

# Cyberbullying in a boundary blurred working life

## Distortion of the private and professional face on social media

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore what characterizes cyberbullying when it is performed in digital space and in an increasingly boundary blurred working life context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Cyberbullying is explored through the lens of Erving Goffman's theories on everyday life interaction and social media scholars understanding of social life on the internet today. The empirical material for the study is grounded in eight in-depth interviews with individuals who have been subjected to cyberbullying behavior in their professional life. The interview data were analyzed by means of thematic analysis.

**Findings** – Three key themes were identified: spatial interconnectedness, colliding identities and the role of the audience. The empirical data indicate that in order to understand cyberbullying in working life, it is necessary to consider the specific context that emerges with social network sites and blogs. Moreover, this study shows how social network sites tend to blur boundaries between the private and the professional for the targeted individual.

**Originality/value** – Cyberbullying in working life is a relatively under-researched area. Most existing research on cyberbullying follows the tradition of face-to-face bullying by addressing the phenomenon with quantitative methods. Given the limited potential of this approach to uncover new and unique features, this study makes an important contribution by exploring cyberbullying with a qualitative approach that provides in-depth understanding of the new situations that emerge when bullying is performed online.

**Keywords** Audience, Cyberbullying, Social network sites, Impression management, Working life, Front and backstage

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Today, boundaries between work and private life are becoming increasingly blurred (Allvin *et al.*, 2006; Kossek and Distelberg, 2008; Kossek *et al.*, 2006; Sennett, 2011). Mobile devices such as laptops and smartphones make it possible to share and receive work-related information regardless of location and time. “Boundaryless jobs” (Allvin, 2008) are often associated with task-oriented “knowledge workers” with flexible working hours. However, with the increasing use of social media platforms such as Facebook and blogs, difficulties in maintaining boundaries between work and non-work may become problematic to individuals regardless of profession. When individuals' online social networks constitute a mix of friends, family, work colleagues, managers, customers and clients, previously separate social spheres become increasingly mixed and overlapping (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

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While more of the private social interaction is conducted online, work relations are also maintained and performed on social media platforms. This paper focuses on the dysfunctional sides of such interactions by exploring the experiences of individuals who have been subjected to cyberbullying behavior in working life. This is done by the use of Erving Goffman's (1959) theories on everyday life interaction and social media scholars' understandings of social life on the internet today. Cyberbullying in working life can be defined as "all negative behavior stemming from the work context and occurring through the use of ICTs, which is either (a) carried out repeatedly and over a period of time or (b) conducted at least once but forms an intrusion into someone's private life, (potentially) exposing it to a wide online audience. This behavior leaves the target feeling helpless and unable to defend" (Vranjes *et al.*, 2017). Currently, cyberbullying among adults and in working life is a relatively under-researched area (Bartlett and Bartlett, 2011; Brack and Caltabiano, 2014; Göransson *et al.*, 2011; Privitera and Campbell, 2009). Nonetheless, an increasing number of studies on cyberbullying in working life emphasize its existence (Forssell, 2016; Kowalski *et al.*, 2018; Privitera and Campbell, 2009). In a study on male manufacture workers in Australia, Privitera and Campbell (2009) found that 11 percent had experienced cyberbullying. A large survey from Sweden shows a similar prevalence rate, reporting that 9.7 percent of the working population had experienced weekly exposure to cyberbullying behavior in the last six months (Forssell, 2016). Moreover, Kowalski *et al.* (2018) found in their study on workers in the USA that 24 percent of the respondents had their first incident of cyberbullying in their adulthood. Among this group, the cyberbullying incidents were primarily reported to take place on social network sites, followed by instant messaging and e-mail. Moreover, there is a growing number of studies on cyberbullying in working life that show negative implications related to the targeted individual's health (Coyne *et al.*, 2017; Muhonen *et al.*, 2017). This includes stress (Snyman and Loh, 2015) and mental strain (Farley *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, research has shown that cyberbullying is related to decreased job satisfaction (Coyne *et al.*, 2017).

While the fundamental purpose of communication technology is to exchange messages across geographical locations, digital spaces change users' perceptions of time and space (Baym, 2015). As digital spaces are not physically bounded in the same way as material spaces of bodily presence, users can be present in several online spaces simultaneously (Turkle, 2011). The absence of the bodily presence of users in digital spaces also implies a detachment from bodily expressions. Facial gestures, eye contact and body language are largely replaced in the digital communication by pressing buttons on a keyboard and watching the text develop on the screen. The lack of non-verbal social cues in digital interaction has been suggested to decrease feelings of empathy for the targeted individual (Slonje and Smith, 2008; Dooley *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, the faceless communication may reinforce the users' perception of being anonymous or invisible when interacting in certain online forums. These characteristics have been proposed to have a disinhibiting effect in cyberbullying, leading offenders to behave in a way they would not do face-to-face (Suler, 2004; Kowalski *et al.*, 2012).

Another feature of cyberbullying is the vastness of potential audience, also referred to as reach or publicity within the cyberbullying literature (Slonje and Smith, 2008). Digital contents in cyberbullying messages are accessible for perpetrators and bystanders to copy, paste and forward (Kowalski *et al.*, 2012). Thus, cyberbullying is a public bullying that potentially can have a viral reach (Langos, 2012). Moreover, the accessibility in digital communication and the ability to exchange messages regardless of time and space makes cyberbullying an intrusive form of bullying. In their qualitative study on targets of cyberbullying in working life, Heatherington and Coyne (2017) described this intrusiveness as an accentuation of how boundaries between work and home are transgressed when targets receive the cyberbullying acts at home. According to the authors, the targets' experiences of having their perceived boundaries between home and private life violated contribute to their negative experiences of cyberbullying (Heatherington and Coyne, 2017). D'Cruz and Noronha (2013) also underscored

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the boundaryless character of cyberbullying in working life. Based on their study of cyberbullying among IT workers in India, the authors highlight how cyberbullying behavior goes beyond the physical workplace into the targets' home and includes relationships from the targets' private sphere such as family members and significant others.

Digital communication challenges traditional notions of bullying in working life. Unlike face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying does not only occur during the working day. Moreover, cyberbullying occurs in other places than the workplace. Thus, cyberbullying challenges previous notions of when bullying is work related. Moreover, the accessibility to digital communication invites actors that are not necessarily members of the target's work organization. Customers, clients, students and pupils can target an employee more easily than before. Thus, cyberbullying challenges previous understandings of who are offenders in bullying. Finally, digital communication is a faceless communication and when performed on Facebook or blogs, the communication takes place in front of a potentially large audience. Thus, interaction on social media platforms matters for how cyberbullying occurs.

#### *Cyberbullying from a social interactionist perspective*

Erving Goffman's (1959) theories on everyday life interaction offer a way to explore mechanisms behind cyberbullying. Although Goffman's theorization draws from observations of face-to-face interaction, his dramaturgical approach is often considered useful in understanding online presentation of the self (Hogan, 2010). Along with Goffman's low attention to cultural factors in the interaction, some of his drama metaphors have been criticized for being lightweight and inconsequential (Smith, 2002). However, some concepts from Goffman's analysis, such as his understanding of performance, have endured and have proven useful for analyses of the mediatized society (Johansson, 1999).

Goffman analyses social interaction by using theatrical metaphors such as actor, stage, mask, performance and audience. Goffman's understanding of the individual is as a social interactive agent that presents an idealized version of herself/himself to others who constitute her/his audience. Thus, Goffman suggests that individuals can be seen as actors performing different sides of themselves. According to Goffman, fundamental to individuals' performances are their attempts to manage the impressions of themselves among the different audiences. Thus, with his concept of "impression management," Goffman emphasizes how people use different communication strategies in order to manage others' impressions of themselves (Johansson, 2009).

In order to prevent contradictory images of oneself from being performed in front of the same audience, Goffman (1959) argued that it is in individuals' interest to keep different types of audiences separated. However, when interaction is taking place online, such as on Facebook and blogs, "audience segregation" (Goffman, 1959) may become difficult to maintain. Marwick and boyd (2011) used the term "context collapse" to describe how social network sites flatten multiple audiences into one platform. Unlike in face-to-face interactions where individuals can present themselves differently depending on who they are interacting with, users of social network sites address a diverse group of audiences that are not normally brought together. Thus, when posting messages on social network sites, it becomes impossible for the user to differentiate self-presentation strategies according to the audience (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Considering the infinite character of digital spaces and the ability to share messages to different sites and platforms, grasping the width of the audience of one's posted messages is often difficult. Litt (2012) suggested that users of social media project an "imagined audience," i.e. a mental conceptualization of the audience before crafting a message. Many factors are involved in such process. Baym and boyd (2012) argued that the user's imagined audience can involve anyone from a supervisor at work to other individuals who have commented on the user's posts in the past.

While impression management often involves considerable self-control exercised by the individual, stage performance is also a joint effort where the audience can act as a team around the individual. The audience can maintain, enhance or even destroy a person's performance. According to Goffman (1967), an individual's self-image and reputation should be considered as a "loan" from society. Goffman (1967) used the concept of "face" to describe the positive social value that a person achieves in the eyes of the other by adhering to approved social attributes. Face can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and thus a person must constantly pay attention to it in interaction with others (Brown and Levinson, 1987). When presenting an image that is perceived as internally consistent and supported by others, an individual is maintaining face. When the self-image is not supported, individuals experience loss of face (Goffman, 1967).

Face-threatening acts can hurt or damage one's reputation. These situations can occur unintentionally, or they can be of a kind that Goffman refers to as "aggressive use of face-work." That is, "face-threatening acts that are done maliciously with the intention of causing open insult or destroying someone's face" (p. 39). Elaborating on Goffman's face-threatening act, Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguished on the one hand between face-threatening acts that are clear and unambiguous and on the other hand those whose intentions are difficult to decipher.

In bullying, disguised forms where the intent is covered are common and can be understood as a way for the offender to avoid retaliation or negative consequences (Baron *et al.*, 1999). Indirect acts where the bullying behavior occurs through a third person are more common than acts that directly target an individual (Björkqvist, 1994). Similarly, passive acts that involve giving someone "silent treatment" are more common than active acts as in direct insults (Neuman and Baron, 1997). However, according to Neuman (2012), this pattern is likely to change when the contact between offender and target is limited, as in situations where the offender is a customer, client or patient.

In Goffman's analysis of social interaction, he particularly identifies two performative "regions." The frontstage is the region where the performance is carried out and this is where individuals engage in self-presentation strategies directed at their audience. The backstage region exists in relation to the frontstage, although safely separated from it. The backstage region is a place where actors can let go of the presented image of the self and digest the impressions collected in the frontstage. According to Goffman, neither frontstage nor backstage is associated with a particular place but should rather be understood in relation to audiences. Tseëlon (1991) argued that the division between frontstage and backstage can be traced to the individual's perception of being exposed. Audiences that evoke self-conscious behavior in an individual denote the frontstage. Similarly, an audience that creates an unselfconscious behavior in the individual denotes the backstage. In the same dynamic and relational way, the conceptions of the private and the public can be understood in relation to the audience and the behavior they induce in the individual (Tseëlon, 1991).

Goffman's performative regions are sometimes used in research on bullying and cyberbullying. According to Svensson (2010), all bullying is conducted on a frontstage. Backstage environments are places where targets can withdraw from the bullying and build alliances. The size of the working organization, the access to physical places to retreat and how the work is organized influence the targets' abilities to recover from the negative acts and receive support from others. In their study of cyberbullying among girls between 12 and 15 years of age, Kernaghan and Elwood (2013) explored how the use of technology creates new and complex ways of participating and experiencing bullying. According to Kernaghan and Elwood (2013), cyberbullying acts are openly received by the target on their frontstage, but often conducted by the offenders in their private backstage environment. Kernaghan and Elwood (2013) argued that this setting allows us to think of cyberbullying as a performance.

In the backstage environment, the offenders can deliberately construct their performance without the presence of the audience. Time and spatial separation from the audience enable offenders to plan their action and manage the impressions given off in the performance. Thus, cyberbullying can be argued to create a safer environment for offenders. By hiding their identity and/or creating messages open for interpretation, the bullies can try to avoid confrontation (Kernaghan and Elwood, 2013).

Previous studies have often described social network sites and blogs as stages for contemplated self-presentation (Murthy, 2012), that is, as a type of frontstage regions. With status updates through texts, photos or videos, users construct public images of themselves under controlled circumstances. Receiving positive comments or “likes” connected to the presented images often evokes feelings of self-affirmation among users (Murthy, 2012). However, in some types of situations, social network sites can also be regarded as a backstage region. In their study of privacy settings on social network sites, Lewis *et al.* (2008) reflected upon the activity of employers logging into Facebook in order to get a glimpse of a job applicant’s backstage region. As the information presented on Facebook can diverge from the image that the job applicant wants to present in a job interview, insight into users’ backstage environment on Facebook may have negative consequences for the individual (Lewis *et al.*, 2008).

As social media platforms merge private and professional relations, it can be argued that people may get more insight into colleagues’ backstage regions. However, it can also be argued that images on social network sites such as Facebook are only highly polished representations of what the users would like to portray as their backstage. Both on- and off-line, people engage in strategic activities in order to form their impressions in others. When it comes to self-presentation strategies, Goffman (1959) distinguished between cues intentionally “given” away in a performance and cues unintentionally “given off.” Online, cues intentionally given can be enhanced by the asynchronous communication that gives the users time to reflect upon the impression they want to give before responding. Cues unintentionally given off can be exemplified with poor spelling that the audience may interpret as signaling the sender’s social status or state of mind.

### *Aim of the study*

There is a need for research that explores the distinct characteristics of cyberbullying (Brack and Caltabiano, 2014; D’Cruz and Noronha, 2013; Slonje and Smith, 2008). Most studies on cyberbullying in working life follow the tradition of face-to-face bullying by addressing the phenomenon with quantitative methods. Given the limited potential of this approach to uncover new and unique features, there is a need to explore cyberbullying with a qualitative approach that provides in-depth understanding of the new situations that emerge when bullying is performed online. Considering that cyberbullying involves a move from the physical workplace to a boundary blurred digital space, I argue that space is a central aspect in the understanding. Faceless communication, perception of anonymity, large and cumulative audiences constitute a specific context for social interaction online. In order to address the spatial circumstances that contextualize situations of cyberbullying, this paper explores the phenomenon of cyberbullying through the lens of Erving Goffman’s (1959) theories on everyday life interaction, in combination with social media scholars’ understandings of social life on the internet today. The aim of the study is to explore what characterizes cyberbullying when it is performed in digital space and in an increasingly boundary blurred working life context. The study is led by the following research question:

*RQ1.* How does the complex social interactions between target, offender and audience impact the cyberbullying situation?

Social relations and spatial distances are central in understanding communication and interaction in cyberbullying situations and will be further elaborated in the Results section.

**Method**

*Informants and procedure*

The empirical part of this study is based on interviews with eight informants (four men and four women). Most of them were recruited via a questionnaire study among randomly selected individuals between the ages of 25 and 65, living in Southern Sweden. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. After further information was given to the respondents about the research project, five of the informants were recruited by this procedure. Three informants approached the researcher after having read about the research project in the media or in other ways received information about the project. In Table I, the background characteristics of the informants can be found.

While cyberbullying is well understood within school children, there is still a shortage of research on middle age workers. Considering the explorative approach of the study, the only selection criterion was that the informants were adults and had experienced cyberbullying in their working life. Similarly, the study had no selection criteria for the type of work organization. However, all informants that volunteered to participate in the study were working within Human Service Organizations (HSOs). HSOs is an umbrella term for organizations designed to handle education, child care, health care, social service, etc. (Hasenfeld, 2009), and involves establishments such as schools, nurseries, public and authority offices. In the initial communication with the informants, the term “internet bullying” was used instead of cyberbullying. Internet bullying is the term commonly used in media reporting on the phenomenon in Sweden and is a term better known outside academia than cyberbullying. The narratives expressed in the interviews involved cyberbullying behavior mainly on Facebook and on blogs.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from one hour to one and a half hours. The interviews were based on open questions that let the informants describe the situations around cyberbullying, what perceived consequences the cyberbullying have had for them, what coping strategies the informants found available and what support the informant received from their employer. Most interviews were conducted at the university where the researcher is affiliated. However, due to geographical distance some were conducted over telephone. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The majority of the interviews were conducted in 2015.

*Data analysis*

The interview data were analyzed by means of thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes occurring in the empirical material (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The rationale for using thematic analysis in the current study was to interpret several aspects of the research topic. The common ground for thematic analyses is their epistemological and theoretical flexibility (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, the analysis can involve both a reflection of the reality and an unravelment of the surface.

**Table I.**  
Background characteristics of the informants (fictitious names)

	Gender	Hierarchical position	Profession	Age group	Type of offender/s
1. Lena	Woman	Non-manager	Public administrator	45–50	Colleagues, manager
2. Paul	Man	Manager	Law enforcement officer	45–50	Colleagues, subordinates
3. Eric	Man	Non-manager	Administrator	40–45	Colleagues, friends
4. Eva	Woman	Manager	School leader	55–60	Parents
5. Marie	Woman	Non-manager	Teacher	50–55	Students
6. Kerstin	Woman	Manager	School leader	45–50	Colleagues
7. Hans	Man	Non-manager	Local politician	50–55	Citizens
8. Thomas	Man	Non-manager	Security administrator	45–50	Client

The themes were identified after the interviews were conducted. Since the identified themes are constructed on the informants' narratives rather than the researcher's preconceptions of the studied phenomenon, the themes are only loosely related to the questions that were asked during the interviews. The analytical process involved moving back and forth between the entire data set, the initial generation of codes and the broader themes that were gradually identified. A theme is operationalized in this study as something that both captures important elements in relation to the research question and represents a patterned response within the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

*Ethical considerations.* Bullying, in any form, is a sensitive subject. Therefore, the informants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their identities and the data they provided would be treated confidentially. In this paper, the real names of the informants have been replaced with fictitious names. Also, other types of revealing information, such as the identity of the informants' workplaces, have been excluded. The study design has been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board, Lund, Southern Sweden (2012/619).

## Results

### *Descriptions of the cyberbullying situations*

In this study, the informants had different relations to their offenders. The relations varied between those that had contact with their bullies on a daily basis at work and those that had never met their bullies face-to-face. In the following, the cyberbullying situations that informants have experienced are presented briefly.

Lena is working as a public administrator. The cyberbullying behavior experienced by Lena is closely interwoven with the face-to-face bullying she experienced previously from one of her managers. Lena described herself as being excluded from the social interaction taking place among her colleagues on Facebook after returning to work following a period of sick leave.

Paul is working as a first-line manager within a larger public organization. In the interview, Paul expressed a constant awareness of having his actions as a manager being a subject of discussions by colleagues in his work organization's Facebook group. The Facebook group included members of the organization from all over the country and had become a forum for internal complaints about different aspects of the work environment.

Eric, who is working as an administrator, finds himself being attacked on Facebook by people in his private and professional network after posting a controversial status update. The status update receives massive traffic during four days and infects Eric's relation to one of his colleagues. The conflict on Facebook results in a situation where he finds himself the subject of face-to-face bullying conducted by one of his colleagues.

Eva is working as a school leader and experiences cyberbullying behavior from parents whose children are attending the school she is working at. Parents at the school had created a Facebook group where some school leaders had been openly criticized and mocked.

Marie is working as a teacher. Her experiences of cyberbullying behavior occur when one of her students publishes a video where Marie is mocked and ridiculed. The student posted the video on her own blog and the video was spread among students and staff members at the school.

Kerstin became a target of cyberbullying behavior on a local political blog after accepting a job as a school leader in a small town. On the blog, discrediting information was put forward about Kerstin and the reason why she got her position as a school leader was questioned.

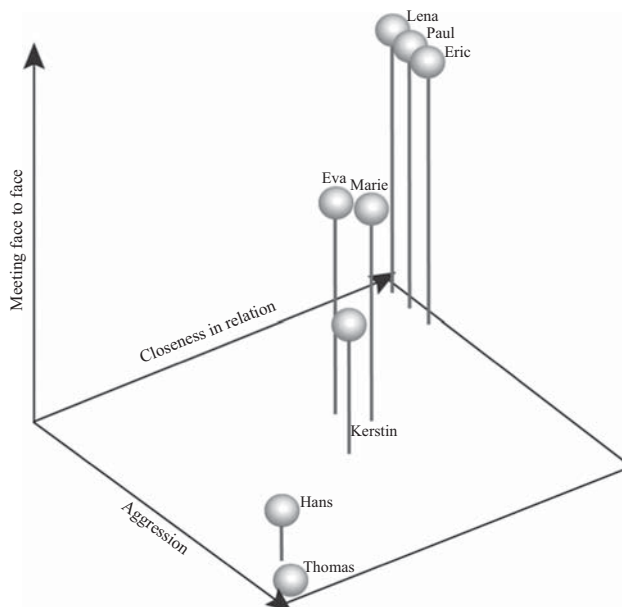
Hans is a local politician and has a semi-public role in the town where he is working. Hans has witnessed repeatedly and over time how the image he portrayed of himself on Facebook was twisted, repeatedly criticized and commented upon in negative terms.

The negative comments were always posted by the same group of individuals and varied from aggressive threats to remarks questioning Hans's trustworthiness.

Finally, Thomas is working with security issues at a public authority. When investigating a case where other member of his organization had become targets of cyberbullying behavior, he ended up becoming a target himself. The cyberbullying behavior directed at him involved the spread of false and offensive information about him and his family on a blog.

In Figure 1, the narratives have been placed out with regard to the closeness in relation between target and offender, face-to-face meetings and the type of aggressions involved in the cyberbullying situations. The figure indicates that closeness in relation and meeting face to face influence the type of behavior involved. When there are few or no face-to-face meetings and the relationship between target and offender is distant, the cyberbullying behavior tends to include more direct aggressions. On the contrary, in those narratives where there is a close relationship between the target and offender and when occasional meetings occur face to face, the cyberbullying tends to include more passive and/or indirect aggressions.

When the target works in the same organization as the offender/s as is the case with Lena, Paul and Eric, face-to-face meetings occur on a regular basis. In these narratives, the cyberbullying behavior is primarily expressed with indirect and passive aggression. In situations where there is a greater relational distance between target and offender, as expressed by Hans and Thomas, the aggression is particularly direct and actively expressed. These situations are more reminiscent of "online hate," a collective term commonly used by the Swedish media for threats and harassment online. While online hate often is associated with highly exposed people in the media, the informants in this study are not public figures, although one of them has a semi-public role in the town where he lives. The narratives of Eva, Marie and Kerstin are placed in the middle of the continuum of aggression. Here, the target and offender are not working in the same organization but have professional contact in different ways.



**Figure 1.**  
The figure illustrates how closeness in relations and face-to-face meetings influence the type of behavior involved in the cyberbullying situations

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*The key themes in the cyberbullying situations*

Three key themes were identified in the narratives. These themes highlight different aspects of the informants' experiences of being targeted by cyberbullying in working life. The themes are: spatial interconnectedness, colliding identities and the role of the audience.

*Spatial interconnectedness.* With the new and emerging phenomenon of cyberbullying, issues around the relationship of cyberbullying to traditional bullying have been accentuated. The issues concern whether cyberbullying should be understood as a distinct phenomenon or merely as an extension of face-to-face bullying (cf. Privitera and Campbell, 2009; Slonje and Smith, 2008; Vranjes *et al.*, 2017). The empirical findings of this study indicate that new aspects emerge when bullying is performed on social media. However, the deep embeddedness of social network sites in everyday life practices of the physical world prevents a total separation of the two spheres. Even when restricted to Facebook or blogs, the cyberbullying described in many narratives in this study is not entirely separated from the informants' lives in the so-called physical world. This was illustrated by the face-to-face encounters that often occurred between the targeted individual and the offender. Although explicit bullying did not occur in the face-to-face meetings, some informants perceived these encounters as highly emotional. This was expressed by Eva when she spoke about situations where she occasionally meets the parents who engage in spreading derogatory and false information about her on Facebook or people that in other ways, such as "liking" a certain comment, signal an antagonistic position toward her:

I met one of these dads yesterday in connection with another meeting. I actually pretended not to see him and went aside. Because I felt that I didn't have the strength. What am I supposed to say? When he sits there "liking" that comment about me, that I am a certain kind of person. It's just too hard for me. (Eva)

The underlying cyberbullying as well as a sudden appearance in face-to-face meetings evoke feelings of uncertainty and discomfort, leaving Eva with a negative sentiment of not knowing how to cope with the situation. Inadequately handled, Eva feared that the denigration she experienced on Facebook would only escalate and therefore avoided face-to-face contact.

Spatial interconnectedness between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying expressed in physical meetings are not restricted to a particular time or place. While the previous extract involves a time delay between cyberbullying behavior on social network sites and meetings face to face, the next extract illuminates how cyberbullying and face-to-face meetings can coincide in time and space. This was expressed by Eric, who was in the middle of a flaming situation (i.e. a brief, heated online exchange between two or more people) on Facebook, receiving comments that questioned his intentions in various ways. While this was going on Eric attended a work-related event where he saw the colleague whom he found to have been most hostile toward him on Facebook. However, instead of approaching the colleague Eric decided to pick up his smartphone and respond to her message on Facebook:

So, I actually stood there and answered her message [on the smartphone] because I didn't want to talk to her. I didn't know how to address her. It's because it was so aggressive. Of all the posts, hers was the most aggressive. (Eric)

The extract illuminates how cyberbullying in working life simultaneously can occur in different spaces and among different relational contexts. While sharing the same physical space as the offender, Eric creates a backstage environment by using his smartphone. In this backstage region, Erik can respond to the offender in a way that he feels more comfortable with than he would face to face. As stated by scholars such as Baym (2015),

the digital communication provides the communicating partners with several advantages. The time delay in asynchronous communication gives the communicating partners' time to think, reflect and build up arguments before responding, which enables the users to hone their arguments. Moreover, asynchronous communication allows the users to finish their sentences without interruption (Broadbent, 2016). With these advantages, the digital communication can help the target to hide emotions and put up a professional front and create situations where he/she has better control over the social cues given away in the performance.

Asynchronous communication and the perception of control it allows may also encourage a behavior among the users that they would not perform face to face. While both Eva's and Eric's narratives are examples of how cyberbullying in working life cannot be separated from spatial practices in the offline world, they also show how interaction is played out differently among spaces. In Eric's case, the flaming conflict arising on Facebook later evolved into what he experienced as face-to-face bullying in the workplace. Feeling neglected and excluded from social interaction by his offender, Eric expresses a situation of ostracism when returning to the workplace. The kinds of treatment that Eric experienced from his offender in their interaction online and in the workplace differ greatly. While the flaming on Facebook was outspoken and direct, the aftermath in the physical workplace was non-confrontational and passive. Similarly, most face-to-face meetings Eva experiences with the offenders are free from bullying behavior, thus greatly differing from the treatment of denigration she experienced from the same persons online.

The different behavior acted out in the digital vs the physical spaces can be understood from the perspective of performance. In this performance, the target is not the primary addressee but the receiver of the negative behavior that emerges when the offender performs in front of a like-minded audience on Facebook. Proceeding from Goffman's conceptual framework of social interactions as a performance, Kernaghan and Elwood (2013) described cyberbullying as a public bullying that is received by the target on a frontstage but conducted among users situated in a backstage environment. Backstage environments are often associated with intimacy among the participants. Thus, it is likely that users in such environments feel inclined to adopt a certain vocabulary, language and behavior they would not use otherwise. This complexity of simultaneously performing in front of several audiences on social media relates to another theme, "the role of the audience," that will be discussed later in this paper.

### *Colliding identities*

Research often emphasizes cyberbullying as intrusive bullying since it has a capacity to target an individual 24/7 (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013; Heatherington and Coyne, 2017; Kowalski *et al.*, 2012). Issues concerning time as well as spatial boundaries are also expressed in this study. Hans, for instance, states that in order to avoid negative attention to his posts on Facebook, he avoids making status updates in the evening when many of his followers are online. Eva and Kerstin express how they only handle the cyberbullying messages on their private computers at home, as a way of separating the cyberbullying behavior from their professional duties at work. Consequently, the coping strategy applied by Eva and Kerstin involves a limitation of "places for retreat" from the bullying behavior (Svensson, 2010).

Digitalization contributes to the undergoing transformation where boundaries between work and private life are becoming increasingly blurred (Allvin, 2008; Broadbent, 2016). While time and spatial consequences were discussed by the informants, boundlessness was also expressed as the targets' difficulties in separating their private and professional

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identity when being exposed to cyberbullying behavior. Most of the informants expressed concern about having their face impaired or in other ways questioned on a digital platform. Face-threatening activities are not restricted to cyberbullying but are common in all types of bullying. However, when bullying is performed on social network sites or blogs, face can be lost in front of a potentially large and limitless audience.

When users mix audiences from different spheres of life in one social media platform, a threat to the private face caused by cyberbullying behavior may transform into a threat to the professional face and vice versa. Marwick and boyd (2011) used the term “context collapse” to stress the difficulties that emerge with users having to perform and maintain multiple social relations on a single social network site. Thus, social network sites such as Facebook contribute further to the overall perception of blurred boundaries between the private and professional. The anxiety evoked by not knowing how and by whom postings on Facebook are viewed was expressed by Eric when reflecting on the conflict he became a part of on Facebook:

I get very worried about that [the image created about him]. You can check, what did you think? And, oh, that's good. But all other 800 [Facebook friends] out there. Has there been an image created that Eric probably is a Sweden Democrat[1] and all that? Because that might have happened. People draw the most stupid conclusions from nothing. And I am like, I don't care, you stupid idiot! But at the same time, when you apply for that job or you do something then, it [the created image] can affect you in all sorts of ways. (Eric)

Eric's choice of including people from his professional sphere in his private Facebook account gave the conflict both a private and a professional character. Moreover, the massive attention Eric's post received in the form of comments, emojis and discussions among users made Eric's post particularly visible. The architecture of Facebook made the post receive a prioritized spot in many users' Facebook news feeds for days.

Difficulties in separating the private from the professional, as well as the private from the public, are also manifested when private content available on social media is used as a way to damage the target's professional image. This was illustrated by Thomas when speaking about how his family also became involved in a cyberbullying situation:

The other dimension was that he [the offender] immediately realized that my parents are on Facebook, and there he found some pictures [...] So I learned that it is not only about me on social media, it is also about my friends and family. (Thomas)

The threatening and harassing communication to which Thomas was exposed can be referred to as a form of cyberstalking, which refers to the activity of using electronic communication to stalk another person (Kowalski *et al.*, 2012). Although Thomas does not have a Facebook account of his own, Facebook's aim of connecting people with each other and displaying users' contacts made Thomas's friends and family visible and accessible to the offender. Today, information about individuals' private and professional identity is often available online. Search engines such as Google make the cyberbullying behavior available to people outside the targeted individuals' professional sphere. As cyberbullying in working life blurs boundaries between the private and the professional, the targeted individual becomes particularly vulnerable. Accordingly, the repeated activity by some informants of googling their name was commonly described by them as an attempt to gain control of the potential face-damaging information online. This was expressed by Kerstin, who found disparaging information about herself visible online:

You can find it today, yeah, and I have contacted Google about trying to get them to remove it. I have also been talking with a lawyer about the harassment, and they have talked to this woman [the offender] and they told her it is good if she removes it, but it is still there. But I have changed my name after this, so my new name is not there. (Kerstin)

Changing her name shows how profoundly affected Kerstin felt by the face-damaging information online. The activity of googling the name can be seen as a consequence of the

anxiety evoked by having their reputation damaged online. Beside googling the name, some informants also described strategies that involve interacting with the offenders online. What these informants had in common was that they responded to the offenders on the social media platform by using a professional and objective tone without showing any negative emotions.

While many informants perceived the cyberbullying behavior as directed toward them both as professionals and as private persons, most informants considered themselves to be restricted to a professional role when defending themselves against cyberbullying behavior. Engaging in behaviors that deviate from professional performance may only further damage the target's reputation. In line with Goffman (1959), for a person in a prominent position it often lies in that person's interest to segregate certain audiences from his/her informal appearances as it may otherwise harm the attributes ascribed to his/her professional role. Thus, being exposed to a large and mixed audience on a public platform may contribute to the targets' perceptions of having their hands tied and acting accordingly to frontstage norms of behavior. Now and then, however, feelings of anger and frustration may slip out, as witnessed by Eva who described how one of her work colleagues departed from her professional role and in an emotional rush directly responded to some of the parents on Facebook:

She crossed the line, so to speak, because she wrote that – “If you are not happy you can take your children off the day care because what you are writing is not OK. Take your children away from here!” Yes, of course, as a teacher you can't write that via Facebook to a group of parents. But I guess it came over her one night, she called me at half past ten in the evening. (Eva)

Eva never confronted the offenders on her own. To her the incident expressed in the extract above confirmed her decision not to intervene directly with the offenders. For many informants, neither face-to-face confrontations nor confrontations on social network sites such as blogs seemed like a suitable option.

The lack of non-verbal cues in digital interaction supports the coping strategy of performing a professional role. The downside, however, is that the offenders remain unaware of the negative effects the cyberbullying evokes. These are important aspects in cyberbullying, as the lack of non-verbal cues tends to decrease feelings of empathy and has been suggested to amplify the cyberbullying behavior (Slonje and Smith, 2008).

#### *The role of the audience*

The informants who had tried to talk to the offenders online often experienced these attempts as fruitless. This was expressed by the informants as feelings of “being ignored” or deliberately “misunderstood” by the offenders. The following extract illuminates the difficulties that some of the targets experienced when trying to engage in a constructive dialog with the offenders on social media. Here, Hans expresses a sense of powerlessness as his offenders repeatedly targeted him with disparaging or offensive comments:

Like I said, there is this group of people who are being constantly negative and non-receptive. You notice that they don't care about what I write. They have decided to continuously put forward the same message. (Hans)

The cyberbullying experienced by Hans continues over a long period of time and involves many different, albeit, fruitless attempts by Hans to mitigate the experience. Lack of interest in participating in dialog with the targeted individual raises questions about who is being addressed in these cyberbullying situations. Although described in various ways, the audience is often present when the informants talk about their experiences of cyberbullying behavior. The following extract illustrates the essential role the audience plays when bullying is performed on social media. Being a victim of face-to-face bullying at the

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workplace, Lena perceives that her work colleagues do not want to be associated with her on Facebook. This is expressed by Lena who describes her social exclusion from the social and collegial interaction online as a power play:

When I got back from sick leave I realized what it could be like on Facebook and how vulnerable you can become. Because when a manager is bullying an employee, and no one dares to stand up for you, you become very lonely. [...] There were several in that group who didn't respond to my friend requests and I can see that they are friends with like 60 people including work colleagues. It becomes so obvious on Facebook, this power play. (Lena)

The social exclusion Lena experienced on Facebook can be referred to as ostracism. In general, ostracism is a form of bullying where the offenders' intention remains hidden or ambiguous. However, when ostracism is performed on Facebook, the "passive" bullying behavior becomes visible and therefore possible to confront with evidence. Lena could observe that her friend requests to colleagues were neglected, which also enabled her to walk up and confront them. The transparency on Facebook that enabled Lena to identify the negligent treatment may, however, also be the source of the social exclusion. As participation on Facebook involves a visualization of the user's social network, accepting a friend request means that the users openly let themselves be associated with the other person. The user's social connections steer the impressions they make on others (Baym, 2015). Thus, the willingness to accept a friend request may be detrimental to that person's social status. Following Litt's (2012) theorization about the user's "imagined audience," the colleagues' mental conceptualization of who is observing their activities on Facebook may impact their inclination to respond to the contact request. Imagining the audience to be other members of the work organization, exposing a connection to the bullied individual on Facebook may reflect badly on the colleagues.

While the extract above illustrates indirect cyberbullying expressed by ostracism and exclusion from social interaction, the presence of an audience also prevails in situations of outspoken forms of cyberbullying behavior. When cyberbullying behaviors are explicit and public on social network sites, the audience takes on the role not only as receivers of the distorting and denigrating image of the target, but also as legitimizers, if they confirm the twisted image. This became clear in the interview with Kerstin when she described how other people read her student's blog and confirmed the disparaging information written about her:

Yeah, other people had gone in [to the blog] and made comments that they thought it was well written, and yeah, confirmed her [the offender] in some sense. (Kerstin)

The presence of the audience when communicating on social media is also evident in the next extract, which illustrates how the offenders try to manage the audience impressions by using fake Facebook accounts and correct language. According to Eva, some of the parents that were involved in spreading false and discrediting information about her in the Facebook group used fake accounts to present themselves as a larger group of complaining parents than they actually were:

Two of the parents are using both their own names and fake names. There might be more fake names I don't know, but there are at least two fake names. They write something and then they "like" it in their own names. You can see that it is the way they are doing it. In a way, it becomes... I can see it by the language. They are trying to use a language that is [...] correct. Well, not correct because what they are writing isn't very nice, but they are well articulated. (Eva)

Digital communication creates new possibilities to present ourselves to others (Baym, 2015). The sparsity of social cues in the electronic interaction makes it easier to make false statements. Eva's perception of the offender's use of fake accounts is based on her investigation on Facebook. Facebook's display of each users' social contacts led Eva to the

conclusion that some Facebook accounts were set up for the purpose of creating the impression to others that the Facebook group was larger, and therefore more powerful, than it actually was.

### Discussion

The aim of this study has been to explore what characterizes cyberbullying when it is performed in digital space and in an increasingly boundary blurred working life context. To address this aim, eight interviews have been conducted with individuals who have experienced cyberbullying behavior directed toward them in their working life. Based on these interviews, three themes were identified. These are: spatial interconnectedness, colliding identities and the role of the audience. These themes uncover new aspects when bullying in working life is performed on Facebook and blogs. Considering the novelty and the scarcity of research about cyberbullying in working life, there is a need for studies that explore the distinct characteristics of cyberbullying (Brack and Caltabiano, 2014; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013; Slonje and Smith, 2008). Most existing research on cyberbullying follows the dominant quantitative research tradition and is rather atheoretical (Heatherington and Coyne, 2017). Thus, by employing a qualitative approach and using Goffman's theories of everyday life interaction, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the new situations that arise with cyberbullying in working life that may have practical implications for management and work organizations.

The results of this study illuminate that it is necessary to consider the specific contexts that emerge on social media in order to understand cyberbullying in working life. This study shows that cyberbullying behavior in working life is not limited to a digital space. Although cyberbullying in working life is performed online, face-to-face meetings often occur between the targeted individual and offender. Social media scholars such as Baym (2015), Berg (2014) and Ellison (2007) stress that while there are online platforms that enable social interaction with a clear separation from the offline world, social network sites such as Facebook are often interwoven with life in the physical world in a complex way.

In addition to previous research that have reported overlaps between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying (cf. Ford, 2013; Gardner *et al.*, 2016; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007), this study addresses overlaps in regard to spatial interconnectedness. When online platforms are interlinked with life in the physical space through personal relations, it becomes problematic to separate cyberbullying from the social interaction in the physical workplace. Thus, considering digital spaces as constituted by both technological abilities and people's behaviors and practices within space (cf. Kitchin and Dodge, 2011), digital spaces are also relational (cf. Massey, 1994).

However, while social network sites such as Facebook and blogs tend to blur boundaries between the private and the professional, the private and the public, work and non-work, digital and physical spaces, this study also shows that cyberbullying in working life creates distinct situations for the targeted individual and differs from face-to-face bullying.

First, an important theme has been that the audience has a critical part to play in cyberbullying. This confirms previous research showing that the potential of cyberbullying behavior to reach a large audience not only creates uncertainty and anxiety for the targeted individual (Kowalski *et al.*, 2012; Langos, 2012; Slonje and Smith, 2008), but it also provides a different approach to the role of the audience. The present study reveals that offenders' engagement in cyberbullying behavior may be as much a performance in front of an audience as an attack on the targeted individual. Considering social interactions on social network sites and blogs as a performance on a frontstage where users perform an ideal version of themselves in front of an audience, cyberbullying behavior can be understood as the offender's own engagement in contemplated self-presentation. While self-presentation strategies are commonplace in both online and offline interaction, cyberbullying represent

new situations where the offenders have better control over the social cues given away in the performance. This finding is in line with Kernaghan and Elwood's (2013) study that showed the asynchronous communication and the safe backstage environment from where the bullying is performed give the offender several advantages. As the digital communication gives users time to think and reflect before creating a message, the offender may be able to target an individual while simultaneously creating a positive image of the self. In addition, this study suggests that the targets can also create a backstage environment where they can have better control over how they present their responses.

Second, the context of blurred boundaries evoked by social media creates situations of cyberbullying where disgracing one's professional face also negatively affects one's private face. This overlap was evident when the cyberbullying was performed in front of the target's private relations on Facebook, or, when the content of the cyberbullying behavior was searchable on the target's name. As in previous studies by Heatherington and Coyne (2017) and D'Cruz and Noronha (2013), this study found cyberbullying to go beyond the physical workplace and include relationships from the targets' private spheres. In addition to the previous findings, this study stresses that these situations influence the targets' perception of available coping strategies. Considering the mix of social relations online, the targets in this study often perceived themselves as being restricted to performing a professional role when managing the cyberbullying attacks. This involved hiding the negative emotions evoked by the cyberbullying behavior or not interacting with the offenders at all. Performing a professional role created situations where targets of cyberbullying behavior found themselves in a defenseless position with few possibilities to protect themselves from the cyberbullying behavior.

The variety of relations and the different expressions of cyberbullying behavior expressed by the informants suggest cyberbullying to be a multifaceted phenomenon. In order to organize in these different situations, a third aspect of the nature of cyberbullying behavior exposed in this study is that the expressions of cyberbullying vary with the relation established between the targeted individual and the offender. Subtle expressions of cyberbullying behavior where the intention behind the negative acts was hidden or ambiguous often occurred in situations where target and offender belonged to the same work organization. When no such closeness in relation was present, the cyberbullying behavior often was more outspoken or even aggressive. When working in the same organization as the targeted individual, the offenders run the risk of being confronted due to their bullying. Subtle cyberbullying behavior where the intention is ambiguous or unclear may avoid such confrontation. In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that a more distant relationship between the targeted individual and the offender, for example as when they do not belong to the same work organization, may allow the offender to express more aggressive and direct cyberbullying behaviors. This is in line with the suggestion put forward by Neuman (2012) that stresses that direct and active bullying are more common in situations where the contact between the offender and the target is limited.

#### *Future research*

As this study identifies important situations evoked by cyberbullying, these situations deserve further research. The nature of cyberbullying in working life needs to be studied further, as well as the relation to other counterproductive behavior in working life such as "internet hate." All targets of cyberbullying in this study worked in the public sector, and some of the targets were exposed to cyberbullying from offenders outside their own work organization. Thus, this indicates that in organizations where the employees work close to other individuals, such as in HSOs, situations can emerge where employees become vulnerable to cyberbullying behavior. Moreover, earlier studies indicate that men and individuals in a supervisory position are more exposed to

cyberbullying behavior than women and individuals in non-supervisory positions (Forsell, 2016). Thus, gender and organization may also be important for understanding the mechanisms behind cyberbullying behavior.

In general, more studies are needed in order to understand the complexities within cyberbullying and the new situations that emerge when social media become platforms for work life interaction. This includes studies that continue the exploration of cyberbullying on Facebook and blogs, as well as on other media platforms. Moreover, research is needed that addresses how cyberbullying can be prevented in working life. While this study shows that the audience has an important role to play in the performance of cyberbullying by confirming the cyberbullying behavior, intervention studies that focus on how bystanders of cyberbullying can intervene to support the target and prevent the cyberbullying situation would be an important contribution to the research area.

### *Practical implications*

Implications for organizations and practitioners should be addressed. This study shows the importance of re-thinking work life boundaries in situations of cyberbullying. Although users of Facebook and blogs engage in social interaction based on their private profile, inclusion of work relationships on such sites makes Facebook and blogs embedded in the work organization. The boundary blurred nature of cyberbullying raises questions for practitioners on when and where to intervene. Workplace health and safety policies that consider the blurred working life boundaries and the new situations that emerge with cyberbullying are important as they provide work organizations tools to prevent and mitigate the negative effects of cyberbullying when it occurs. Moreover, cyberbullying is associated with new types of consequences for the targeted individual. This includes the difficulty to separate threats on their professional face from their private face, and the negative digital footprint the cyberbullying behavior leaves behind. These are aspects that practitioners need to be aware of and should be recognized in the development of workplace health and safety policies.

### **Conclusion**

The empirical data indicate that in order to understand cyberbullying in working life, it is necessary to consider the specific context that emerges with social network sites and blogs. The study shows that social network sites and blogs tend to blur boundaries between the private and the professional lives for the target. This includes the difficulties of separating the professional and personal identity when being exposed to cyberbullying.

### **Note**

1. The Swedish Democrats are a controversial nationalistic far-right political party in Sweden.

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