

Youngsters in virtual realities: The phenomenon of cyberbullying in high schools in Sarajevo
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Violence and bullying in schools are not new occurrences. Insufficient information on how to deal with the issue of peer violence in schools, as well as the lack of a unified attitude of schools and government towards violence, suggest an alarming call for all levels of society to take a systemic approach to the problem of bullying in schools. I believe that increasing knowledge and objective information on this topic would help reduce violence and discrimination happening in high schools, which would contribute to the creation of more inclusive education and a society founded on respect for human rights and freedoms. However, no studies directly focus on the topic this blog deals with since it will be closely focused on the issue of cyberbullying in high schools in Sarajevo Canton. The situation in Sarajevo probably mirrors the situation in both BiH entities and neighboring countries in the SEE region. Having in mind that it is the capital and biggest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina, conducting the study in Sarajevo will provide relevant and representative data.

Bullying is a widespread problem not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but in the world in general. From Carney and Merrell's point of view, "bullying is a problem which is receiving increasing attention worldwide. Researchers in several countries have already devised and implemented bullying intervention and prevention programs on a nation-wide basis" (Carney, Merrell, 2001). Also, with the growing rate of access to the internet, new channels for bullies open up and bullying online is on the rise. "In generations past, bullying was a problem that could be left on the playground as a bullying victim returned to the safe, protective walls of the home. The advent of the internet and the rapid increase in cyberbullying, though, makes every internet user a potential cyberbullying victim (Villines, 2014)." CompariTech analyzed the results of an IPSOS international survey of adults in 28 countries and it reveals an increasing number of parents whose children have experienced some form of cyberbullying. "60 percent of parents with children aged 14 to 18 reported them being bullied in 2019. More parents than ever report that their children are getting bullied both at school and online (Cook, 2022)." Additionally, the study shows some more devastating findings. "Although the vast majority of parents reported bullying in school, 19.2% stated that bullying occurred through social media sites and apps. A further 11% indicated bullying

occurred through text messages, while 7.9% identified video games as a source. Meanwhile, 6.8% reported bullying occurred on non-social media websites, while 3.3% indicated the bullying occurred through email (Cook, 2022).” According to UNICEF (2018), 1 in 3 students between the ages of 13 and 15 worldwide experience bullying on a regular basis. Therefore, bullying is a reality for a significant proportion of students around the world. Moreover, when it comes to the digital form of peer violence or cyberbullying (threats via the Internet, social networks, text messages) it was noted that the frequency increases with age, i.e., that a quarter of younger students and a third of older students in primary schools and two-thirds of secondary school students were exposed to this form of violence (Popadić, Kuzmanović, 2016). The data in the SEE region does not vary much from the global data and it shows that a quarter of younger students and a third of older students in primary schools and two-thirds of secondary school students were exposed to this form of violence (Popadić, Kuzmanović, 2016). When it comes to the prevalence of cyberbullying in BiH society and the environment, research shows that a large number of students are exposed to some form of this type of violence. When it comes to the digital form of peer violence and bullying, it has been noted that the frequency increases with age (Šahinović, Jeftić, 2017). According to Đurišić (2015), the most common forms of peer violence and bullying, are the following: (a) verbal (threats, calling names, insults, mocking, teasing, unpleasant comments, etc.); (b) physical (hitting, kicking, pulling hair, pushing, slapping, spitting, biting, damaging or destroying clothes or property, etc.); and (c) relational violence aimed at excluding a certain individual from the peer group (ignoring, humiliating, using threats, spreading rumors, gossip, etc.) in direct communication or through digital media. In recent years, with the raise in access and usage of the internet, bullying through electronic means, specifically mobile phones or the internet has emerged, often collectively labelled *cyberbullying* (Smith et al, 2008).

Children and adolescents today are the first generation raised in a society in which technological literacy is essential for effective citizenship in the 21st century. With much more youth using digital technologies for educational and recreational purposes, there has been an increase in social problems in cyberspace, exposing them to different forms of cyber violence (Chisholm, 2005). Online or cyber violence, which is a relatively new phenomenon, includes any form of public humiliation, abuse and insulting of another person on social networks and online platforms. What distinguishes it from other types of violence is the fact that children can be exposed to it everywhere, even in the places where they were completely safe until now, it can last

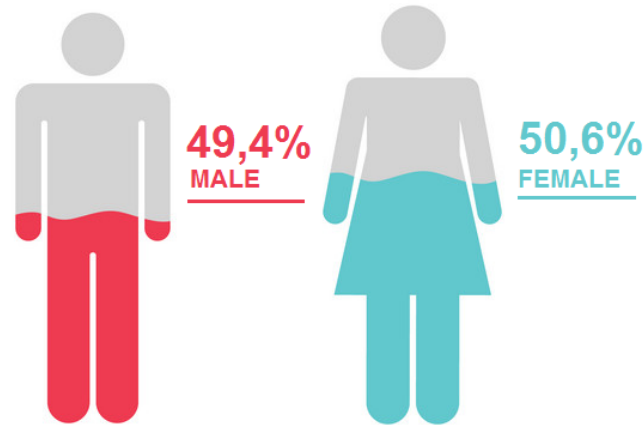
24 hours every day of the week and an unknown perpetrator can create additional fear and insecurity in the child. It is, actually, a multidimensional phenomenon that in some aspects overlaps with the already mentioned forms of violence, except that it is limited to the virtual world of online media. Taking into consideration everything said above and all the aspects and elements of cyberbullying, stated below is one rather comprehensive definition of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is harassment that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, text, and apps, or online in social media, forums, or gaming where people can view, participate in or share content. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else. It can include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation. Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior (Li, 2008).

Now that the phenomenon is defined and thoroughly explained, it is the right time to research this topic in a specific study case. The main objectives of this study are to collect different views on bullying at schools and cyberbullying in high schools in the Sarajevo Canton. The data collected through questionnaires and interviews was of great significance for the further development of this study. Quantitative research was conducted with high school students through a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions. 168 responses were collected from students in 6 schools in Sarajevo. Qualitative research was conducted with teachers and pedagogues of 7 schools in Sarajevo, through semi-structured interviews consisting of 10 questions. 10 interviews were conducted in total. The schools that participated in this research are Second Gymnasium, Third Gymnasium, First Bosniak Gymnasium, Catholic School Center Saint Joseph, High School for Textile, Leather and Design, High School of Metalworking and Railway School Center.

The sample consists of 50,6% female respondents (85 girls) and 49,4% male respondents (83 boys), hence the research has an equal approach to boys and girls and both perspectives were equally taken into account. These are all students from the third and fourth grades of high school, aged between 16 and 19 years. According to the findings, children in high schools in Sarajevo spend mainly 5+ hours using information and communication technologies (ICTs) every day. When it comes to comparing the results between boys and girls, it seems that boys spend more time using digital devices. The average screen time for boys would be 5 to 10 hours, while it would

be 3 to 5 hours for girls. Both boys and girls use this time mainly to browse through social media. The most used social network is Instagram, followed by YouTube, then Tik Tok and Snapchat. They almost do never use Twitter and very rarely use Facebook.



Graph 1: Male vs female respondents

One of the leading questions for this research was to explore the extent of cyberbullying and how often it happens in high schools. 21% of respondents experienced cyberbullying 1 to 5 times in the last three years, 7% said they experienced it 5 to 10 times, and 8% said they experienced it more than 10 times in the same time frame. To compare the results, 67% of girls reported being cyberbullied and 33% of boys, out of 33 people in total responded they have experienced this kind of bullying. Out of 85 girls who participated in the questionnaire, 19 of them reported they experienced cyberbullying 1-5 times in the given timeframe, 1 of them reported being cyberbullied 5-10 times and 2 of them more than 10 times. Out of 83 boys who participated, 4 reported being cyberbullied 1-5 times, 2 reported 5-10 times and 3 reported 10 times. As stated above, the majority of high school students have 5 to 10 hours of screen time daily, which they mostly spend using social media or playing games. With this in mind, it is no surprise that this is exactly where cyberbullying most often happens. 150 out of 168 students said that it occurs on social media.

Usually, the victims are girls and other vulnerable groups in class, such as LGBTI children, Roma children, and children with disabilities. In shorter, everybody who is somehow different from the majority is at the risk of being bullied. The perpetrators are boys and those who are more powerful than the victims, however, the second most common answer was that there is no particular characteristic of either victim or perpetrator. While the most common forms of cyberbullying that happened among the children from my sample are exclusion from different

chatrooms and online groups, making fake profiles, posting content online without someone's consent, making fun of, and posting content to ruin someone's reputation or friendship and lastly threatening messages or emails. The incidents are usually reported firstly to peers from school, then to parents, then to pedagogues, then to teachers and lastly to the police. However, what is worrying is a rather high percentage of incidents that go unreported – 32% total.

Respondents are aware that cyberbullying has an enormous impact on the victims, especially on their mental health, self-esteem, overall psychological stability, self-harm, self-isolation and increase in fear. Another worrying response was definitely that perpetrators bully other people mostly for fun. Victims have numerous effects on their physical and mental health just because someone decided to have some fun. This shows the inevitable need for raising awareness among high school students, education and sensitizing. 45% of respondents stated that they are educated enough to recognize when cyberbullying is happening to them or someone they know, 54% of them know whom to contact when they or someone they know is experiencing cyberbullying and 50% of them trust their teachers and pedagogues enough to report the incidents that happened. It is extremely important to work on improving trust between school staff and students, but also to work with the adults (parents, teachers, PP school services) to make them more aware and sensitized.

Similar findings are drawn from the qualitative research with the professors and pedagogues. Respondents from all schools singled out psychological abuse as the most common form of violence, specifically via the Internet and social networks, while group violence is more common among high school students than individual violence. In boys, physical violence predominates, which implies aggressive and impulsive behavior that includes physical contact with another student (in most cases a boy) to knowingly inflict bodily harm and pain. However, according to some respondents, physical violence is decreasing inside and outside of school. They state that the reasons for it can be the disciplinary measures that are taken in the case of violence among students. In girls, on the other hand, verbal, emotional or psychological violence is prevalent. It is less noticeable, more subtle, lasts longer compared to the physical and is harder to notice, while the consequences are more long-lasting and more dangerous for the victim. Isolation is one of the forms of psychological violence at school experienced by both male and female students, although girls are still victims of this form of violence in more cases than boys. The Internet is one of the key causes of violent behavior and it is necessary to influence from all social

levels the suppression of this violence and especially the education of parents and students about the dangers of the Internet as well as greater control and censorship of certain content. Insufficient information on the part of parents is a big problem for a child who is given access to the Internet without additional control over its use.

Prevention of school violence in cases of cyberbullying generally includes the following steps: noticing the violence, immediate and decisive intervention to stop the violence, calming the situation (usually by talking to the victim and providing help), talking to the perpetrator of the violence, taking additional actions depending on the severity of the violent act and cooperation with other institutions (police, centers for social work, involvement of parents). The school staff must know how to recognize the signs of violence and act accordingly, and what is even more important is that the children are not labelled because of it, but that they are given attention, support and open conversation.

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