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### **Self and Others in School Bullying and Cyberbullying:**

#### **Fine-tuning a New Arts-based Method to Study Sensitive Topics**

##### **Abstract**

Despite continuous international research and prevention efforts, bullying not only persists globally but also evolves into new forms, such as cyberbullying. In this methodological article, we present a new arts-based research tool, graphic vignettes, that can extend our understanding of peer aggression and other sensitive topics by facilitating participants' creative reflection over the roles of self and others in different problem-based situations. Each graphic vignette, designed for this study, looks like an incomplete comic strip that participants individually develop further. Flexible and open to interpretation vignettes were used in combination with more restrictive/structured vignettes to facilitate methodological comparisons. During follow-up interviews, creatively completed graphic vignettes helped participants locate and articulate their perceptions and experiences of peer aggression. Being able to share personal experiences and feelings through the character's perspective

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encouraged participants to open up more. Using creative works in interviews also helped the understanding between participants and researchers by allowing participants' verbal and visual accounts to enhance each other. Moreover, our findings suggest that offering creative tasks to participants helped us reduce the effects of the social desirability bias – a prevalent problem in sensitive research. Overall, the article demonstrates how new graphic vignettes can be developed, adjusted, and effectively applied in an international setting.

*Keywords:* bullying, cyberbullying, arts-based research, graphic vignettes, vignettes, graphic elicitation, story completion, sensitive research

**Self and Others in School Bullying and Cyberbullying:****Fine-tuning a New Arts-based Method to Study Sensitive Topics**

Peer aggression has long been a ubiquitous problem transcending cultural and geographic borders (Craig et al., 2009). Yet, detecting and assessing the scale of it still represents a major challenge standing in the way of understanding the phenomenon and developing effective preventative measures (Cornell & Cole, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2014). The estimated rates of bullying and cyberbullying can be notably influenced by how these concepts are defined, and research shows that lay people often disagree on what constitutes different types of peer aggression (Hellström et al., 2015; Maunder et al., 2010). At the same time, researchers rarely offer young people an opportunity “to discuss their understanding of bullying experiences in their own voices” (Bosacki et al., 2006, p. 232). Some evidence even suggests that the scientific definition of cyberbullying, often referred to as harmful actions inflicted through the use of electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2014), does not correspond to the actual experiences of young people (Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019). Another thing that adds to the challenges of peer aggression assessment is that students, when dealing with it, often avoid reporting their experiences (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2012; Wiseman & Jones, 2018). Changing this to gain important insights into how young people understand and deal with bullying and cyberbullying means developing new research methods that help students, teachers, and researchers build trust and

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a common understanding to allow more voices to come to the forefront. Reasonably, Smith (2019) calls for more qualitative research and warns that “predetermined survey questions may miss out important aspects of what those involved in cyberbullying are experiencing” (p. 23). Engaging participants in creative reflection might be a particularly good way to explore such sensitive topics (Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020) since arts-based research is rooted in psychotherapy designed to help people process their unpleasant experiences and even trauma (Coholic et al., 2009; Houghton, 2015; Kara, 2015; Levell, 2019; Mak, 2011; Reilly et al., 2018).

In this methodological article, we share our critical reflections on organizing an arts-based research project aimed at exploring students’ perceptions and experiences of bullying and cyberbullying. This study builds on our previous research in which we developed and tested a new method to study traditional bullying – graphic vignettes (Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020). The present article intends to show how the limitations identified in the previous studies were addressed and how the original graphic vignettes were adjusted to study cyberbullying.

### **Arts-based research**

Artmaking and creative engagement are often considered to be the main components of arts-based research (ABR). For example, McNiff (2014, p. 259) defines ABR as “a process of inquiry whereby the researcher, alone or with others, engages the making of art as a primary mode of inquiry”. Even

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though this definition of ABR has long been operationalised with artmaking driving valuable knowledge production, scepticism around arts-based methods is still common. This necessitates more methodological research that can gradually foster more trustworthiness for ABR (Flowers, 2017).

Traditional research focuses exclusively on factual accounts, casting aside fiction as it is open to interpretation. However, fiction always stems from reality, reflecting its creators' background and beliefs (Leavy, 2018). "As writers and readers of fiction know, rather than compromising experience and reality, it may optimally heighten them" (McNiff, 2018). Forde (2021) provides an insightful reflection when noting that photographs capture objective reality as it is, whereas drawings and paintings do not – their purpose is to highlight things that are most important to the creator. Indeed, artmaking necessitates decisions over what to include and exclude and these artistic choices communicate important messages about the creator. Moreover, participants' artworks allow researchers to engage in collaborative interpretations that help untangle all parts of their stories and establish what specifically came from real life and how exactly these parts were transformed into fiction. This way "issues inherent in interpretation become a valuable addition to the research rather than an obstacle to be overcome" (O'Dell et al., 2012, p. 702). Essentially, incorporating creative components into research enables us to see through a multimodal analytic lens which enhances traditional linguistic-based analyses with visual and/or auditory information

(Flowers, 2017; Kress, 2009; Kuttner et al., 2021). Indeed, the ultimate purpose of arts-based research is “the enhancement of perspectives” that facilitates the re-evaluation of the studied phenomenon and the enrichment of existing scholarly discussions (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that not only researchers can be sceptical about ABR but also potential participants and this might stand in the way of their engagement. For example, in their reflection over comics-based research Kuttner et al. (2021) noted that “participants may view comics as not a ‘serious’ scholarship”. This problem is less likely to occur with young participants, but it is an important methodological issue to consider when planning an ABR project. One of the ways to increase credibility of ABR in the eyes of participants is through encouraging their active and genuine engagement (Morris & Paris, 2021) because it ensures that participants’ do not feel coerced to say/express what the researchers want to hear/see.

In view of this, many researchers who use arts-based methods are keen on encouraging participant-led engagement that enables participants’ own meanings and beliefs to be at the heart of participant-researcher interactions (Bagnoli, 2009; Bravington & King, 2018; Dutton et al., 2019; Gausman et al., 2019; Literat, 2013). This helps bridge the gap between participants and researchers facilitating knowledge production “based on reasoning and understanding” (Leavy, 2015). Indeed, organising interactions around

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participants' creative outputs facilitates effective communication as it reduces the power imbalance that is inevitable in traditional research (Goopy & Kassan, 2019; Roger & Blomgren, 2019). Empowering participant-led approaches are particularly important when working with vulnerable populations who often feel invisible and silenced and might carry stigma and shame. This is because feeling empowered can help vulnerable groups overcome inhibitions and communicate their authentic self (Coemans et al., 2015; Dickson, 2021). At the same time, following the lead of participants often means straying away from the investigatory path initially anticipated by the researchers but this is something they need to be comfortable with (Dickson, 2021; Haberl, 2021).

Furthermore, engaging with works of fiction creates a unique window into participants' empathy as "fiction can allow us, metaphorically, to walk in the shoes of another" (Leavy, 2015, p. 194). Interpretative gaps present in creative works help audiences make empathetic connections and are filled in with their own experiences (de Freitas, 2003). Importantly, research shows that engagement in arts-based activities helps people become more emotionally aware and empathetic through creating original art as well as through reflecting on other people's art (Adamson et al., 2018; Coholic & Eys, 2016; Lutter et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016).

What is important is that arts-based methods allow participants not only to connect to experiences and emotions of others (including fictional



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characters) but also to transmit their own experiences and emotions to the researcher. In fact, “arts-based research requires us to think with feelings” (Romero, 2020) and allows participants to have and express mixed feelings and contradictory beliefs (Haberl, 2021). Engaging with art lets a range of raw emotions surface, facilitating the communication of complex thoughts and feelings (Jack, 2012; Nguyen, 2018). In contrast, by relying on verbal accounts alone, traditional research methods do not tolerate ambiguity and thus restrict the scope of what participants can communicate (Nguyen, 2018).

Due to “the power of arts-based methods to engage people’s emotion and empathy” (Leavy, 2019) research topics associated with complex emotional states can particularly benefit from ABR. Importantly, Haberl (2021) notes how many of her participants chose to communicate their emotions through their abstract art by using colours as symbols, without being asked to do so. This suggests that there could be an instinctive urge to base off one’s creative works of one’s real emotions. As Kearney & Hyle (2004) highlights being engaged in drawing in particular can “create a path toward feelings and emotions” which in conjunction with participants’ verbal clarifications provide triangulation of data. Pain (2012) notes in her review article that visual research methods are often selected when researchers deal with difficult, sensitive, and emotionally charged topics that are likely to cause psychological suppressions and communication blocks. This is because capturing different dimensions of the phenomenon can compensate for

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incomplete verbal accounts. “Drawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 34). Barone & Eisner (2012) understood enhanced communicative power as one more key component of ABR when they defined it as “an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable” (p. 1).

Our literature review revealed the need for more methodological studies that can build ABR’s credibility through considering how arts-based methods enable participants: to lead the interactions with researchers, to locate and articulate complex emotions, to share new perspectives that were previously untold and/or cast aside. The purpose of this article is to show how a new arts-based method, graphic vignettes, was developed and used effectively to study different types of bullying and cyberbullying in two different contexts. More specifically, the article aims to build on our previous research with graphic vignettes by examining the following research questions: What kind of insights into students’ understandings and perceptions of bullying and cyberbullying can be achieved with the use of the adjusted graphic vignettes? What are the key methodological considerations of developing new graphic vignettes?

### **Method**

### **Study Participants and Their Recruitment**

One school in Switzerland and one school in Russia were recruited for this study. The two schools were small international tuition-based private schools. The sample consisted of 17 students (7 males, 10 females, coded as S1-S17) from the Swiss school and 18 students (10 males, 8 females, coded as R18-35) from the Russian school. Participants' age ranged from 13 to 16 years (Grades 7, 8, 9, and 10). All students in this age group in the two schools were invited to participate since bullying is a "group phenomenon" (Salmivalli et al., 1996, p. 11) making it important to study whole peer groups. Preliminary analysis of the data collected in the two schools indicated that data saturation was reached.

The parents of the participating children gave their informed written consent, while the children provided informed verbal assent. All participants were reassured that their responses were completely anonymous. Moreover, to ensure trusting interactions between participants and researchers both authors of this article travelled to each school and stayed on the premises for one or two weeks. During these periods researchers introduced themselves, engaged in daily school activities and participated in school events. Before deciding on their participation in the project participants had an opportunity to get to know the researchers and understand the project's objective and goals.

### **Designing the Graphic Vignettes**

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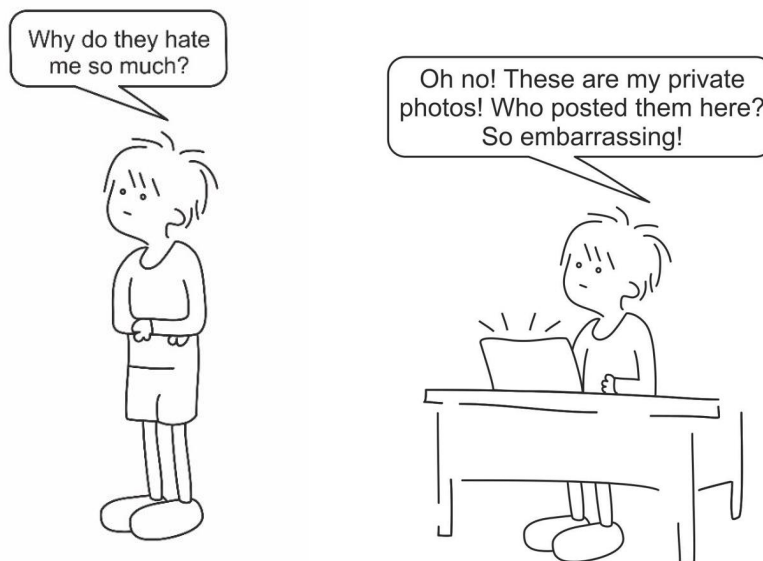
The new method of graphic vignettes is based on the three methodological approaches: traditional vignettes, narrative inquiry, and graphic elicitation. A graphic vignette looks like an incomplete comic strip with a specific problem-based situation at the core (for example, a bullying occurrence) that needs to be creatively developed into a visual story. After reflecting on our initial study (Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020), we decided to adjust the existing set of vignettes to provide participants with more space for creativity for two main reasons. First, cyberbullying is a less defined and more dynamically developing phenomenon than traditional bullying, calling for more explorative research (Kowalski et al., 2014; Smith, 2019). Second, in our first study, some participants could not relate to any of the situations presented in the graphic vignettes despite reporting personal bullying experience and this hindered their ability to share their stories to the fullest. We hypothesised that making vignettes more ambiguous with less visual and textual prompts would facilitate more empathetic connections leading to the interpretative gaps being filled with personal experience (de Freitas, 2003). At the same time, we restricted the scope of our study by designing all vignettes with a focus on victims only. This way we expected those with personal experience of being bullied to share it through their creative works, while expecting everyone else to use graphic vignettes to project their perceptions of victims. Studying this represents an important scientific interest as it helps develop more effective anti-bullying interventions based on the group ecology (Gini et al., 2008).

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A set of six graphic vignettes (Appendix 1) was designed specifically for this study. The first vignette was the most open to interpretation, but the majority of participants perceived it as a situation of traditional bullying. The rest of the vignettes were showing different types of cyberbullying (harassment, denigration, impersonation, exclusion, and outing) previously reported in academic literature (Bauman, 2015; Willard, 2006) (See Figure 1 presenting vignettes 1 and 2 as examples). Each vignette portrayed one character that was purposefully expressionless and had a thought bubble indicating what kind of situation the character was dealing with.

**Figure 1**

*Vignette 1 (on the left) and Vignette 2 (on the right)*



*Note.* There were large margins in the original versions given to participants providing space for their creative input.

**Data collection**

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Participants were invited to reflect on the first (the most flexible) vignette as well as on any other three or more vignettes from the set and develop them into their own stories. Participants' creative works were then used for organising in-depth interviews. In the course of an interview, the participant and researcher discussed the meaning and inspiration behind each completed vignette. Four main questions were used as prompts: 1) Could you, please, tell me a bit about your comics? 2) Does this look like a serious situation to you? 3) What do the characters feel? 4) Where did the inspiration for this story come from? Throughout the interview the researcher did not use the words "bullying" and "cyberbullying" to enable the participant to share their personal perception and understanding of each problematic situation without being pushed towards the topic of bullying. However, at the very end of an interview the participant was additionally asked to assess how frequently bullying happened at school (on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "Never" and 10 means "On a daily basis").

### **Analysis**

All data (created comics and transcribed interviews) were subjected to repeated systematic readings to be coded inductively through the identification of noteworthy data sections (Appendix 2). Following the six-phase guide to thematic analysis (outlined by Braun & Clarke, 2006), we identified two types of themes (methodology-related and bullying-related). Comics were placed into different categories based on what type of victim

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was created (aggressive/provocative victims, victims who seek help, victims who suffer alone, etc.). At the same time, all aspects of the comics were considered: both visual (colours, clothing, facial expressions, tears, etc.) and meaning-related components (participants' story plots, characters' thought bubbles, and explanations, clarifications, inspirations provided in interviews). Then a table was created to evaluate if any visual components co-occurred with any meaning-related components. To ensure trustworthiness of the data analysis, the developed codes were checked for clarity (Thomas, 2006): 1) the first author performed independent data coding and then shared the developed codes and their descriptions with the second author; 2) consequently, the second author worked with raw transcripts and assigned sections of the text into the codes developed by the first author.

### **Results**

All 35 participants of this study reported that they did not encounter any serious difficulties when working with the graphic vignettes and created 92 unique visual stories. Ten students (S2, S5, S6, S7, S12, S16, R20, R24, R32, and R34) revealed that they had been bullied in the past. All of them shared their personal stories through vignette 1 (which was designed to be the most open to interpretation and thus transformable into a vast range of scenarios). Moreover, one participant (R31) used this vignette to communicate personal struggles unrelated to bullying (a situation of fighting with friends). There

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was even one person (S9) who admitted to bullying others when working with this vignette.

“I think I have never been in a bullying situation. I mean I was never bullied but there was this situation when I treated someone a little... It wasn't like real bullying, but everyone was sort of annoyed by this person and I was too. Sometimes people just don't understand that they can be unwanted and annoying... Everything depends on the person actually — if they have a will and confidence, they will never let others put them down.” (S9)

In addition, eight students reported having been cyberbullied (S4, S6, S8, S9, S16, R21, R26, and R28). All these participants translated their personal stories into comics using vignettes 2-6 (which were designed as four different cyberbullying situations). Eight more students (S15, R22, R24, R25, R30, R31, R33, and R35) used these vignettes to talk about other personal experiences that did not constitute cyberbullying (for example, misunderstandings and conflicts with classmates). In addition, one participant (S11) suggested that they might have cyberbullied someone and created comics based on that situation.

- Researcher: Did it happen to someone you know?
- S11: Mmm, it was like, it was not like bullying, not really like that, maybe more like posting their embarrassing pictures but just for fun... it's like not that serious, a fun thing to do.



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- Researcher: A fun thing?
- S11: Like the person doesn't take it like that.

The theme of having fun and joking around was actually one of the most re-occurring (discussed by S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S11, S17, R19, R22, R29, and R32). Two of the participants who brought up this theme (S4 and R32) linked it to their personal experiences of victimisation. They first created their comics based on their experiences placing a clear emphasis on endured aggression. Later, however, in their interviews they tried to minimise the gravity of their situations. For example, S4 described in an interview two of his cyberbullying experiences as funny despite saying earlier that he viewed bullying and cyberbullying as hurtful and serious issues.

- Researcher: Has it ever happened to someone you know?
- S4: Yeah, to me, but it was in a fun way.
- Researcher: Who did it?
- S4: My friend. But it was in a funny way.
- Researcher: A friend hacked into your account?
- S4: Yeah, cause he knows my password and was able to enter my account.
- Researcher: What did he...
- S4: Just wrote to random people. It was funny but also embarrassing.

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R32, on the other hand, was clearly more upset about being a target of “bad jokes” but still, she did not view her current situation as “real bullying” because she was comparing it to something worse, she went through in the past.

- R32: There is no real bullying anymore but there are still some bad jokes occasionally that can hurt. So, I would estimate it (the level of bullying at this school) as 3-4 (on the scale from 1 to 10).

- Researcher: How do you understand bullying? What would be your personal definition?

- R32: It is when you are minding your own business and some people start talking about you. They start making jokes about you. Then, after classes, they are joking again, and it keeps on going.

These interactions allowed us to explore how students understand bullying and where they see the line between jokes and aggression. Eight participants noted that bullying and cyberbullying often start with jokes and the desire to have fun (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S17, R19, and R32). At the same time, three participants (S11, R22, R29) were adamant that jokes are only jokes and should not be equated with bullying.

Generally, there is no bullying (in this school). As I said before, we never cross the line but there are some people who get offended. They just don't understand that we are not trying to offend anyone. We are doing this for a laugh. (R22)

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Students were not on common ground regarding what should be considered hurtful and aggressive. Predictably, none of the participants viewed oneself as a bully, even though some hinted at their possible roles in bullying others (S9 and S11). Nevertheless, potential bullies can be detected through analysing participants' perceptions of victims and their ability to empathise with them. Notably, five participants (S9, R21, R27, R29, and R31) who reported no bullying experience showed very little empathy to victimised characters and described them as deserving, provocative, show-offs, and three of them (R21, R27, R29) even added smiles on victims' faces in their comics (see Figure 2 as an example).

I created a guy here who thinks that he is the boss, and he wants to be in charge of everything without a reason for it. Then he starts thinking, "why do they hate me?" They hate him because he is full of himself and has no leadership skills. (R27)

- Researcher: what do these characters feel?
- R21: He thinks that they envy his success because they think he is a show-off.
- Researcher (noticing the character's smile): Does he like this situation or not?
- R21: He is wearing glasses, so he likes it.
- Researcher: What about the others?

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- R21: The others dislike this situation because they are struggling (with this academic task) while he is saying it is too easy for him.

**Figure 2**

*An episode from comics created by S21*



*Note.* Translation of Figure 2: They are jealous!

In contrast to such depictions of “bad” victims, we noticed that no one who created comics based on their own struggles placed the blame on the victimised character and/or demonstrated indifference to their feelings. In fact, there was often a clear emphasis on their characters’ emotional pain. Ten (S5, S6, S7, S8, S16, S20, R21, R24, R32, and R34) participants with reported personal experience of peer aggression depicted victims with tears and very sad facial expressions (see Figures 3-4 for examples). Many of these

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participants talked about their character's pain first before opening up about their own experiences.

- Researcher: How does this character feel?
- R32: Bad. He is trying to act as if it is OK, trying not to let it affect him, but things happen, and it gets to him... (...)
- Researcher: Has this ever happened to you?
- R32: Yes. For no reason at all and it wasn't even in messages but in real life. I would just walk past them trying to act as if it is OK, but they would yell things at me.

**Figure 3**

*An episode from comics created by R32*

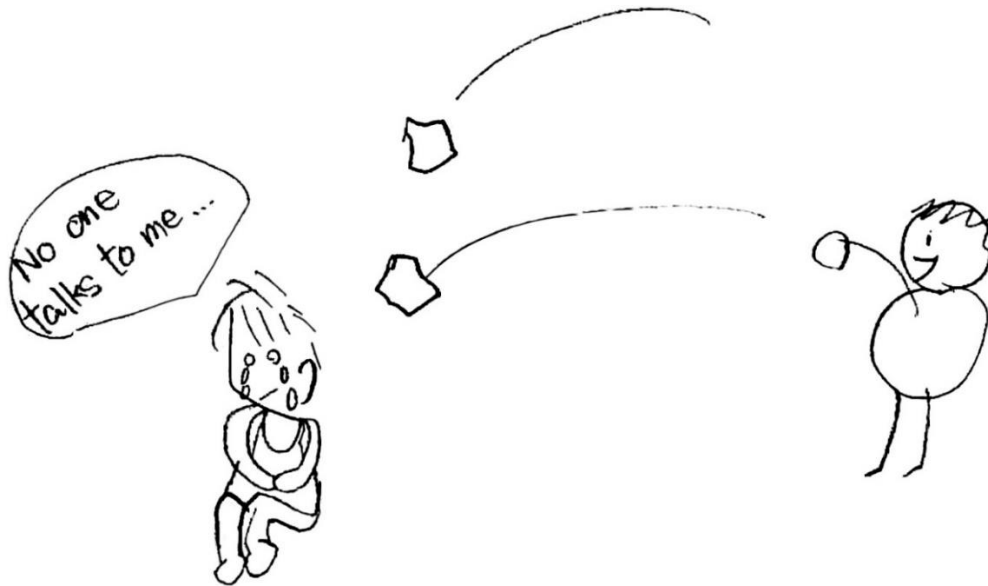


*Note.* Translation of Figure 3: This is not my fault that I am this way. I also want to be normal, but I have so many complexes. I hate myself so much.

**Figure 4**

*An episode from comics created by S5*

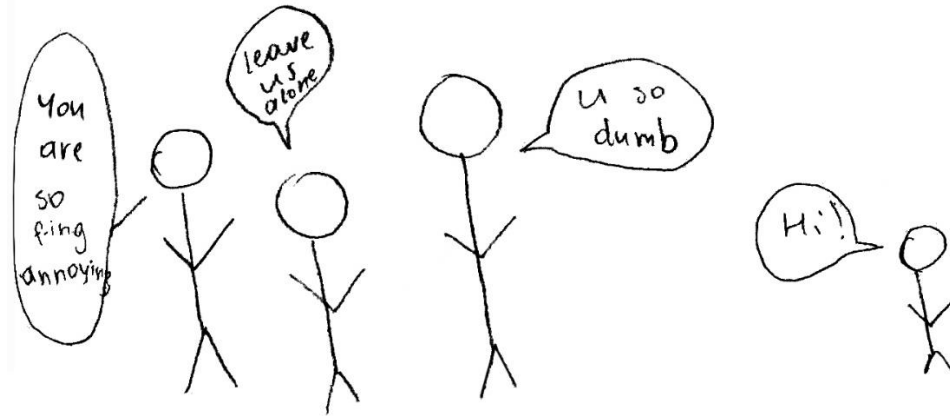
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A few participants without reported personal experience also emphasised characters' emotions using visual details in their comics (S1, S3, S11, and S14). In conjunction to that, all of them expressed a lot of empathy for victims in their interviews. However, those who had no personal story to refer to and showed little empathy in an interview depicted victimised characters very simplistically and often with completely blank faces (see Figure 5 as an example).

**Figure 5**

*An episode from comics created by S9*

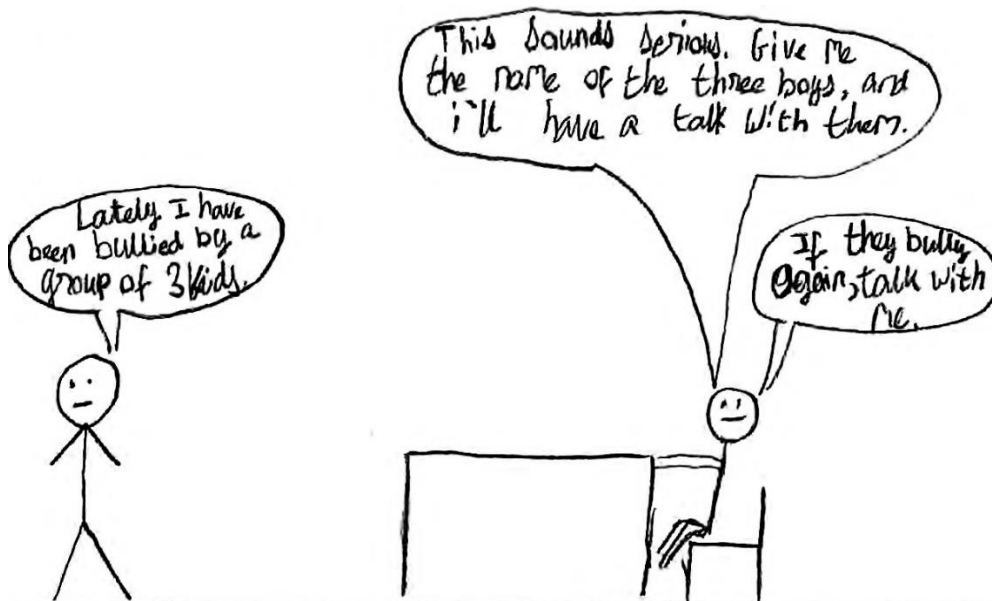


*Note.* When commenting on this story S9 said: “This isn’t that serious... I mean this situation that I created. I think he is sad. Yeah, it is not great to hear these things but he kind of brought this on himself, deserved it a little bit”.

Another re-occurring feature in the comics inspired by personal experiences of bullying and cyberbullying was creating supportive characters (a kind friend, a concerned teacher or parents) — five students (S2, S4, S8, S12, S16) provided their victimised characters with outside support (see Figure 6 as an example). In their interviews, they also stressed that the best way to handle peer aggression is to seek help from others. Notably, none of the Russian participants created supportive characters and, in their interviews, they underlined the importance of dealing with peer aggression on one’s own.

**Figure 6**

*An episode from comics created by S16*



Importantly, all 35 participants were asked to comment on the research methodology. Most simply stated that completing the task was an easy and enjoyable process for them. Some participants, however, highlighted the aspects of working with graphic vignettes that they found somewhat challenging. For example, six participants deemed it difficult to come up with ideas for their stories (S7, S16, R22, R23, R27, and R35), and connected this difficulty to limited or absent personal experience.

Maybe it (the task) has a medium level of difficulty (for me). I have never been in these situations so I could not draw on my own experience... Coming up with ideas was hard because I simply don't know how these things happen... (R23)

- S16: Some of them (vignettes) were more difficult than others.



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- Researcher: Which ones?
- S16: When somebody is using his account (vignette 2), and also, I think that's... yeah, the hateful messages (vignette 3), because I didn't really know how somebody would get to his account unless he actually told them (the password). (...) Those were the two difficult ones. The project one (vignette 5) — I knew how to deal with it because that happened to me and 'why do they hate me so much' (vignette 1) is also the one that has already happened to me before, so...

Two participants felt the opposite and highlighted how easy it was for them to come up with ideas as they drew on personal experience but having to verbalise their ideas and explain their comics when being interviewed was the difficult part for them (S5 and S12). Additionally, one participant (S9), who hinted at being aggressive towards others, reported her initial resistance to recall past events. She also noted that in her opinion students often underreport their involvement in bullying when participating in research, but in this study, she felt compelled to open up more than usual as her experiences could help researchers gain valuable insight.

Apart from these difficulties, it was also noted that the method of graphic vignettes helped participants reflect on the topic of bullying:

- Researcher: Was it difficult to work with these comics?

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- S16: Well, it definitely made me think about what can happen in school and what has already happened to other people. Sometimes I need to think about my situations.

**Discussion**

The new methodological tool, graphic vignettes, allowed us to assess the extent and explore the nature of bullying and cyberbullying in two international schools in Switzerland and Russia. Looking at bullying from different perspectives through participants' visual stories and interviews provided an insight into how bullying situations emerge, how they influence schoolchildren's mental health, what coping strategies are commonly used, and how bullying is regarded as a phenomenon. In addition, graphic vignettes also showed how bystanders and potential bullies perceive victims, either empathising with them or ignoring their emotional distress and/or justifying aggression against them. In addition, graphic vignettes demonstrated how schoolchildren viewed the adults around them (teachers, school authorities, and parents).

From earlier research we know that a better understanding of victims' help-seeking patterns is important for reducing bullying (Dowling & Carey, 2013), and victims' willingness to ask for help largely depends on whether they perceive their environment as understanding and supportive (Eliot et al., 2010). Graphic vignettes proved to be a valuable tool to study school environments as they enabled us to see how victims are viewed and

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discussed by those who never experienced peer aggression first-hand. Indeed, different components of our participants' stories (facial expressions, thought bubbles and interview comments) amplified one another conveying strongly to us the prevalence rate of empathetic attitudes. Importantly, looking at all components of created stories together facilitated rigorous data triangulation (Kearney & Hyle, 2004) and analysis through a multimodal approach (Flowers, 2017; Kress, 2009; Kuttner et al., 2021). Moreover, no one in this study labelled oneself as a bully but some participants showed little empathy and clearly attempted to justify aggression against victims. With empathy being an important predictor of both bullying and cyberbullying perpetration (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Gini et al., 2007), we see it as an important avenue for further research and a key characteristic to encourage in anti-bullying interventions.

Considering previous research indicating that arts-based activities facilitate the development of empathy (Adamson et al., 2018; Coholic & Eys, 2016; Lutter et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016) and contemplating our own findings, we come to hypothesise that graphic vignettes can be developed into an effective whole-class anti-bullying intervention tool for fostering empathy in children. One of the ways to achieve this is to invite those demonstrating a lack of emotional awareness to analyse and reflect on the artworks created by victims of bullying. Moreover, those who disclosed having been bullied demonstrated an instinctive urge to draw on one's own

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experiences when being asked to create a visual story about bullying. Their self-reported ease of engagement with graphic vignettes suggests the method's therapeutic value that can also be maximised as part of an arts-based intervention.

In addition, since many quantitative studies rely on students' honest self-report of experiencing, perpetrating, and witnessing bullying our study has important implications – the real rates of peer aggression are likely to be underestimated because perpetrators and non-empathetic witnesses often do not see bullying occurrences as “real” bullying. Moreover, as we saw in this study, victims themselves can be underreporting bullying if they get desensitised to it through continuous exposure and start viewing only extreme cases of peer aggression as bullying. In view of this, offering creative tasks to participants and studying their artistic choices truly offers a unique perspective (Forde, 2021) helping researchers to some extent overcome the limitations imposed by participants' social desirability bias and other types of biases.

In line with our hypothesis and earlier research (de Freitas, 2003), we found that providing more space for creativity in a new set of graphic vignettes helped participants better relate to the characters as interpretative gaps were filled with personal experience. It is important to stress that the new graphic vignettes were used for sharing personal stories by everyone who admitted to having been bullied, which was not the case in our previous

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study with less flexible vignettes (Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020).

However, inevitable ambiguity of the adjusted vignettes also encouraged participants to share some accounts that were beyond the topic of the study.

In comparison to the original (less flexible and offering less leeway for interpretation) vignettes, the new set was less effective at helping participants stay on topic. This study was initially designed to focus mostly on cyberbullying, but the majority of participants chose to focus on traditional bullying instead, which indicates that traditional bullying was a more relevant topic to them. This observation also highlights the major concern voiced by the scientific community regarding the content validity of cyberbullying as a concept. While a consensual definition of cyberbullying has not yet been reached, our findings support the claim that it might be meaningful to “measure the phenomenon of cyberbullying in a ‘bullying context’” (Olweus & Limber, 2018, p. 142) and view it as a subcategory of traditional bullying.

Since participant-led engagement is an important element of arts-based methods (Bravington & King, 2018; Dickson, 2021; Dutton et al., 2019; Gausman et al., 2019; Goopy & Kassan, 2019; Haberl, 2021; Roger & Blomgren, 2019), we were committed to following the lead of our participants and accepted the shifted focus of the study. This is an important point to keep in mind when designing one’s own graphic vignettes and employing them in research. We would also recommend using more flexible

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vignettes for studying frequent and multifaceted phenomena to capture and explore their novel dimensions, while using less flexible vignettes appears to be more suitable for studying more narrowly defined phenomena as they help participants stay on topic. Using a combination of both types of vignettes, however, can be particularly illuminating allowing a fuller picture of the studied phenomenon to emerge.

Moreover, the shift towards traditional bullying also supports Leavy's (2018) argument that fiction always reflects its authors' experience and feelings. Our participants clearly gravitated towards working with those vignettes that resonated with them personally. Being able to choose graphic vignettes from the set and seeing them as highly mouldable enabled many participants to share at least one personal story (albeit not all of them were related to our topic). This way, they indicated the most common types of peer aggression in their context. Some participants did not hesitate to reveal that they used their own experiences to create comics while others took some time and chose to talk about their characters' pain first before opening up about their own experiences and confirming that they indeed used them as an inspiration for comics. Also, many chose to focus on depicting emotional states in their comics even though it was not requested by the researchers. These findings indicate that creative activities help people connect to and articulate their feelings and emotions (Jack, 2012; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Nguyen, 2018; Romero, 2020).

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Two comics even suggested that for their creators it was easier to admit their pain in a creative work rather than in an interview, as they emphasised the pain of their characters in comics but tried to minimise the gravity of their own experiences in interviews. The vignettes, thus, might have served as an outlet for expressing “the not-yet-thought-through” and “the subconscious” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Engaging in a creative task together with an interview seemed to have helped these two participants convey unhindered contradictory feelings, while a traditional methodology would not have revealed such ambiguity (Haberl, 2021; Nguyen, 2018). Knowing that people against whom violence was committed often feel silenced and are accustomed to censoring themselves to avoid judgement, we argue that our findings warrant further use of arts-based methods in sensitive research involving different vulnerable groups whose voices are yet to come to the surface (Coemans et al., 2015; Dickson, 2021).

In conclusion, graphic vignettes proved to be a valuable and versatile research tool that enabled us to study not only what kind of bullying and cyberbullying students deal with but also how students perceive those in bullying situations. The new method also turned out to be an effective tool for cross-cultural research which highlighted cultural differences in the participants’ perception and understanding of bullying and cyberbullying. Indeed, artmaking is a universal language, and its application can assist with limiting the reliance on words alone in participant-researcher interactions

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which are known to have different connotations in different languages.

Testing how the new methodology works together with more traditional methods is an interesting avenue for further studies of bullying and cyberbullying.

**Appendix:**

Appendix 1 – Full set of graphic vignettes given to participants:

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19812826.v1>

Appendix 2 - Table created for data interpretation:

<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.19812601>

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Appendix. Vignettes.







Someone keeps spreading all these rumors about me online!  
What's going on?



Why aren't anyone replying? We are doing a group project after all but my ideas are ignored!





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### **This instruction is read out for student participants**

Look carefully at each situation and select 3 or 4 you want to work with. For each selected situation please consider (1) what most likely preceded it and (2) what would be the best way to deal with it. Having that in mind please complete each situation adding written and/or drawn components. Creativity is welcomed!

When working, remember that this is not a test; there are no right or wrong answers. You do not need to impress anyone here and you don't have to be an artist to complete this task. Just draw and write whatever comes to your head. It would be great you could draw inspiration from your personal experience but if you do not have relevant experience then you can make up a fictional story.

You have 20 minutes for the whole task. After that, we will have individual interviews with you.

### **Interview**

#### **Questions for each completed vignette:**

1. Tell me about your situation – what is happening here?
2. How serious do you think this situation is?
3. Why do you think this situation happened?
4. How do you think the characters feel in this situation?
5. What advice would you give to the characters in this situation?

Situations 1-5 has happened to:

- Me
- My friend(s)
- People I know
- Never happened

If the situation happened to the participant or their friends, ask them if they are comfortable with sharing more.