

# Representing Female Bullying in Post-Feminist Society: Visual Data for Intersectional Analysis

## Rappresentazioni del bullismo femminile nella società post-femminista. Dati visuali per un'analisi intersezionale

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### Abstract

Bullying is a relational, socially and culturally located phenomenon in which students engage in group-level practices aimed at constructing boundaries between acceptable/unacceptable and valued/devalued gendered and classed subjectivities. Adopting Bourdieu's theoretical frame, data are analysed, through an intersectional perspective, considering cultural capital as a key element in constructing specific gender and class habitus subjectivities. Gender representations of bullying highlight the role of bodily appearance (beauty, clothes, migratory background), female social desirability, and school performance, constructing young girls' subjectivities as persons of value. Moreover, cultural capital and migratory background are crucial in reproducing specific representations of femininity. This study aims to contribute to the debate on bullying knowledge to support the construction of anti-bullying policies. Bullying in school mirrors the power dynamics of the post-feminist society. It highlights the need for putting the focus back on the structural gender aspects in bullying as well as in society, overcoming the individualistic neoliberal perspective.

**Keywords:** Gender representations, Cultural capital, Bodily appearance, Female social desirability, Structural gender aspects.

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### Sommario

Il bullismo è un fenomeno relazionale, socialmente e culturalmente radicato, in cui gli studenti sono coinvolti in pratiche di gruppo volte a costruire confini tra soggettività di genere e di classe accettabili/inaccettabili e valorizzate/svalutate. Adottando il quadro teorico di Bourdieu, nel presente lavoro, i dati sono analizzati, attraverso una prospettiva intersezionale, considerando il capitale culturale come elemento chiave nella costruzione di specifiche soggettività di genere e di classe. Le rappresentazioni di genere del bullismo evidenziano il ruolo dell'aspetto fisico (bellezza, abbigliamento, background migratorio), della desiderabilità sociale e del rendimento scolastico, costruendo la soggettività delle giovani ragazze come persone di valore. Inoltre, il capitale culturale e il background migratorio sono cruciali nella riproduzione di specifiche rappresentazioni della femminilità. Questo studio si propone di contribuire al dibattito sulla conoscenza del bullismo per supportare la costruzione di politiche antibullismo. Il bullismo a scuola rispecchia le dinamiche di potere della società post-femminista. Sottolinea la necessità di riportare l'attenzione sugli aspetti strutturali di genere nel bullismo, così come nella società, superando la prospettiva individualistica neoliberale.

**Parole chiave:** Rappresentazioni di genere, capitale culturale, aspetto fisico, desiderabilità sociale femminile, aspetti strutturali di genere.

### 1. Introduction

One out of ten adolescents has been bullied at school (Cosma *et al.* 2024). Bullying strongly affects the health of many young people all over the world (Chester *et al.* 2015; Forsberg 2019)[1]: being a “tenacious problem in schools” (Walton, Niblett 2012). Despite there being no significant differences in the percentage of boys and girls’ victims of bullying in school (Cosma *et al.* 2024), there are gender connotations in bullying practices<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, since school bullying mirrors the power dynamics in society, both social class and gender play a key role (Due *et al.* 2009). Since no social organization is gender neutral (Acker 1990), to support educational policies to contrast bullying, an in-depth consideration of gender aspects in bullying is necessary in the context of the contemporary post-feminist approach. According to the post-feminist theoretical perspective, the feminist gains

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<sup>4</sup> Boys are more often involved in physical fights (14%) than girls (6%) (Cosma *et al.* 2024). Moreover, about 12% of adolescents report cyberbullying others, more boys (14%) than girls (9%); while 15% have been cyberbullying victims: 15% boys and 16% girls (Cosma *et al.* 2024).

of the 1970s and 80s have been actively undermined in the last decades (McRobbie 2015), emphasizing the personal choice and individual agency aspects, instead of collective political activism within a structural patriarchal society perspective, in the context of neoliberal discourses (Sims-Schouten, Edwards 2016).

Despite the increasing number of studies on bullying (par 2.1) and on gender and bullying (par. 2.3), female bullying representations in relation to cultural capital in the post-feminist neoliberal context have not yet been investigated. This study is, therefore, led by the following main question: What are the boys' and girls' representations of female bullying in relation to social class (cultural capital) within the gendered post-feminist dominant discourses?

This study investigates the gender representations of bullying by early adolescents (ages 10-13) through a visual method research design. The study adopts an intersectional research approach focusing on female bullying representations in relationship with social class considered as cultural capital of the respondents, adopting field and capital concepts and analytical categories suggested by Bourdieu: contemporary femininity is investigated as forms of capital – cultural and physical<sup>5</sup> (Shilling 2004) – that may become symbolic in relation to the construction of specific bullying subjectivities.

## **2. Theoretical background on bullying and gender**

### ***2.1. Bullying from individual motivation to social violence***

Prevarication, harassment and violence in school contexts affect adolescents' wellbeing and health. Since the Seventies, such phenomena have been analysed and dealt with mainly through the conceptual framework of bullying, which, following the influential work of Olweus (1978), highlights that such aggressive behaviour is characterised by intentionality, repetition over time and power imbalance between perpetrators and victims. Such conceptualisation emphasises individuals' motivations and characteristics as causes of bullying and victimisation. Some critics have pointed out the limits of this framing, which overlooks the role of social norms, cultural contexts, and structural inequalities in shaping the forms and characteristics of bullying (Favretto, Ferrara, Colangelo 2025; Lohmeyer, Threadgold 2023; Horton, Forsberg 2019; Horton 2011).

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5 Bourdieu refers to incorporated capital as a sub-section of cultural capital. Shilling defines "physical capital" as the social formation of bodies through sport, leisure, and other activities in ways that reflect a social location and which are accorded symbolic value (Shilling 2004).

Recently, a different paradigm of school bullying research has emerged that considers the social and cultural dynamics of bullying (Lohmeyer, Threadgold 2023). Within this view, power imbalance is not reduced to individual size or strength but is rooted in social hierarchies and structural inequalities (Horton, Forsberg 2019; Horton *et al.* 2024). Moreover, the dichotomy bully-victim is seen as a discursive rhetoric that tends to simplify a complex phenomenon that entails group dynamics (Ringrose, Renolds 2010), friendship networks (Bouchard *et al.* 2018) and the overlapping with other experiences of gender and sexuality-based harassment and violence (Milnes, Turner-Moore, Gough 2021). Bullying is also considered as part of a broader category of social violence (Hammarén 2022), benefiting from a transdisciplinary approach (Marini, Volk 2016).

This new paradigm has been fostered by qualitative researchers who have explored adolescents' perspectives on bullying at school (Thornberg 2011). Such studies explore bullying as the result of status definition, reputation management, and exclusion practices strictly linked to the group dimension of school life (Forsberg 2019; Milnes, Turner-Moore, Gough 2021). Perceptions of social differences are revealed as a pivotal aspect of bullying, and those differences mirror relevant social categories such as class, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability (Walton, Niblett 2012). In this perspective, schools, -with their implicit normative orders, values hierarchies and institutionalized racism and sexism - become relevant contexts for investigating bullying as a systemic phenomenon and for framing anti-bullying policies (Hammarén 2022). Dynamics of symbolic violence are also highlighted to shed light on the mechanisms that allow violence to persist over time (Lohmeyer, Threadgold 2023; Hammarén 2022).

From a theoretical point of view, bullying is framed as a relational phenomenon. Horton and colleagues (2024), drawing on Elias' work show how bullying can be understood as emerging from "figurations", that is "the webs of interdependency that come from macro, long-term social arrangements (or sociogenesis) that become internalised and acted out by individuals at a deep-rooted and often unquestioning level of psychological structures (psychogenesis)" (Horton *et al.* 2024, p. 959).

## ***2.2. Bullying through Bourdieu's lens***

Horton and colleagues (2024) employ the Bourdieusian notion of field to interpret bullying as an arena of social action, characterized as a configuration of objective relations, structured by a specific logic, where power struggles take place over relevant stakes and strategic resources and where specific forms of capital become relevant for the construction of gendered identities (Klein 2006).

According to Bourdieu, different forms of capital get involved - economic, social, or cultural, or different combinations of those; each may become symbolic capital, that is acknowledged as legitimate by habitus predisposed to recognize it as a sign of importance (Bourdieu 1979). For Bourdieu, the acquisition and accumulation of different forms of capital is a structuring mechanism, a process that underpins social practices in social fields and allows for continuous accrual, conversion, and consolidation as people transit through different social spaces (Ibid.). The habitus can be defined as a technology of strategic game-playing accrual (Skeggs 2004).

The concept of habitus overcomes the dualism between objectivism and subjectivism in explaining social practices. Bourdieu has defined it as a “structured structure” and a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1980), that is, a set of durable and transposable dispositions that integrate past experiences and conditions that produce a matrix of perception which permits solving new problems by analogy with those already solved in the past. The habitus is the mechanism used to explain how individuals adapt to their contexts and deal with new circumstances. These ways are partly pre-reflexive and incorporated rather than completely conscious and rational (Ibid.).

The Bourdieusian notion of habitus has been criticized for being over-deterministic, as Bourdieu has emphasized mainly the reproductive and adaptive elements of the habitus rather than the generative ones. Scholars point to the need to reduce the explanatory power of the habitus in favour of a wider consideration of its working in relation to reflexive and learning processes within specific contexts (Sayer 2011).

Bourdieu’s model offers a lens to frame the self as structured by a logic of accumulation of value through “the acquisition, conversion and accrual of capitals (economic, symbolic, cultural and social)” (Skeggs, Loveday 2012, p. 475). However, Skeggs notes that while Bourdieu’s analysis perfectly explains middle-class individuals’ experience and strategy, it cannot provide a viable way to represent those of the working class as individuals of value. In his analysis, they emerge exclusively as those lacking resources and titles (Skeggs 2004). Moreover, the property-like model of self-formation is imbued with moral evaluations, contributing to the construction of moral hierarchies along the boundaries of social stratification.

This study investigates female bullying representations through the Bourdieusian theoretical framework. Bourdieu’s relational view of social phenomena frames bullying as a socially and culturally situated phenomenon embedded in power dynamics. Students’ desire for popularity and status is considered part of the ongoing dynamics of interdependency in schools. These social attributes can only be understood relationally since they have no ontological meaning outside the ties that bind or divide them” (Horton *et al.* 2024, p. 959). The stakes that become relevant in the school context and the social hierarchy and moral orders that underpin them are

always relational; there may be different stakes, values and morals “but those with the most symbolic power in any situation get to ‘make’ the morals” (Lohmeyer, Threadgold 2023, p. 483).

### ***2.3. Bullying and gender construction in neoliberal post-feminist discourses***

Several studies show differences between boys and girls in the forms of bullying acted out or suffered, and in the risks of victimisation (Cosma *et al.* 2024). These studies on sex differences have shed light on less visible forms of violence, such as that experienced by girls. However, they tend to essentialize gender differences and to overlook gender stereotypes and power dynamics that reproduce hierarchies (Horton, Forsberg 2019; Gonick, Conrads 2022; Knipp 2025).

Bullying is about performing hegemonic gender roles and identities. In the school contexts, dominant gender norms and hierarchies are inscribed into a hidden curriculum through which social control is deployed as discipline of the body (Morris 2005). Forms of institutionalised sexism affect school policies as well as peers’ relationships and teachers and pupils’ interactions (Gonick, Conrads 2022). Bullying is linked to the “normative cruelties” of doing gender through the practices of differentiation and otherisation (Ringrose, Reynolds 2010). The gender-based aggressions are rooted in the hierarchies of gender and sexuality (Ringrose, Rawlings 2015) and also refer to the prevalence of the implicit heterosexual norm in regulating sexuality (Gonick, Conrads 2022).

Schools and peer groups are sites where gender and sexuality are policed and spaces where the borders between “normal” and “deviant” practices are fiercely defended but sometimes also challenged (Gonick, Conrads 2022).

Nonetheless, female bullying practices involve the competition among different forms of femininities and the stigmatization of some of them. Scholars (Gonick 2006; McRobbie 2015; Ringrose 2007; Pomerantz *et al.* 2013) have analysed the contemporary constructions of femininity mainly within the theoretical perspective of post-structuralism, inspired by Foucault’s work. It investigates the discourses and technologies that constitute young girls’ subjectivities mainly as a cultural frame within which the possibilities of specific meanings, gazes and bodily practices are interiorised. Such studies have analysed the intertwining of post-feminist and neo-liberal discourses. Post-feminism, as a cultural frame, represents women as agentic individuals, emphasizing freedom of choice, empowerment, self-monitoring, and discipline (Gill, Scharff 2011; Gonick 2006). This discourse is consonant with the neo-liberal tension toward individualisation in many areas of social and personal life. Especially middle-class girls grow up within the

post-feminist and neo-liberal ideals. They are fostered to do well at school, sport and social relations, feel powerful, and be in an equal position with their male counterparts (Pomerantz, Raby 2011). For working-class girls, this new culture may create frustration and anxiety when confronting the educational system and the labour market, which considers them as fit solely for the low-paid jobs (Gonick 2006).

This new construction of girlhood is not unitary and presents many internal tensions. Gonick (2006) notes how the “girl power” discourse goes alongside another one, which stresses girls as fragile, vulnerable, and at risk of not developing, without help, the required attributes of the neo-liberal subject. Also, the performing, high-achieving girl is always at risk of not being acknowledged as entirely feminine. Performances of hyper-femininity and ‘smartness’ become strategies to maintain feminine identities in predominantly male-dominated spaces (McRobbie 2015; Pomerantz *et al.* 2013). New material tools, such as the affordances offered by social network sites, pose specific challenges (Ringrose 2011; Gill, Scharff 2011).

Around these fractures and tensions, contemporary discourses of femininity construct spaces for enlarging girls’ experiences and potentialities, but at the same time, for reproducing traditional gender norms and practices. Girls negotiate their subjectivities in relation to boys but increasingly in a conflicting confrontation with their female peers within a neoliberal individualistic society (Gonick, Conrads 2022).

### **3. Methodology and research design**

#### ***3.1 The case study***

The study applies a participatory multimethod research design. It was carried out in five schools with 7th-grade students in the Marche region (Italy). Data collection followed the University policy on ethics of research and the GDPR (UE 2016/679) rules. Detailed information about the research was provided to the school’s head, parents, and students. Parents’ and students’ Informed consent was obtained prior to the beginning of the research.

Italy represents an international case study deserving of further investigation because a reduction in bullying rates had been observed as a result of increasing public attention on the topic (Chester *et al.* 2015), however, data are still dramatic: in 2023, almost 24% of 11–13-year-olds were victims of offensive, disrespectful and/or violent behaviour in the last twelve months (Istat 2025). In Italy, the Marche region is in the central part of the country. It is considered a hinge region between the north, with more developed welfare services, and the south, with less efficient interventions. The regional data concerning welfare policy aligns with the national media

value (Genova, Pesaresi 2022). Data on female bullying and cyberbullying in the Marche region show a lower prevalence in comparison to the national mean: 15,5% of 13<sup>th</sup> years old girls reported being victims of bullying vs 17,3% at the national level; 14,9% reported being cyberbullied vs 18,4% at the national level. However, at the regional level, both bullying and cyberbullying victimization have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. The former increased from 12,1% in 2018 to 14,9% in 2022, and the latter from 8,2% to 13,5%<sup>6</sup>.

### ***3.2 Drawings within a participatory multimethod research design***

We used art-based methods (Leavy 2020) such as drawing and theatre to increase participation and explore embodied forms of knowledge. Nonetheless, this study focuses only on visual data produced during the drawing sessions and the textual insertions and/or the comments to the drawings. The following analysis is based on 119 individual drawings and text comments realised in the early phase of the project, when students were asked to represent what they consider bullying to be. In our study, the students involved were 44,1% female, 36,2% male, 15,3% preferred not to tell their gender (4,5% were missing).

### ***3.3 Collecting data through drawings***

In social research with adolescents, drawing is a creative method that provides spaces for agentic participation; it is a visual way to express students' voices (Eldèn 2013; Literat 1993). Drawing is an intermediary that lightens the relationship between researcher and participants (Pauwels 2010; Gallagher 2008; Lomax 2012). It enhances a direct and inclusive way of participating and thinking about bullying, bypassing the verbal/written representation. That facilitates participation by vulnerable students, such as those with language impairment or who are not fluent in the national language. Visual elicitation also allows for the tacit, embodied and affective facets of young people's experience to emerge (Kearney, Hyle 2004). Drawing as an embodied practice illuminates what is difficult to express verbally. That offers a way to capture the tacit dynamics of social exclusion/inclusion, the hidden power relations (gender, class, ethnicity, disability) embedded in interactive contexts, the gender unconscious models and the forms of engagement with them. On the other hand, the drawing process is

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<sup>6</sup> HBSC 2022. Stili di vita e salute tra i giovani italiani. Regione Marche; HBSC 2022. Principali risultati <https://www.epicentro.iss.it/hbsc/indagine-2022-nazionali> (accessed 19/04/2026).

a reflexive practice: it stimulates critical thinking about everyday experiences in peer social contexts. Drawing can be understood as an individual and collective practice that captures the shared dimension of the school context (Rose 2012).

In data analysis, different layers of interpretation are involved (Balmer 2021). The visual dimension is the key data considered in this study, because the figurative elements allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The image is often integrated with a verbal part, as in comics. Where the verbal part is present, the analysis considers the comics as well.

### ***3.4 Operationalisation process for gender and cultural capital***

The two main variables investigated are gender and cultural capital. Adolescents' gender has been operationalised into three categories: female, male, and prefer not to define. Concerning the drawings' content, we opted for a binary sexual representation: male and female, according to the explicit physical characteristics represented. For our analytical purposes, we consider the institutional dimension of cultural capital and have operationalized it as the sum of young people's parents' educational credentials. We operationalized cultural capital according to the principle of dominance, in the following way: high cultural capital when at least a parent has tertiary education credentials; medium when at least a parent has secondary school credentials, and low when both parents have below secondary school titles. Cultural capital is considered a proxy of the "family resources" (Nash 2002), which influences socialization by equipping children with specific competencies and attitudes for navigating institutional requests and promoting a strategic conception of agency.

### ***3.5 Data analysis process***

Data analysis was performed using a qualitative, in-depth approach. First, we carried out different layers of analysis on the entire corpus of data. Initially, we performed a thematic analysis separately on the drawings and the text comments using Maxqda; subsequently, we put together and compared visual and textual results. As a second step, we conducted an inter-group analysis highlighting common elements and contrasting differences in the themes among groups (males/females and, amongst the latter, medium-high level of cultural capital vs low one). A qualitative analysis has been conducted concerning the relationship between cultural capital and gender representations in bullying drawings and comics.

#### **4. Results: cultural capital and gender representations in the drawings**

This section firstly presents some descriptive statistics (paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2) concerning bullying representations. The analysis of female representation in bullying drawings highlights two main themes: the bodily appearance (paragraph 3.3) and the school performance (paragraph 3.4).

##### ***4.1 Binary explicit gender characteristics: data descriptive statistics***

The drawings represent bullying as a phenomenon involving both genders. Nonetheless, binary explicit gender elements (male/female) are highlighted in 119 individual drawings out of 177. The analysis focuses on drawings with explicit gender characteristics. Descriptive statistics (Table 1) show that in explicit gender binary representations of bullying, males are dominant both as bullies, bystanders, and victims (76 drawings out of 119). In addition, in over half of these drawings (55), bullying is represented as an exclusively male experience.

In the drawings that bring the female gender into play (48 drawings out of 119), we observe the coexistence of traditional/hegemonic representations, marked by the male representation of the bully and the female representation of the victim (8 drawings), and less conventional ones, with a female representation of both bullies and victims (12 drawings) or male and female mixed bullies and/or bystanders (7 drawings). These representations, which see girls play the roles of both aggressors and victims, are proposed only by female respondents (56), except for two of them who have not indicated their gender.

The representation of the female bully acting against a male victim is almost absent (1 drawing). In 6 drawings, females are represented as part of a mixed group of bullies or bystanders in situations where the victim is male.

##### ***4.2. Bullying forms, gender characteristics and family cultural capital***

Data shows a partially different interpretation of the forms of abuse directed towards girls and boys. The most frequent form of violence can be traced back to the category of insults and verbal derision, which appears in most of the drawings in a substantially transversal way (34/40 in the drawings with female victims – and 52/72 – in the ones with male victims, and 4 out of 7 drawings with mixed bullies/bystanders).

Table 1 Gender representations of bullying in drawings.

|                  | Male bullies/ bystanders | Female bullies/ bystanders | Undefined bullies/ bystanders | Absent bullies/ bystanders | Mixed female & male bullies/ by-standers | n. of drawings |
|------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--|----------------|
| Male victim      | 55                       | 1                          | 4                             | 10                         | 6  | 76             |
| Female victim    | 8                        | 12                         | 6                             | 14                         | 0  | 40             |
| Undefined Victim | 2                        | 0                          | 0                             | 0                          | 1  | 3              |
| Mixed victims    | 0                        | 0                          | 0                             | 0                          | 0  | 0              |
| n. of drawings   | 65                       | 13                         | 10                            | 24                         | 7  | 119            |

However, in scenes with male protagonists, there is a recurrence of forms of physical violence and/or verbal threats towards acts of force (14 out of a total of 18 drawings); this kind of representations are, on the other hand, a minority in drawings marked by female protagonists (3, out of a total of 18 drawings), in line with other studies (Cosma *et al.* 2024)

The drawings made by the girls are characterized by an emphasis placed on the digital sphere of social dynamics of exclusion and marginalization (although the numbers are limited: 5 girls out of 56, 3 boys out of 44, 1 ungendered out of 19).

Furthermore, it is confirmed (Jamal *et al.* 2015; Cosma *et al.* 2024) that the reference to relational bullying is slightly more widespread among girls, who represent forms of explicit exclusion much more frequently (11 drawings of girls out 56 and 8 of boys out 44 and 5 of 19 ungendered ones). Finally, the focus on corporeality is mainly represented by girls (35/56) compared to boys (15/44), in terms of beauty, body weight, exteriority, ways of dressing and appearing, both in verbal expressions and in the victims' visual representations.

Physical violence is marginal (18 out of 119) in the overall corpus of data, compared to verbal and relational violence (91 drawings). Nonetheless, considering the relationship between cultural capital and bullying representation, physical violence has been drawn mainly by girls with low cultural capital (4 drawings on 6).

### ***4.3 Female representation in bullying drawings: bodily appearance***

#### *4.3.1. “You are disgusting”: canons of body beauty*

The issue of body appearance dominates drawings 1 to 5 (Fig. 1 and 2): they represent verbal insults about body weight and shape, in virtual communication and physical contexts (drws. n. 1, 4, Fig. 1), and concern towards body fat (drws. 2 and 3), which is also associated with filth. These drawings underline the concern for the comparison with one's body image, both private and personal (as in the mirror scene), and public. The symbolic value of the external appearance emerges as a vehicle of social acceptance.

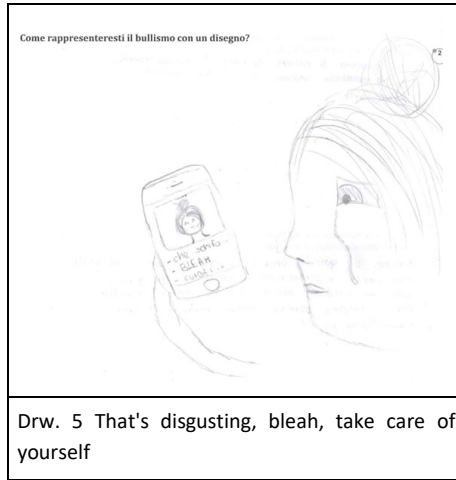
The key theme of physical appearance recurs in bullying literature (Reay 2005, Currie, Kelly, Pomerantz 2007). Data show recurring observations on physical beauty in graphic terms and as verbal expressions, as ‘ugly, fat, curvy’. The reference to weight can be defined as bodily capital in relational dynamics (Skeggs 2004). A sexist construction of popularity dominates (Pomerantz, Raby 2020). Most of the drawings recall some constitutive aspects of the hegemonic models of femininity: fatness and thinness are recalled as stigmatizing elements, which refer to the incorporation of normative canons on female corporeality (Eriksson, Horton 2025).

Fig. 1 Representations of bullying based on physical appearance

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   |  |
| <p>Drw.1 On the left side: "Online: truly horrible video. What a whale! Ball! Close the channel". On the right side: "Real Life: how thin you are! Ha, ha".</p> | <p>Drw. 2 Ugly, lose weight, fat, eat less, ugly, horrible, you're disgusting, you make me want to throw up, the others are superior to you, fat, stop it victim, make me vomit, fat, fat, you're ugly, you're not like the others, but look at you, you're disgusting</p> |
|   |  |
| <p>Drw. 3 You suck, you have big thighs</p>   | <p>Drw. 4 "Ah, ah fat!"</p>  |

Note: Drw is a short for 'drawing'

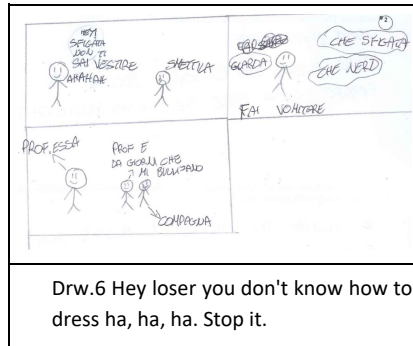
*Fig. 2 Representations of bullying based on physical appearance (continue)*



#### 4.3.2. “You don’t know how to dress”: canons of the ‘right’ clothes

The reference to a normative model of physical appearance also concerns material dimensions relating to clothing as a distinctive form of consumption (Bourdieu 2001). In most of the drawings, girls are represented according to distance/proximity to ideals of aesthetic perfection: thin, with long, straight hair and with the ‘right’ clothes (Currie *et al.* 2007, Francombe-Webb, Silk 2016) In drawings 6, 10 and 14, the social importance of dressing emerges, despite the simplicity of the graphic line. The femininity models come into play in bullying through the ‘non-human materials’ (Ringrose, Rawlings 2015) such as clothes or, conversely, by the presence of uncool objects such as the big briefcase bag (see drw no. 13), glasses and the generic reference to the inadequacy of other people’s clothing (Pomerantz, Raby 2020).

Fig. 3 Representations of bullying based on physical appearance (clothing)



4.3.3. “Go back to your country”: discrimination on migration backgrounds

The hegemonic model of femininity also fosters discriminatory positions based on migration backgrounds, in a small group of bullying drawings. That is a relevant aspect to consider in the framework of public debate on migration policies. A drawing (no. 7, Fig. 4) proposed by a pupil whose parents come from Eastern Europe shows a girl with thick, curly hair and full lips who cries because of the comments and insults she receives about her body. In this drawing, a dialectical tension emerges between identification and distancing oneself, where somatic traits different from one’s own are recalled. This occurs within a narrative frame centered on the exclusion of the ‘different,’ characterizing the second-generation girls. In this illustration, the aesthetic imperative of the ‘beautiful girl’ is also modulated according to class and ethnic canons (Cossens, Jackson 2020): denigration arises from the shape of the hair and lips, showing the rhetoric on the diversity of the foreigner ‘pure/impure’ and the risk of contagion (Douglas 1966).

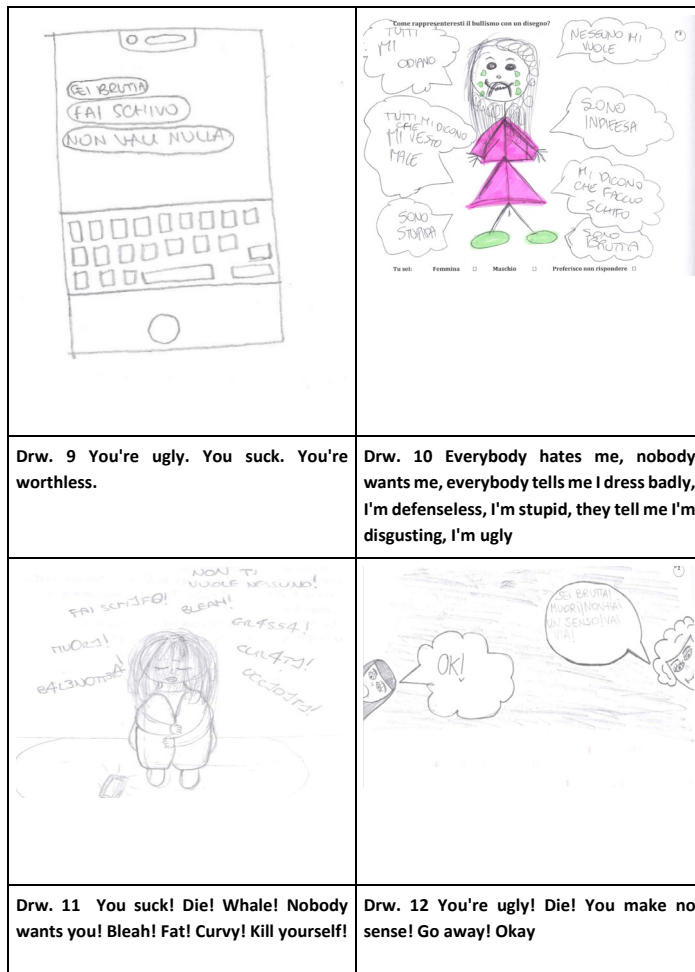
In addition, the perception of individual value recurs: the idea of ‘worth nothing’ (see the following paragraph) emerges in the dehumanization of the ‘Other’. The expression ‘I am human too’ constitutes an example of the problem of ‘misfitting’ described in literature as characteristic of the experiences of victims of bullying. It recalls a distinctive aspect of the mechanism of social maladjustment according to which the victim is perceived as ‘otherness’ through an emphasis placed on aspects/traits of diversity, an emphasis that opens to drifts towards dehumanization itself (Thornberg 2018). This mechanism is pervasive in the dynamics of bullying exclusion and is frequently found in the representations proposed by many pupils, albeit often with more nuanced tones (Strindberg, Horton, Thornberg 2020).



The drawings reveal social pressure on the feminine ‘ideal type’ characterized by body canons, migration background elements, and educational performance. In these drawings, a sort of syllogistic reasoning identifies ugliness with low self-value, marginalizing some girls.

Furthermore, some facets of the neoliberal logic reverberate in these social inclusion and exclusion dynamics. In particular, it is possible to observe how the classification of otherness, with respect to the sense of the group, is often modulated through the language of the market economy (see also below, drws. no. 10, 12, Fig. 5).

*Fig. 5 Representations of bullying based on female social desirability*



#### 4.4. “Stupid” and/or “swat”: school performance and family cultural capital

In some drawings, the dynamics of derision, exclusion, and stigmatization concerning the value of school performance are structured as a representation (vision) and social division according to Bourdieu’s analytical approach. Drawings by pupils with high family cultural capital (5 drawings) represent female bullying victims as ‘not having enough intelligence’ and being poor at the school level. Only in two students’ works (drws. 6, 13), with low family cultural capital or migrant background, there is a reference to this theme of educational performance according to a value orientation opposite to the previous one: the object of derision concerns excessive scholastic ability and skills. In drawing no. 13 (Fig. 6), there is a group of male bullies who flout a girl with big glasses and a big briefcase, saying the word ‘swat’.

Data show the persistence of a ‘traditional’ modality which distinguishes students, who are more disadvantaged on a socio-economic and cultural level, in their daily confrontation with educational institutions and their related values and objectives (Archer, Halsall, Hollingworth 2007). Moreover, these differences in how normative discourses are used, selected, and translated into situated dynamics of action make evident, as Thornberg (2017) already observed, the intertwining of agency and structure, between tacit adherence and selective and creative appropriation.

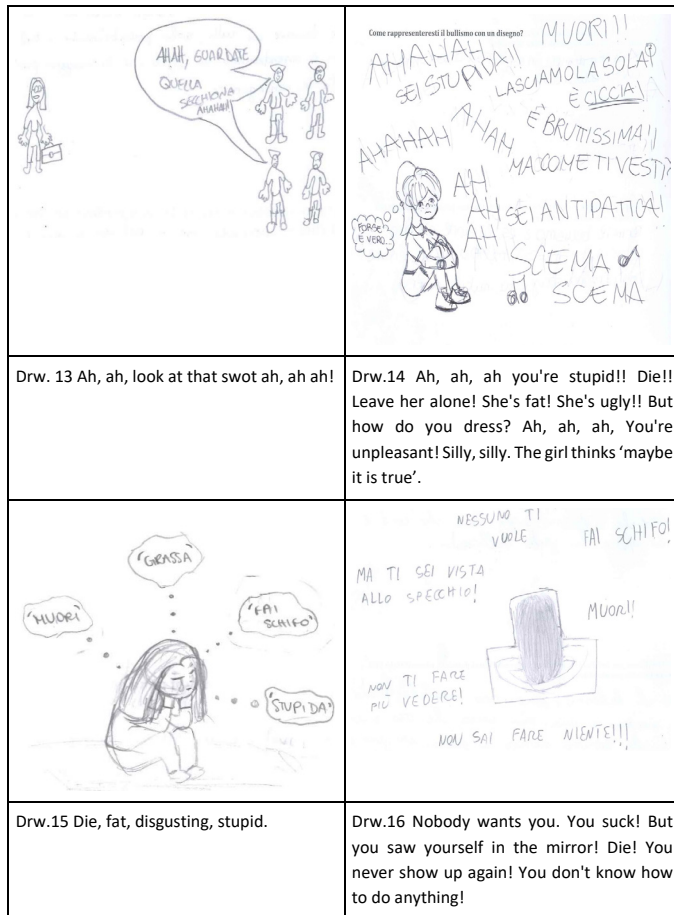
However, these dynamics take shape within, and remain anchored to, the fracture of social divisions. There is a structural rooting in how these discourses are mobilized or not. The different meanings attributed to educational success recall deeper gender dispositions, with a class matrix. The different references to scholastic skills and intelligence refer to different educational habitus, tacit ways of enhancing the formal knowledge transmitted by the school institution (Hollingworth, Williams 2010). Finally, it should be noted that, in the representations (drws. no. 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16), there is a tendency to overlap among girls’ intelligence, school performance, social desirability, and personal value (Francis, Skelton, Read 2010). These elements allow us to reflect on the pervasiveness of neoliberal logic, which shapes the very subjectivities of youngsters. Therefore, this performance-and-educational-success theme would seem to be interpreted and lived in a neoliberal and post-feminist way as an attitude, merit, and personal intelligence (Ringrose 2007).

Along this interpretative line proposed by literature (Currie *et al.* 2007), it is possible to reflect on how the narrative of the ‘successful girl’ is specific of the upper social classes (Allan, Charles 2014) and constitutes a key element of the identity tensions that characterize the ‘privileged’ young women. These tensions refer to pushes towards an identity realization of ‘supergirl’ subjectivity (Francombe-Webb, Silk 2016). Subjectivities which are marked

by post-feminist and contradictory normative ideals, based on the imperative of success in every area of daily life. In this sense, the drawings reveal the internalization of multiple value orientations, such as having to be a socially active and aesthetically attractive girl but also performing from an academic point of view (Pomerantz *et al.* 2013; Ringrose 2007).

In these drawings, the ambivalence of the 'good girl' emerges: attractive, socially, and successful in schooling. In the reproductions taken as examples, there is a simple but immediate interpretation of skills at school under the neoliberal lens, as an individual and intrinsic quality linked to a lack of intelligence; school failure thus ends up being assimilated to the absence/lack of personal value, according to the same reflection of the logic of failure as individual responsibility.

Fig. 6 Representations of bullying based on school performance



## 5. Conclusions: the gendered social order in bullying representations

This work has adopted a Bourdieuan perspective, an art-visual-based methodology, and an intersectional analysis to investigate representations of female bullying. The visual representations of female bullying of 7th-grade students show some tacit, pre-reflexive, and incorporated dimensions of bullying, revealing how prevarication and violence in schools are rooted in social power dynamics.

The analysis of the empirical materials highlights how bullying experiences are narrated through grammar and meaning repertoires that reproduce an order embedded in societal and institutional structures that are profoundly conservative of inequalities. In line with Bourdieu's relational view, the pupils' drawings offer an interpretation of bullying as an articulated configuration of social relationships characterized by an imbalance of strength and power. Following Ringrose and Renold (2016), it can be considered that the problem of bullying is at the heart of power dynamics, through which specific social hierarchies are strengthened daily. The intersection between bullying, gender and cultural capital reveals how the phenomenon of bullying involves power structures between boys and girls, privileged and disadvantaged boys and /or girls (Shute, Owens, Slee 2007); power structures that pushes girls to align themselves with neoliberal and sexist representations of femininity, feeding hierarchies in the female universe.

From the data, a heterogeneous set of 'structured' and 'structuring' elements can be detected: differences in educational skills, bodily capital and Maussian female 'body techniques' (Mauss 1936), migration background and social skills. These differences outline a 'matrix of power relations' (Ringrose, Renold 2016, p. 5) within which

the symbolic and meaningful repertoire that female students draw on for the construction of gender identities takes shape. This set of elements outlines an ideal of a successful girl as attractive, performing academically, cool, and socially integrated, but also 'Caucasian'. It emerges the contour of a normative femininity that is profoundly conservative of the social order and that constitutes a form of symbolic violence.

Bridging cultural capital and bullying representations, this study suggests the need to foster the debate on normative gender references, considering their structural roots and avoiding emphasis on individual responsibility and agency.

Two analytical lines can be identified. Firstly, the distinction of 'moral' boundaries between us/them as a practice marked by and revealing of tacit class and ethnic divisions; divisions within which the same female gender performance is played out. Values, definitions, imaginaries, and ideals that,

therefore, provide tools for the construction of gender, ethnic, and class subjectivities for girls.

Secondly, despite the common 'ethical' distancing from bullying, in the drawings there is a designation of the victim of bullying as the one who is in a subordinate position in the social structure (e.g. migrant, with a specific corporeality and so on), for the capital resources possessed (cultural, economic, social and physical). This socially dominated configuration of bullying victims is widely explored in the literature (Thornberg 2017; Horton *et al.* 2024; Klein 2006). It has been examined in our study with a focus on the social construction of gender to reveal some tacit and normative dimensions at play in youngsters' experience of femininity.

In conclusion, the drawings reveal the complexity of the power dynamics that shape the girls' subjectivities in terms of 'normal' and 'inferior' identities. In the open dialectic between identification and distancing, denunciation and acceptance, rejection and tacit adhesion, the challenge of reproducing gender, migration background, and class hierarchies is played out (Pomerantz *et al.* 2013).

Investigating bullying through the lens of a post-feminist approach and cultural capital has provided both a critical perspective and concrete insights for deconstructing dominant values and current ideals of femininity.

This work contributed to advancing the knowledge on bullying by highlighting the relevance of the relational view and the logic of capital accrual to understand power dynamics within adolescents. Moreover, the use of a visual technique favoured the emergence of tacit and taken-for-granted dimensions of bullying. However, it presents some limits. We had to limit our analysis to a part of the total corpus of data, the one with an explicit gender visual element. Eliciting narrations about the drawings by pupils would have permitted overcoming this limitation as well as provided further insightful material for the analysis.

This study also aims to advance the debate on policies to counteract bullying. Bullying in school mirrors the power dynamics of the post-feminist society. Investigating the relationships between cultural and symbolic capital and gender bullying representations, this work highlights the need for placing the focus back on the structural gender and class aspects in bullying as well as in society. Results suggest the need to overcome the individualistic neoliberal perspective that emphasises the role of individual choice and agency, over the structural patriarchal societal conditions; and therefore, it recommends fostering collective reflection on the hegemonic models of femininity, considering beauty and fashion not as individual agency expression, but instead as tools of oppression.

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