

CYBERBULLYING AMONG YOUNGSTERS IN FLANDERS¹

What is cyberbullying (definition)?

Cyberbullying is bullying by means of new information and communication technologies (i.e. primarily the Internet and mobile phones). Some examples are: anonymous emails, abuse by instant messaging, breaking into somebody's email account and changing the password, text message harassment and creating defamatory websites.

In the case of classic **bullying**, the bully has the intention of hurting his victim. Bullying behaviour is not a one-off occurrence, but consists in repeated harassment of the same individual. The bully has more power (and often also has greater physical strength) than the victim. By and large, these characteristics apply to cyberbullying as well.

However, there are a number of important **differences between classic bullying and cyberbullying**:

- With cyberbullying, it is not necessarily the case that the victim is harassed repeatedly. A defamatory website, for example, will often stay online for a longer period of time and can, moreover, be read by many individuals. A spoken insult, by contrast, disappears from the moment it is uttered, and is only heard by those present at that time.
- In the case of classic bullying, the physical strength of the bully is often an important factor in the power relationship with the victim. Cyberbullies, on the other hand, gain their power mainly from their computing and Internet knowledge. If one knows how to build a website, one can also set up a defamatory one. However, serious damage can already be inflicted using relatively simple tools such as email or instant messaging.
- Email and cell phone text messages typically contain few rich signs to help the recipient interpret the content. One can, for example, not see the sender's facial expression (or hear his or her intonation). Cyberbullies are unable to see how their victim responds to the bullying. As a result they are less aware of the offence caused by their actions.
- On the Internet, it is easy to assume an other or a fake identity. Consequently, one can harass victims in an assumed 'anonymous' way.

¹ English translation of original text in Dutch language. English version under revision. Version May 2006.

Some examples of cyberbullying

- Breaking into a mailbox and changing the password
- Purposely sending a virus-infected file to an other person
- Hacking into someone's computer and stealing personal information
- Purposely sending many or excessively large messages to someone in order to overload their system
- Insulting or threatening behaviour via the Internet or mobile phone
- Excluding someone from an online group
- Disseminating private or embarrassing information about someone via the Internet or mobile phone (e.g. an "embarrassing" photograph)
- Pretending to be someone else over the Internet or mobile phone (fake or false identity)
- Stealing someone's messenger or email password and sending messages in their name (false identity)
- Organising defamatory personal websites and/or polling websites (e.g. "Just how much of a loser is Betty?")
- Posting someone's private or confidential information on a website or forwarding it to others by means of text or email
- Spreading rumours about someone via email or phone text messages.

Research into cyberbullying in Flanders

In October 2005 viWTA (Vlaams Instituut voor Wetenschappelijk en Technologisch Aspectenonderzoek – Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment), at the request the Committee for Culture, Youth, Sport and the Media of the Flemish Parliament, ordered, a large-scale survey into cyberbullying among youngsters in Flanders from the University of Antwerp. As to obtain a clear idea of the phenomenon, the study tried to gain insight into ICT use by youngsters and their experiences with traditional forms of bullying as well as cyberbullying. A total of 636 primary school children and 1416 pupils from secondary education completed a (paper) questionnaire on their use of the Internet and mobile phones and their personal experiences with traditional and cyberbullying.

Youngsters and the use of new information and communication technology (ICT)

How often and why do youngsters use ICT?

- 94.4% of the interviewed youngsters use the Internet. 91.8% have access to the Internet at home.
- On average, youngsters spend almost 2 hours a day on the Internet. During weekends, they spend almost 3 hours online.
- Over 80% of youngsters aged 10 to 18 years own a mobile (cell) phone.
- The main reason why girls use the Internet is to "chat with others". Boys use the Internet mainly "recreationally".
- Youngsters use their mobile (cell) phones primarily for exchanging text

messages and, to a lesser extent, for telephone calls. More recent functions of mobile (cell) phones, such as “MMS” and Internet connectivity, are used less frequently.

- About the half of the interviewed youngsters play video or computer games daily or frequently. Racing games and sports games are the most popular, followed by games of strategy and simulation games.

All cyberwizards?

The interviewed youngsters rate their own **knowledge of the Internet and computers** highly: 70.1% regard themselves as advanced users, and 15.4% call themselves experts when it comes to knowledge about the Internet. From the survey results it would appear, though, that Internet use by youngsters is not without **risk**: almost the half (48.9%) engage in online chat with people they only know from the Internet, and an even larger proportion (51.6%) sometimes post personal information about themselves on the Internet Web. Furthermore, one out of three youngsters (31.5%) says they have passed their personal passwords to a friend.

Do parents monitor their children's Internet and cell phone behaviour?

Parents could **restrict the time** that their children may spend on the Internet. However, the survey reveals that six out of ten youngsters are allowed to use the Internet at home whenever they want. Parents can also be **involved to varying degrees in their children's use of the Internet**. For example, they could give their children tips about how to use the Internet more effectively (one in five parents does this), by passing on knowledge about the medium (12.0%), and by pointing out the dangers of cyberspace (six out of ten). It is also worth noting that only 38% of the youngsters feel their parents have a know-how of the Internet. Clearly, though, some knowledge is required in order to give sound and credible advice to youngsters about how to apply ICT.

Almost eight out of ten youngsters say they are allowed to use a cell phone as much as they want, and nine out of ten report that they have no restrictions on the number of text messages they are allowed to send. At school, mobile (cell) phone use is usually severely restricted though.

Internet at school?

About six in ten youngsters also have access to the **Internet at school**. In three-quarters of the cases, Internet use is however restricted to look up information related to schoolwork. A large majority of youngsters (89.1%) feel their **Computer science teachers** know a lot about the Internet. The knowledge level of other teachers is rated less highly.

Cyberspace or the real thing?

Youngsters still **like to speak to their friends in person** (99.7% ‘like to’ or ‘very much like to’). Yet almost nine out of ten (89.7%) indicate also that they ‘like to’ or ‘very much like to’ communicate with their friends through Internet instant messaging.

Talking over a mobile (cell) phone is the third most-favourite means of communication (82.8% 'like to' or 'very much like to'). Fixed-line (traditional) telephone (74.5% 'like to' or 'very much like to') and email (63.5% 'like to' or 'very much like to') are the two least popular modes of communication. Youngsters are more likely to use the Internet or a mobile (cell) phone to tell someone "they fancy them" or that they find them annoying than for other types of messages.

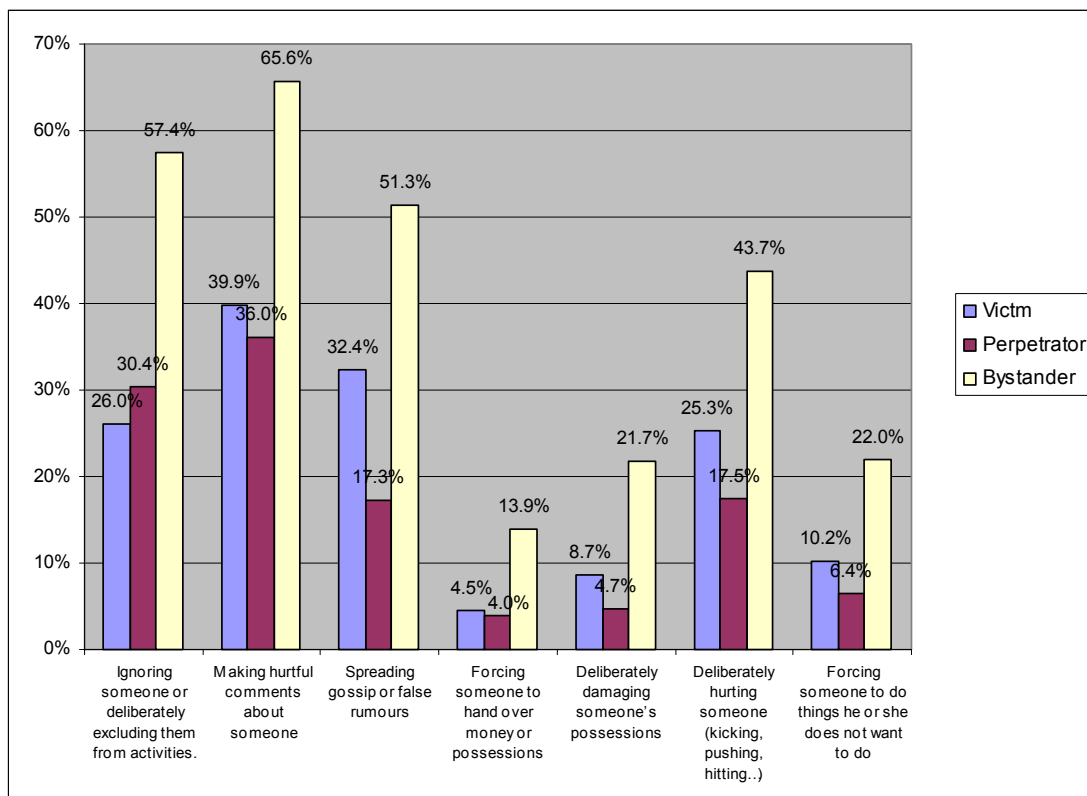
Almost 60% of youngsters (59.3%) agree with the statement that **on the Internet they are more daring**. The half of the interviewed youngsters agrees that messages conveyed via the Internet or by cell phone text may often be interpreted incorrectly.

Traditional bullying

How prevalent is bullying?

56.7% of the respondents report that they have been the victims of at least one form of (potentially) offensive bullying behaviour over the past three months. 49.3% admit to having been guilty of such behaviour, and 78.6% report having witnessed it as a bystander.

The most **common forms** of bullying are 'offensive comments', 'deliberate exclusion or ignoring', 'spreading false rumours or gossip' and 'hitting, pushing, kicking or otherwise hurting people'.



Just over one out of ten youngsters (10.4%) report to have been severely bullied over the past three months. A slightly smaller proportion (9.0%) admits having bullied others over that same period. A small number of respondents (3.7%) say they have been a victim as well as a perpetrator of bullying.

Who are the bullies and who are the victims?

The victims

- are ***most likely*** to be pupils from ***vocational secondary schools***² and least likely to be general secondary education pupils
- tend to have a ***negative self-perception***: they possess less self-confidence, fewer social skills (they have fewer friends and feel less liked) and have a worse relationship with their parents.
- Just over half of the victims have told someone about the fact they have been bullied.

The bullies

- are ***most likely to be pupils from secondary vocational schools*** and least likely to be general secondary education pupils³.
- are ***relatively more often boys*** than girls.

In eight out of ten cases the victims and perpetrators of traditional bullying incidents attend the same school.

Cyberbullying

How prevalent is cyberbullying?

When asked in a direct manner whether they have ever been actively or passively involved in ***bullying via the Internet or mobile phone***, one out of ten youngsters answer that they have been a victim; almost two out of ten say they have been perpetrators, and about three out of ten respond they have been bystanders of cyberbullying.

However, if we look at the number of youngsters who have come into contact with at least one form of potentially offensive behaviour over the Internet or mobile (cell) phone that can be classified as related to cyberbullying over the past three months, the following picture emerges: 61.9 % of the youngsters have been victims, 52.5% have been perpetrators, and 76.3% have been bystanders.

The ***most common forms of potentially offensive Internet and mobile phone activities that can be classified as related to cyberbullying*** are: insults or threats via the Internet or mobile (cell) phone, deception via the Internet or mobile (cell)

² As to the Flemish school system called “beroepssecundair onderwijs (BSO)” en “technisch secundair onderwijs (TSO)”

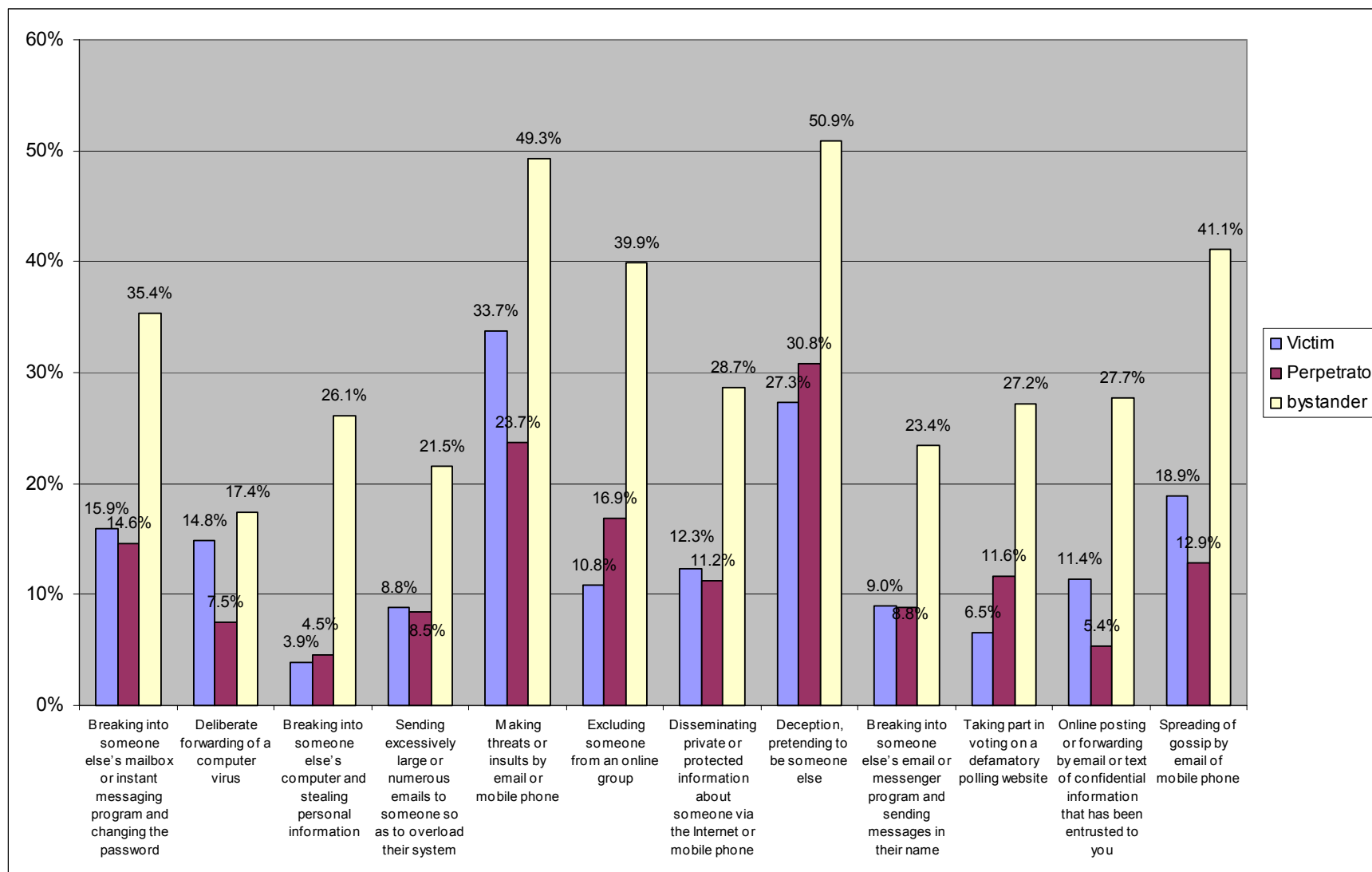
³ As to the Flemish school system called “algemeen secundair onderwijs (ASO)”

phone, spreading gossip via the Internet or mobile (cell) phone and breaking into someone's computer and changing the password. Forms that require a deeper knowledge of computing and the Internet, such as organising a defamatory (poll on a) personal website and hacking into a computer, are far less common among youngsters.

About one out of ten youngsters have been involved in **frequent cyberbullying**: 3.3% exclusively as a victim, 5.0% exclusively as a perpetrator, and 2.6% as both a victim and a perpetrator.

The majority of youngsters (63.8%) believe cyberbullying is a “**big problem**”. This figure may reflect either a general assessment of the issue in the eyes of the youngsters, or it may indicate that they find it a serious problem for those being bullied.

Diagram 2: Frequency distribution of the various forms of potentially offensive Internet and mobile (cell) phone behaviour for victim, perpetrator and bystander



Who are the cyberbullies?

Youngsters who, in their own perception, **have bullied someone** via the Internet or mobile phone...

...spend *more time* on the Internet

...have *parents who are less concerned* with their use of the Internet

...are more often also *victims and bystanders* of bullying via the Internet or mobile (cell) phone

...are more often *perpetrators of traditional bullying*

...do so *anonymously* in seven out of ten cases

Youngsters who have tried out **various Internet and mobile (cell) phone actions** that are potentially offensive and may be linked to cyberbullying...

...are more often *boys than girls*

...have *greater knowledge* of more complex Internet applications

...have *many friends* and feel popular

...have *parents who are less involved* in their Internet use

...are more often also *victims of and bystanders to* various Internet and mobile (cell) phone actions that may be offensive

...are more often *perpetrators of traditional acts of bullying*

Who are the victims of cyberbullying?

Youngsters who, in their own perception, **have been bullied via the Internet or mobile (cell) phone**...

...are *more dependent upon the Internet* (they find life without the Internet boring, they disregard their homework in order to go online, they make many friends over the Internet...)

...have *fewer friends* and feel less popular

...are *more often also the perpetrator of and bystander to* bullying via the Internet and mobile (cell) phone

...are *less often the perpetrator and more often the victim of traditional acts of bullying*

...show *more symptoms of stress*

...have told someone in less than 50% of the cases about their experience of being bullied

Youngsters who have been the victim of **various actions on the Internet or by mobile (cell) phone that may have been offensive**:

...are more often *girls* than boys

...take *more risks on the Internet*: they are more likely to chat with people they only know from cyberspace

... have *many friends* and feel popular

...are also more often *perpetrators of and bystanders to* various actions on the Internet or by mobile (cell) phone that may be offensive.

Conclusion

1) There is a strong **link between cyberbullying and classic bullying**. On this basis, we assume that bullying that takes place at school, in social life etc...is continued in cyberspace, with full retention of roles. In other words, perpetrators remain perpetrators and victims remain victims. There would seem to be no evidence of a so-called “revenge-of-the-nerds” cyberbullying, i.e. victims of classical forms of bullying who “get their own back” on the bullies on the Internet or their mobile (cell) phones. On the other hand, it may also be the case that cyberbullying occasions classic bullying.

In addition, however, there is a category of youngsters who are only involved in cyberbullying and not in classic bullying. In other words, the emergence of cyberbullying has not only deepened the phenomenon of bullying (more intense, via multiple channels), but has rather broadened it (more youngsters involved).

2) The youngsters who are perpetrators of cyberbullying have, in many cases, also experienced cyberbullying as victims or bystanders and vice versa. This is an indication to the existence of counter- or chain reactions in cyberbullying, whereby perpetrators become victims and victims become perpetrators, ultimately resulting in a “**culture of cyberbullying**” (which may be witnessed by many, who may in turn draw inspiration from it).

3) The **amount of time** that youngsters spend on the Internet and the degree of **Internet dependency** they exhibit may be an indication of their involvement in cyberbullying.

4) **Knowledge of complex Internet applications** is not required for cyberbullying, although it does provide the bully with a broader range of tools. Youngsters who **take risks on the Internet** (e.g. online posting of personal information, chatting with strangers, lack of caution with regard to passwords....) are more likely vulnerable to certain types of online bullying. Nevertheless, even those who do adopt a cautious attitude cannot avoid the threat of cyberbullying entirely.

5) **Parents’ lack of expertise and involvement in their children’s Internet activities** means that youngsters are often able to experiment unsupervised in cyberspace. It is therefore also an environment where they can bully freely.

6) Youngsters who are more likely to be bullied in real life often seek refuge in cyberspace (even though this environment appears not to be safe too).

7) Cyberbullying is related to **gender, type of schooling and age**. Perpetrators are more often boys than girls. Youngsters from vocational secondary schools are more likely to have experienced cyberbullying (in all roles) than youngsters from general secondary schools. And the prevalence of cyberbullying increases up to about the age of 15 after which it declines again. These differences are primarily due to the fact that gender, type of schooling and age are strongly correlated with the amount of activity on the Internet, the degree of supervision exercised by the parents, and involvement in classic forms of bullying. These factors imply greatly the likelihood of involvement in cyberbullying.

8) **Internet and mobile (cell) phone activities, which in the survey were considered to be potentially offensive**, are not always perceived by the youngsters as “bullying”. Much depends on the kind of activity involved: for example, youngsters feel, a lot more hurt by such Internet and mobile (cell) phone activities in which they are publicly humiliated than by actions with consequences that only they and they alone can feel or experience (e.g. computer crash caused by a deliberate infection with a virus). Obviously, the personal feeling also depends on the relationship of the victim with the perpetrator. They are less likely to feel hurt or offended if the act is considered as a prank by friends or at least it will not be considered an act of bullying) than if they are being harassed by someone else (e.g. someone who also bullies them at school).

Policy recommendations by the research team

Prevention of cyberbullying by

Making **youngsters** more aware of the fact that:

- cyberbullying can have **far-reaching consequences** for the victim. People in front of computer screens have feelings, and can be deeply hurt or offended by offensive online behaviour of others.
- **high-risk behaviour** on the Internet (handing passwords to peers, online posting of personal information ...) increases the risk of being bullied.
- Internet bullies **can be traced and punished**.

Making **parents and schools** more aware of the fact that:

- parents should be encouraged to **involve** themselves with their children’s **use of the Internet and mobile phones**. Parents should enhance their own knowledge of the Internet.
- Computer science courses at school should pay closer attention to **the dangers and risks** of the Internet and to ‘**cyber etiquette**’ besides the strictly technical aspects of computer handling skills.
- schools should assume responsibility in case of cyberbullying, as this new form of bullying is often an extension **of classic bullying behaviour** (or may occasion it).

Dealing with cyberbullying

Raising of victims’ awareness

Victims should be empowered as to the actions they may or must take in order to protect themselves (e.g. preservation of evidence)

Raising awareness of Internet providers and mobile (cell) telephone operators

Internet providers and mobile telephone operators must enforce their code of conduct for users and must intervene in instances of cyberbullying.

Suggestions for further research

The phenomenon of cyberbullying may be explored in greater depth through further qualitative research. First and foremost, this may involve **interviews with victims and perpetrators** (in order to gain insight into how they perceive cyberbullying). Additionally, professionals who are confronted on a daily basis with instances of cyberbullying (e.g. social services at school, (anti-bullying) teachers...) might be interviewed about their experiences with the issue. Finally, parents and teachers might be involved in order to gain clearer insight into how and why instances of cyberbullying arise.

To monitor the evolution of cyberbullying, and to measure the effectiveness of policy, we recommend a **quantitative follow-up research**. The questionnaire used in this study may serve as a starting point for repetitive surveys.