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# Re-Framing and Exploring Online Suicidal Games as a Specific Form of Cyberbullying

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**Abstract:** This article discusses online suicide games as a part of cyberbullying with the game called “Blue Whale Challenge” as an empirical case. The three-fold aim is to (i) identify key social mechanisms related to participation and engagement, (ii) discuss the phenomena in a broader sociological and criminological framework, and (iii) compare social mechanisms in BWC with mechanisms in cyberbullying. The analysis was conducted in two steps, firstly a case study based on a combination of media reports and extracts from different social media posts related to BWC was conducted. Secondly, the result from the case study was re-analyzed in relation to key elements identified in cyberbullying, to conclude if and how BWC can be defined as a form of cyberbullying. The results show that BWC can be defined as a specific form of cyberbullying, but victimization is created differently in BWC compared to victimization in cyberbullying.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, victimization, suicide, push-pull factors, social interaction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescents’ edgework and risk taking are nothing new in society, and some of it include participation in different challenges (cf. Lyng 2004; Felson and Eckert 2018). Typical adolescent challenges, such as dares, is often considered as something acceptable or manageable in society, but what happens when challenges become viral and society cannot control risky situations and their consequences? Is cyberbullying and cybervictimization a possible outcome? To what extent are we dealing with social interactions and violent encounters?

Since social media platforms has become a contemporary meeting place for adolescent, a new era of challenges has arisen in society, which often get filmed and spread globally. These challenges are varying from harmless ones, such as different dance challenges, to more harmful such as skull-bash challenges, cinnamon challenges to potential lethal challenges such as the Momo challenge. Among these cyber-challenges, we can also find different online suicidal games such as Blue Whale Challenge (BWC), which combine lethal edgework with manipulation and deprivation, resulting in adolescent suicides.

BWC origins from Russian forum VKontakte and was first launched in 2013. The creator, a former psychology student, started the game with the aim to force or lure people with ‘no value’ to commit suicide and by that ‘cleanse society’ (Mann 2017). It is also uncertain how many individuals whom has participated

in BWC or the actual numbers of suicides related to BWC, but it seems to be a global phenomenon (cf. Mullin 2017; Khattar *et al.* 2018).

BWC is structured as a 50 days scheme with different tasks, ranging between self-harm actions, to disrupted sleep patterns, isolation or indulging in horror movies. To see if the participator (‘player’) has succeeded with the task, the ‘curator’ (or game leader) ask for pictures, resumes, etcetera, before the curator impose the player the next task. The participation of the game is voluntary from the beginning (e.g. wannabe players seeking a curator through different social media platforms), but leaving the game is often perceived as impossible from a player’s perspective (cf. Khattar *et al.* 2018).

### 1.1. Aim

As far as known, only a few studies on online suicide games have been conducted, and none of them has discussed the relation between these types of games, cyberbullying and/or cybervictimization. This article is a first step to analyze online suicide games as a specific form of cyberbullying, by having an emphasis on social interaction and violent encounters in the game situation. By using BWC as an empirical case, the article aims to:

1. identify key social mechanisms related to participation and engagement in BWC.
2. discuss the phenomena in a broader sociological and criminological framework.
3. compare these social mechanisms with identified key mechanisms in cyberbullying.

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## 1.2. Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

To enable an analysis of BWC, the case needs to be contextualized in previous research and theory. First, a summary of previous research on bullying, cyberbullying and bullycides will be presented. Thereafter, I will outline some arguments regarding *how* suicides can be understood as social actions. Finally, I will highlight the importance of social interaction in terms of violent encounters, which are key themes in the upcoming analysis.

### 1.2.1. Bullying, Cyberbullying and Bullycides

Bullying has no universal definition and includes a variation of more or less illegal actions, all from ostracism to verbal and physical abuse (Farrington 1993). Nevertheless, even if bullying cannot be defined as one thing, bullying share characteristic of being sequential and recurrent, with an aim to dehumanize the victim (cf. Collins 2008:158;358;172f., Marr and Field 1999:53). Bullying mainly takes place at schools and can be seen as an institutionalized and specialized form of violence, constructing or maintaining hierarchic relations (Collins 2008: 158; 172). Bullying is also geographically situated and tend to occur more in rural and suburban areas, compared to urban areas. Close-knitted communities can be seen as prone to bullying, because of the lack of 'exits' from the bullying situation, such as finding friends outside schools or engaging in activities in other city-districts, which makes confrontations inevitable (see Collins 2008:172f.).

Bullying is also based on face-to-face interaction when it takes place at a school, but with the introduction of social media and increased time spend online, bullying has changed in some ways – and the occurrence of cyberbullying has become a well-known term in the literature. Cyberbullying differ from traditional bullying in, at least, four important ways. Firstly, cyberbullying is not dependent of time, place or physical interaction anymore. Cyberbullying is temporally and place independent and can occur 24/7 with no face-to-face interaction at all. Secondly, the lack of physical interaction also makes it possible for the offenders to hide their identity (e.g. being anonymous), which rarely happens in traditional bullying. Thirdly, victims of cyberbullying tend to be older, compared with victims for traditional bullying, since the victimization is closely connected to the amount of time spend on social media platforms or the cell phone (Kowalski and Limber 2007; Oblad 2019). Lastly, the dehumanization is amplified in

cyberbullying, since the potential exposure and embarrassment of the victim is on a larger scale (John *et al.* 2018; Juvonen and Gross 2008).

The consequences of being bullied, regardless if it is on- or offline, are similar. Bullying can cause mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts or suicides (see Hawker and Boulton 2000; John *et al.* 2018). In Marr and Field's work (1999), the author introduces the term 'bullycide', to define those suicides that follows from bullying situation. Bullycides can therefore be defined as a dramatic solution on a wicked situation, when all other alternatives or options have been closed. In that way bullycides have a resemblance with Emerson's discussion of last resorts (1981). Thus, the decision to avoid bullying by committing a bullycide should be interpreted as a 'necessary' or an unavoidable choice, not a choice between different options (cf. Emerson 1981:5).

### 1.2.2. Suicide as Social Action

We often consider suicides to be the result of individual or internal factors, such as depression or personal adversity, but this is not always true. In most cases, suicides are bequeathing on internal, external and social factors (see Douglas 1967; Lester 2009). Internal factors trigger suicidal ideation or suicidal thoughts (such as depression), but the suicidal act itself is depending on external factors (such as means of suicide). The social factors, in turn, such as occurrence of a suicidal script and sometimes the interaction and support from others, directly or indirectly determine the external factors (cf. Clarke and Lester 1989:86; Lester and Stack 2015; 6; 169).

In short, suicidal cultural scripts can be defined as a 'blueprint' for suicidal acts, by giving 'instructions' for performance, intertwining societal, cultural and sub-cultural elements related to contemporary societal norms regarding lethal method, localization and 'performance' in terms of suicidal notes/message, clothes, symbols and stylization (Lester and Stack 2015:6ff.). Suicides can therefore be defined as a specific situated dramatic performance in general, but specific for online suicides or suicidal games is the momentum of interaction with an audience (Lester and Stack 2015: Chapter 13).

The notion of interaction is of importance, since it stresses that online suicides differ from other forms of suicides conducted 'off-line' in, at least, two ways. Firstly, online suicides can be seen as public acts, in

contrast to 'off-line' suicides which in privacy. This in turn indicates that the interaction with the audience differ between them, in online suicide the audience is present in the act (cf. Thodelius 2018:62). In 'off-line' suicides, the audience instead is perceived, and the interaction is one-sided, by the use of suicide-notes, for example. Secondly, online suicides might be motivated by an aim to gain something socially attractive, such as fame or community, or to escape sanctions. 'Off-line suicides', on the other hand, aims more or less towards solving a problematic situation (Thodelius 2018; 2019). This makes the online suicide more 'instrumental', than emotional, since death is not the goal per se.

### 1.2.3. Violent Encounters

To enable an analysis of BWC, we cannot only theorize on the suicidal act, we also need to combine theoretical concepts related to violent encounters as situated interaction. This is done here by highlighting parts of Collins micro-sociological work on violent situations (2008:19; 39ff. 134ff.; 188; 198ff.) combined with theoretical notes on the interplay between push/pull factors (Reckless 1963) and the function of credit and blame in relations (Tilly 2008).

Confrontational tension and fear are, according to Collins, an emotional response to an unpleasant or unwanted interaction, such as a threat, and the use of violence can be one way to handle the situation (2008:9). Violence, as a response to confrontational tension/fear, seldom burst out, it more likely escalates by different interactions or encounters, where the participators take different roles (Collins 2008:338ff.). For example, in a bar fight, the escalation often is expressive with a clear role taking, where person A attacks person B verbally, and person B might get back physically.

At the same time, this interplay is not always expressive or evolve into manifest interactions, it can also be subtle and only engage one part whom attack a weak victim (Collins 2008:186-187), by staging an unfair fight (e.g. being 'armed' against an un-armed victim). A weak victim, can so to say, be a 'safe' way to handle confrontational tension/fear for the attacker. But, the weakness of the victim is situated, and the attacker needs to establish a specific emotional dynamic, to dominate the victim emotionally or physically. If the (to-be) victim demonstrate submission or not trying to confront the attacker, he or she can definitively be defined as a weak victim in the situation (Collins 2008:39-82).

Collins also acknowledge the role of the audience as a mediator in violent encounters. The audience can either limit or support the use of violence, and the audience response on the situation is so to say crucial for the outcome, hence the audience can either take a side or be neutral (Collins 2008:199ff.). In cases of bullying, this is especially discernable, if the bully gets encouraged of the crowd (e.g. audience) to not only verbally abuse the victim, but also to beat him/her up, the risk for physical violence increase.

Still, if we want to understand violent encounters as situated, we also need to highlight theoretical concepts which explain why people engage in deviance (such as bullying or BWC), and how these processes are structured and justified.

According to Reckless (1961), push and pull factors enforces each other in deviant situations, since internal drives push the individual towards deviance, and at the same time external environmental factors pull the individual into deviance. A situation that may push an individual towards deviance, is if he/she feels some kind of pressure to engage in deviance to escape the current situation. Factors that can pull an individual into deviance, in turn, are things like the presence of opportunities, deviant peers, influence of pro-deviant groups or networks (Reckless 1961).

Not only push and pull factors are of importance, also the presence of inner and outer containment is crucial for the outcome. However, the influence of containment varies by the situation (Reckless 1961). In relation to interactions, outer containment is especially central, since outer containment is interpersonal. The individuals' outer containment is defined by group processes, and outer containment therefore relates to Tilly's work on credit and blame (2008). Thus, the use of credit and blame is structuring social processes and justifications of them, and therefor effect the outer containments. Especially in networks credits and blame has a significant role in distinguishing insiders from outsiders, but also for establishing winners as a strategy, which is of importance in both hierarchic relations and game situations (cf. Tilly 2008:86-90).

## 2. STUDY DESIGN, MATERIAL AND METHOD

To fulfill the study's aim, to explore if and how BWC can be defined as a specific form of cyberbullying, a qualitative study was conducted in two steps. First a single-case study was conducted, and thereafter a comparative thematic content analysis. Before the study design, material and methods are presented, I

will briefly underline some of the methodological challenges with study rare events, such as BWC, which has influenced the study design.

BWC can be defined as a rare event since it is determined by a combination of causes, or what Ragin (1998) calls 'complexly combinatorial' causation. The 'lack' of common causal factors in BWC is related to the unknown numbers of players (Mullin 2017), in combination with the fact that the cases cluster in time, but not in space (e.g. occurs at different places simultaneous in sequences). This, in turns, results in (at least) three methodological challenges; the degree of freedom problem, the combined causes problem, and the different causes problem (Harding *et al.* 2002).

Methodologies traditional used in criminology or sociology do not succeed well in studies of rare events, for example, a quantitative study cannot handle how various causal factors interact to produce a rare event (Harding *et al.* 2002). Thereto, since these studies often bestow of small-N analysis, in combination with combined and sometimes different causes, previous research of rare events recommend the use of case-oriented research, instead of variable-oriented research (Ragin 2000). Hence, case-oriented research is interested in causal configurations as an explanatory factor, even if their subsidiary component isn't related to the outcome (see Ragin 2000).

In line with these recommendations, from both Harding *et al.* (2002) and Ragin (2000), this study was designed as a single case study, to enable a flexible design allowing both cross-case analysis and pattern matching (Yin 2014). In the analysis, the material was coded in terms of belief, emotion and action to identify underlying conditions and social mechanisms (see Elster 2011:51), and thematized in three different thresholds in BWC (entering, playing and exiting).

Next challenge in the analysis, was related to the material, especially the online material from BWC. Hence, even if BWC is performed online, it does not have a specific site or webpage, instead it moves between different social media platforms, which the (potential) participants engage in the game. The material for the analysis therefore combines to types of qualitative data: media reports (published between 2017-2018, n=10) and extracts from different social media posts related to the game of participants (published between 2016-2018, n=20).

The social media posts include different narratives, such as game rules, assignments and discussions

related to entering, playing and ending the game. The social media posts were collected by using three hashtags as keywords on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram: #f57, #curatorfindme and #i\_am\_a\_whale (these keywords was identified in a previous study, Thodelius 2018:36, as a common way to both signal the willingness to participate and to confirm that the tasks in the game was completed).

Due to the emotional and vulnerable characteristic of thee social media posts, from an ethical point of view, all online material is anonymized, and quotes are selected carefully to not harm the individuals behind them or trigger a so-called Werther-effect (cf. Ellis 2007:4; Jonas 1992). This, of course, can affect the transparency, but I have tried to provide enough details so that readers may come to their own conclusion of this study's validity (cf. Tracy 2010). So, instead of focusing at the individual's narrative per se, the study aims to crystalize certain underlying social processes and mechanisms in BWC.

After the case study was conducted, the next step in the analysis took place – namely to compare the identified mechanisms in BWC with the ones identified by previous research regarding cyberbullying (note that the articles used here, was the same collected for the section on previous research above and included in total 25 articles published between 2003-2019). The comparative analysis was conducted by using a qualitative thematic content analyze (see Krippendorff 1980). The following themes was used: participant/victim, anonymity, hierarchic relation, process, escalation, interaction, disintegrate, sanctions and threats, and the comparation was based on which factor was present and to which degree in the two different events (BWC and cyberbullying).

### 3. RESULTS

The result will, firstly, present the identified social mechanisms in BWC, divided by the different thresholds or phases in the game. Secondly, these mechanisms will be compared with mechanisms identified by previous research regarding cyberbullying, to conclude *if and how* BWC can be defined as cyberbullying.

#### 3.1. Entering the Game: Becoming a Whale

There is a need to acknowledge that the entering phase also has a pre-entering phase. Hence, the participants need to be aware of BWC, before he or she can volunteer to engage – since participants needs

to advertise their interest in a specific way, and also be selected before it is possible to join the game. This pre-entering phase was in the beginning based on social media habits, e.g. the use of VKontakte, and not many outside that context was aware of the existence of BWC. In November 2015, after the death of a young Russian girl whom had participated in the game, BWC become known and started to appear in all kinds of social medias (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and so on). This global awareness of BWC can either be a result from the media exposure, a copy-cat effect or a combination of both (see Adeane 2019), but it can also be interpreted as a sign of the 'age of exposure'. As Felson and Eckert (2018: Chapter 10) acknowledge, we nowadays live in an age of exposure, seeing an amplification of old problems (such as bullying), by an increased exposure to offenders and an increased avoidance of guardians (in terms of parents, law enforcement or peers).

After becoming aware of the game, the interested person needs to advertise his/her interest in participation, often by posting an advertisement on social media using specific hashtags. Thereafter, the participant needs to be selected by a curator (a form of game leader). This selection process might indicate that the participant interprets the participation as something more than just being a part of a game. It creates a specific identity, to be a whale, and gives an option to leave an old identity behind. Thus, as Beck (1992:131ff.) stresses, modernity has changed how we form identities, in contrast to having a traditional identity waiting for you, we today create identities in temporal relations instead. And this is happening here, and to not being selected in BWC, creates a frustration, as seen in this user's poste Instagram (2017-05-19/20):

'I want to play [...] Hello [...] How long does it take for a curator to be assigned [...] If any curator sees this, please please, please DM me [...] Can I just play it without the curator? Or shall I keep spamming the Curators via hashtags and DMs?'

As seen above, the frustration of not being noticed, make the person unsure of the process and rules, which also can be a strategy to make BWC attractive in the long run, e.g. only a few becomes a whale. In case of that the participant get selected the curator asks multiple times if he/she is certain of the decision to join, that it impossible to leave the game, that it is expected that all the tasks are done and that the participant will

die at the end (Reddit transcript, 2017). This add a new dimension to the identity, you are not only special or selected, you are also willing to sacrifice and commit for this identity, making an absolute statement of Katz notion, that respect needs to be objectified in blood (1988:35). Therefore, instead of considering the engagement in BWC as an act of a vulnerable or depressed adolescent (see Rossow 2018), it needs to be interpreted as a process related to a specific identity construction.

To become a whale, is thereto not only related to the individual's awareness and attraction of the identity, it also relates to contemporary features. It both address the temporality of identities and the individualistic society, resulting in individual's low integration and loss of meaning. In a way, BWC can be seen as a modern pathway to the 'egoistic suicide' (cf. Durkheim [1897] 2004:155 ff; 161 ff.), but also, paradoxical, a new survival strategy in the search of identity. Hence, BWC is a maladroitly form of seeking contact and attachment, which can offer both 'meaning' and 'community'.

### 3.2. Between Credit and Blame: Playing the Game

However, even if the participation is volunteer from the beginning, and also an active act, the playing phase often become involuntary since it combines both push/pull factors and credit/blame (Reckless 1961; Tilly 2008).

The push factors here, aims at pushing the participant from regular activities, by focusing on given tasks or assignments instead. The game structure is based on an expectation that participants conduct do one task each day for 40 or 50 days (it differs between countries and social media sites). These tasks are a combination of conducting self-harm acts, such as 'cut your arm with a razor' (task 3), sleep deprivation (task 10 for example, 'wake-up 4.20 and go to a roof'), isolation (task 28, 'don't talk to anyone') and selective interaction (task 20, 'the curator check if you are trustworthy' or task 21, 'talk with another whale'). These tasks not only push the participants away from everyday activities and routines, it also isolates and alienate them by the limited and selective social interaction.

Pull-factors in turn, is related to the use of credit and blame in the game, if the participant succeeds with tasks, it will be acknowledged (e.g. use of credit), but if the task fails the participant will be blamed and suffer

different sanctions or penalties. Most common, sanctions include threats, such to threat to infect the computer with malware or that pictures or personal information will be published, or, in rarer cases, threats can be directed against family members, pets or peers.

The strategies related to blame and sanctions are also related to the community context, namely Internet, which both gives the means for them and amplify their effects. The information used for blame or sanctions, such as creating threats, are easily collected at the participants' social media accounts. Most times adolescents' posts information related to address, school, family, peer etcetera on accounts, which makes it easy to identify 'what is of importance' for the participant in a 'black-mail'-situation. Thereto, the participant needs in some tasks to take photos, which also contains information of the user, such as geo-tags, which can be used in relation to blame or sanctions, by identifying the participants home address and then using different sites to gather further information. The amplification of threats, as the participator interpret them as real, even if logic says that a person in country X cannot hurt a person in country Z, comes from the fact that Internet creates a specific dynamic related to time-space compression (cf. Harvey 1990). Time-space compression, in this case, is related to seeing Internet as 'speed-space', blurring the lines between the physical space and the virtual with no physical border.

Playing BWC include a transformation, from the previous volunteer engagement and identity creation, to involuntary participation. This by being pushed further and further away from ordinary life and pulled into a parallel life dependent on other's actions. If the above describe the means or the strategies to conduct this, the social process of escalation or transformation can be related to Collins notion of confrontational tension and fear. Confrontational tension and fear in general is an interaction where the participators takes different roles (Collins 2008:338ff.), but in BWC the escalation are subtle, and can be seen as one sided engagement (e.g. curator) whom is attacking a weak victim (the participant), staging an unfair fight based on interactional weakness (Collin 2008:186f.). The outcome of a fight is also, according to Collins, determined by the audience (2008:119), but since BWC also determine the audience, there is a lack of neutral audience which can function as a mediator. This control is managed in the game by (i) creating a setting with an in-built lack of neutral audience (e.g. BWC seems to be conducted in private) and (ii) creating a setting for a supportive audience, in terms of

that the audience are constituted of curators and other players/whales – which limits the number of possible outcomes (cf. Collins 2008:199ff.).

### 3.3. Exit by Voluntary or Involuntary Death?

For the participant, the exit-phase is introduced in the middle of the game-phase during task 26, which state: 'the curator tells you the date of your death. And you have to accept it', and the exit-process thereafter escalate during the following tasks. Especially thru task 30 to 49, where the participant needs to perform the same task repeatably, namely:

'[w]ake up at 4.20 am, watch horror movies, listen to music "they" [*the curator(s), my note*] send you, make 1 cut on your body per day, talk to a "whale".'

Even if the exit (suicide) is known from the beginning, it now becomes real. The participant also adapts to the fact of suicide, mentally (e.g. by knowing the date of death), emotional and physical (e.g. as a consequence of sleep deprivation, emotional prepares and support from others).

In this phase, different aspects interplay which might add up to an emotional state which can be described as a situation of forward panic (Collins 2008:83ff). By knowing the date of death, the participant feels to be in control of his/her destiny and might recall the feeling of being special or selected, at the same time the participants has during BWC become more and more detached from reality, which can have resulted in a buildup of emotions which needs to be released.

According to Collins, forward panic is a result from prolonged confrontational tension/fear and has a dramatic shape of increased tension striving against a climax (2008:85). Hence, even if the participator was passive in the previous state of the game – both push/pull factors and blame/credit created a field of confrontational tension/fear. Thus, the forward panic (and the suicide) here, is not directed from the strong to the weak as in traditional violence. Instead, the stronger part forces the weak to attacking him/herself, by forcing the participant into forward panic resulting in that the violent encounter shift from externalized violence to internalized violence (cf. Collins 2008:94).

In addition, this can be done by use of traditional confrontational minimizing technique, namely by letting the participant get into a dazed or trance-like blandness

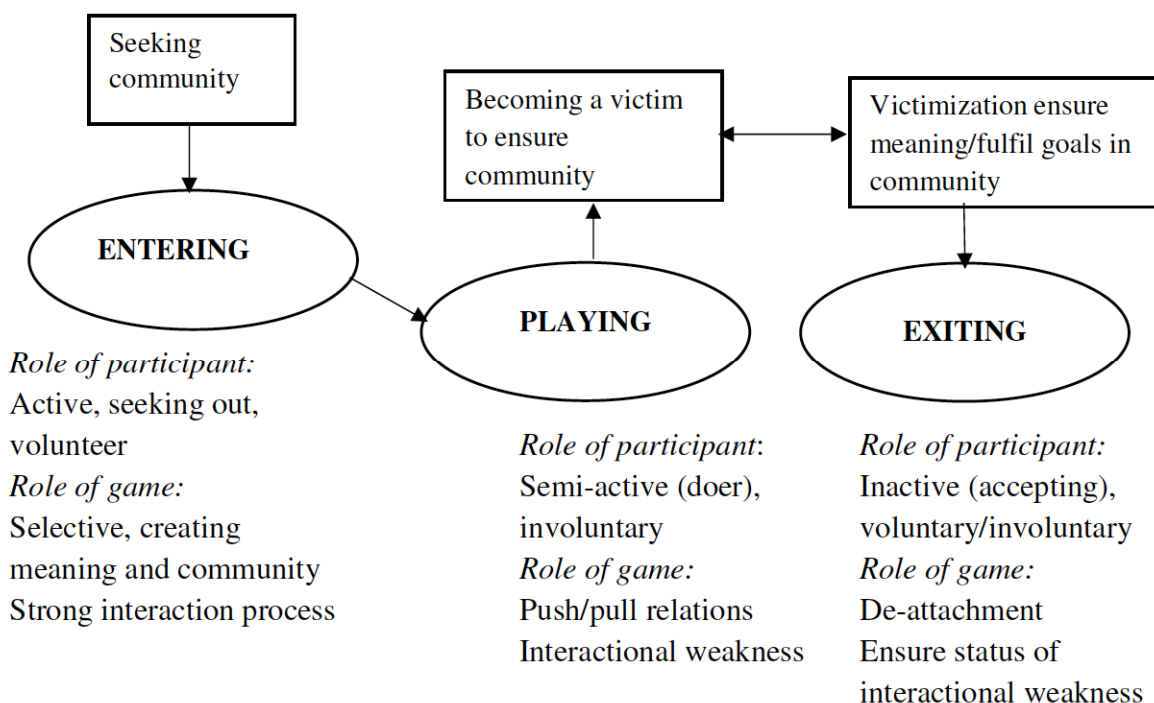


Figure 1: Process and social mechanisms identified in BWC.

(cf. Collins 2008:446). These strategies are especially traceable in the last tasks (no. 30-49), where the participant becomes disintegrated and detached, by becoming both emotional and physical drained. So, to exit BWC, is to die volunteer by involuntary decisions.

**3.4. BWC and Cyberbullying: Similarities and Differences**

To conclude the identified mechanism and the process of participating in BWC shifts during the different stages of entering, playing and exiting BWC (se Figure 1).

As seen above, the *process of entering* the game depend on awareness, exposure, identity construction and community/meaning – which also gives a social role and position the participant in a hierarchy. BWC also seems to fill a gap in modern society, and therefore is socially attractive since it defines a specific identity and clear goals of the engagement. The *process of playing* is based on push/pull factors which transform the participant from an active agent to a weak victim, this shift can also be seen as going from interactional strengths to interactional weaknesses making the situation unfair and unbalanced. *Exit or leaving BWC* is mainly based on mechanisms of detachment and disintegration, to give control by taking it away, and can be seen as a prolonged process of a violent encounter. BWC can therefore be seen as a

process where social mechanisms are at work both parallel and in sequences and goes from interaction to interactional weakness.

To find out *if and how* BWC is a form of cyberbullying, important features in the social mechanisms above was compared to those defined in previous research of cyberbullying. Namely, victimhood, function of anonymity, hierarchy, process, escalation, interaction and sanctions or threat. As seen in Table 1, these correspond high in five of nine mechanisms, mainly those features and social mechanisms related to controlling situated action and controlling the outcome of the situation.

The similarities mainly relate to the fact that the offender is anonymous, which amplifies the threats, since the victim judge if the person behind the threat is capable to realize it. BWC and cyberbullying also seems to aim at constructing hierarchic relations by staging an unfair fight (Collins 2008:186-187). Mainly by disintegrating the victim from audience support or intervenors, to control the violent encounter. The differences relate to interaction and the constructing of victimhood, where in BWC the participant shift from voluntary participant (actor) to involuntary (victim), but in bullying the role is pre-defined as a victim (e.g. looking for suitable victims actively). Thereto, BWC is depending on a social process, to convince the participator to fulfil all challenges, in bullying the shift is

**Table 1: Comparison between BWC and Cyberbullying**

Social mechanism/features	BWC	Cyberbullying	Correspondence
Participant/Victim	Voluntary participant becomes involuntary	Involuntary victim	Medium
Anonymity	Curator, not participant	Offender, not victim	High
Hierarchic relation	Yes	Yes	High
Process	Yes	No	Low
Escalation	Yes	Yes	High
Interaction	Yes	No	Low
Disintegrate	Yes	Yes	High
Sanctions	Yes	No	Low
Threats	Yes	Yes	High

in use of violence/threats instead, shifting from milder teasing to server threats, indicating that the process differs on a structural level.

The comparative analysis suggest that control seems to be crucial in both BWC and cyberbullying, which indicates that both can be seen as means to restore control balance but use different paths to reach it (cf. Tittle 1995). In Tittles work, control balance is a state where exercised control and experienced control are in perfect balance (e.g. control ratio), and that individuals can react with deviance to restore control balance. Still, even if control balance is similar to all individuals, the process to gain it does not unfold in the same way depending on if the individual exercise more control than experienced (having a control surplus) or if the individual experience more control than exercised (control deficit, cf. Tittle 1995; 1999).

By applying Tittle's model here, it is possible to conclude that both acts are about restoring control balance, but it is possible to distinguish BWC from cyberbullying related to control surplus and control deficits, by categorizing BWC as *predation* and cyberbullying as *decadence*. Predation is a serious form of repressive deviance, likely to be undertaken by individuals with relatively small control deficits. An engagement in predation gives them control over someone else, and predation is often characterized by direct confrontations with the victim (Tittle 1995). Decadence, on the contrary, is autonomous deviance, where the offender's momentary whims is reflected in acts based on control surplus, but these acts are often indirect and rarely confrontative (Tittle 1995; 1999). By this difference, we can also assume that these two phenomena engage different offenders, which can be of importance in further work.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

With respect to the study's limitations, related to the small number of units analyzed (n=30 in total) and the chosen research design, the results here need to be understood as analytically generalized, since the validation of them is mainly related to the comparison between empirical data, previous research and theory (Yin 2014). This, in turn, limits the possibilities to discuss preventive aspects based on this study, which needs to be conducted in upcoming research studies in the field of criminology and sociology.

However, these limitations do not affect the results presented, instead this study strongly fulfill the aim. The aim in this article was, not only to identify key social mechanisms related to participation and engagement in BWC, but also to analyze BWC in a broader sociological and criminological framework, and to compare BWC with cyberbullying. In this way, the research shifts focus from internal and psychiatric factors related to individuals, to highlighting the importance of social mechanisms, processes and situated interaction.

As seen in the conducted analysis, participant volunteering entering BWC, since the game gives them meaning, community and a new identity or social role (e.g. becoming a whale). The alteration follows from the game process, where the engagement transforms the actor to a victim with the use of push/pull factors and credit and blame (Reckless 1961; Tilly 2008). Finally, the exiting process of BWC de-attach and disintegrate the participant and create an opportunity for voluntary involuntary death by staging an unfair fight against yourself.

Moreover, this stresses that BWC is a social process transforming the participants interaction to

interactional weakness (Collins 2008:446), by pulling him/her toward BWC-engagement and also pushing away supportive peers or other interaction arenas, by using blame and credit as means in rewards and sanctions (cf. Reckless 1961; Tilly 2008). This also indicates two things of importance, namely that BWC is both using the same mechanisms as ordinary life to regulate and control behavior between actors, while it is context dependent. BWC could not be performed outside Internet, since Internet gives the prerequisites for sanctions, and the amplification of sanctions. Mainly since the information used in sanctions are accessed by the participant (such as Facebook information), and that Internet both gives the offender anonymity and sanctions gets amplified and more spread in the time-space compression that occurs in on-line settings (cf. Felson and Eckert 2018; Harvey 1990; John *et al.* 2018).

By comparing the social mechanisms identified in BWC with those identified in cyberbullying, it becomes clear that these two share certain mechanisms, but also differ in some. This also addresses the question if BWC and cyberbullying might be two extremes in creating control balance (cf. Tittle 1995; 1999), and that BWC can be a very specific form of cyberbullying. This, of course, also points to a further discussion of the common thread in bullying, cyberbullying and BWC, and I argue that control, in terms of controlling interaction and situational outcomes might be the common mechanism in all three. Or, in other words, bullying is always aiming to control the victims' decision, no matter if it is conducted on- or offline.

Lastly, BWC also manifests a two contemporary issues, namely the age of exposure and the loss of identity and meaning. According to Felson and Eckert, the age of exposure in online settings can be understood as a setting where traditional crime gets amplified and more tailor-made related to Internets controlling and decontrolling functions (2018: Chapter 10). Also, it is important to recognize that BWC offer the participants an option or an alternative way to construct meaning and community. In a way, BWC both solve the modern quest of finding an identity (cf. Bauman 1988) and the quest of being a part of something bigger (see Durkheim [1897] 2004, on loss of social integration), which might make it attractive, no matter the consequences.

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