lines, where young people can open up and share their experiences for the first time under the shield of anonymity through non-judgemental interactions with knowledgeable professionals. Future research should explore how chat-counsellors and services can, in a trustworthy manner, encourage young people who are seeking help for the first time to involve

adults in their proximate environment to receive the help that they need. While research can be found on helplines using different forms of communication technology to address a broad range of challenges, the present study is unique in that it explores: (1) data based solely derived from chat-support with (2) an explicit focus on bullying prevention and follow-up. Compared to previous research, the current study is noteworthy in its specificity. This investigation can provide a basis for more precise comparisons in future studies and research on similar parameters as communication technology advances and the availability of chat-support services expands over time.

Conclusions

We still know too little about the impact and effectiveness of chat-services, helplines, and other community health approaches to addressing bullying. Our findings were largely consistent with survey research with respect to the types and context of bullying identified. Given the large number of contacts initiated, dialogues conducted, and repeat users of the chat-service, it is easy to conclude that this type of support has strong appeal to children and adolescents in extremely challenging situations. Future research is needed concerning how chat-services can better reach children and adolescents who are reluctant to seek help and support. Moreover, research is needed about what happens to individuals after they contact such services, as well as how to ensure that the help that is provided meets the needs of users. With respect to practice, there is a need for policy makers and those responsible for establishing and running chat-services to take gender differences into consideration. Efforts should be made to increase the appeal of these services to male victims of bullying and experimental research should be conducted to examine the impact of awareness campaigns, school-based programs, and information access to address this imbalance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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