



Global Campus of Human Rights
Child Leadership Team



Global Campus
South East Europe

— ADDRESSING — CYBERBULLYING AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AMONG CHILDREN IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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You don't have to be
perfect to be amazing.

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One kind comment and support can silence a hundred cruel ones.

ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AMONG CHILDREN IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Editor

Lucija Vejmelka

Authors

**Valmira Morina, Maja Šenk, Miroslav Rajter, Roberta Matković, Tomislav Ramljak,
Sunchica Dimitrijoska and Natasha Pavićević–Stojmenovska**

Project creators and managers

Child Leadership Team SEE with CLT coordinator Nejira Pašić

Proofreading

Tomislav Piplica

Graphic design

Petar Šušnjar

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Sarajevo, 2026.



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Dear children,

Thank you once again for trusting us adults enough to invite us to learn together and to search for a better life for everyone — even in today's world, which we adults have made so complex and chaotic. As your co-editor of this important book, I feel deeply honoured to have been invited by you, insightful and brave children who, while still growing up, have chosen to confront such difficult and essential topics as violence prevention, and who already dedicate your energy and creativity to building a better world.

I am profoundly humbled by your courage to remind us how important it is to live in safe and supportive environments, and by your desire to inspire us adults to find ways to make the necessary changes. You made me pause and reflect on how we live, what we find important, where our attention is focused, and which emotions fill most of our everyday lives. And how extremely important is what we choose today, tomorrow, every day, as well as what we do to contribute to, shape, and enrich our lives and our relationships. Your message stands as a powerful reminder of what a free, creative, and compassionate society we can become.

I hope that the results of our collaboration will reach those who hold the power to shape strategies, policies, and opportunities - and that they will hear our shared call to build a fairer and more human-centred world.

Together with you and for you, I call upon governments, politicians, corporations, employers, agencies, institutions, societies, and communities to show strong political will and readiness to do everything needed to help us achieve our common goal: to spend more time together in meaningful, relaxed, and joyful moments.

If we create opportunities to spend more stress-free time (re)connecting with our parents, children, friends, neighbours, and communities, we will unlock our potential to build supportive relationships and unite our virtues and experiences in societies that truly grow and flourish.

Thank you for the invitation to walk this road with you!

Lucija Vejmelka

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FOREWORD WRITTEN TOGETHER WITH CHILDREN

CHILDREN AND EXPERTS CALL FOR URGENT ACTION

This publication was created entirely through our joint work - children and adults together. From the very beginning, we (children and adults) decided that children would not only be subjects but also active co-creators. Together, we chose the topic, with a clear goal to focus on cyberbullying and its impact on mental health. Children then read and evaluated the authors' child-friendly abstracts, suggested what should be included, took part in shaping the questions, and shared ideas for the final design and presentation of the publication. In this way, it is not only a book about children but also a book created entirely with children.

To embed children's thoughts and feelings into this foreword, children answered several openended questions, and in the next step, these statements were grouped into three thematic areas, striving to preserve children's authenticity while also conveying the key messages we wanted to share.

Why We Chose This Topic: Why It Is Important to Talk About Cyberbullying and Mental Health

Digitalisation shapes our lives. We recognise that it has brought many benefits, but also significant risks, especially the misuse of personal information and the rise of cyberbullying. We see how the generational gap and the digital divide often lead adults to underestimate the seriousness of the problem. When we hear phrases like *"you're young, you're imagining it,"* we feel insecurity, and we are discouraged from speaking openly about our feelings.

We know that cyberbullying is often invisible to adults, yet its consequences are very real and deeply engraved in our mental health: withdrawal, loneliness, insecurity, and even impulsive, risky actions. That is why we want this topic discussed through real-life examples

and lived experiences, so that it does not fade away like a passing conversation but remains recorded and remembered. This book matters to us because it preserves our voices and ensures that the topic will not fade into silence.

Children's Voices:

- ➞ *"Cyberbullying can affect mental health, because a person who has experienced this form of violence can withdraw into themselves, isolate from the world..."*
- ➞ *"Everything that is written down remains, while what is remembered fades away. A book is a great place to have all the important information on this topic."*

Messages to Adults: What We Need to Feel Safer

Our message to adults is centred on trust, understanding, and active listening. We want parents and professionals to spend more time with us, go outdoors together, and show genuine interest, rather than being trapped in the digital world themselves. We need adults to truly listen to us, to talk openly about what troubles us, to learn about the platforms and tools we use, and try to understand our world. Most needed is to treat our mental health as seriously as our physical health and provide support and help when we are exposed to violent behaviours.

We Believe Adults Should:

- learn about the digital platforms we use,
- hold open, non-judgmental conversations and provide support,
- encourage reporting of violence and explain how to do it,
- show care for mental health as equally important as physical health.

Children's Voices:

- ➞ *"We need trust. We want to feel safe that we can speak about something that bothers us."*
- ➞ *"...listen to us carefully, not to diminish our problems with sentences like 'it's just the internet,' and to teach us how to protect ourselves."*
- ➞ *"Children need a sense of security, trust, and support, especially when they encounter something unpleasant online."*
- ➞ *"Be with children not only when they click and scroll, but also when they tremble – so they know they are not alone, neither online nor in life."*

From Children to Children: How We Can Support Each Other

We see our role and responsibility in mutual support, empathy, and empowerment. We know how important it is to listen to each other and share experiences, and most importantly, to react when we see violence: to stand up for a friend, report it to adults or use the “report” option. We want to build safe spaces where there is no mockery, bullying, or promotion of self-harm, and to promote respect for diversity. We believe that small gestures of support, a word, a sign of friendship, not staying silent, can be just as important as institutional responses.

Children's Voices:

➡ *“We can defend each other — if someone sees that a friend is being mocked or bullied, they should not stay silent but react.”*

➡ *“It is very important to empower all children to be able to report violence of any kind... Children can support each other by sharing their stories and experiences.”*

➡ *“Children can do a lot for each other — the most important thing is to be friends, not bystanders.”*

➡ *“Small gestures of support can mean a great deal to someone.”*

Our Shared Message and Joint Call for Actions

We shaped this book together to show that children’s voices must be at the heart of every discussion about them. Our words, ideas, and experiences are woven into every page, not only as quotes but as guidance for adults.

We believe the world would be a better place if children were listened to and asked for their opinions more often. By taking part in this publication, we have shown how powerful children’s voices are and how inspiring they can be in leading all of us toward real change. Without children, it would be impossible to truly understand the challenges we face every day or to create programs and policies that can really protect us.

That is why we are raising an urgent call. Cyberbullying is not a small problem: it hurts children’s mental health, friendships, school life, and sometimes even basic safety. We need adults, experts, schools, governments, and communities to act NOW. We need safer online spaces, better support when something bad happens, and more care for our feelings just as much as for our bodies.

Together, children and adults, the co-creators of this publication, we believe that the world, both online and offline, can and must become a better, kinder, and safer place for all of us.



Lucija Vejmelka, PhD, associate professor

Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Croatia | ivejmelka@pravo.unizg.hr | ORCID: 0000-0002-7531-8457

Editorial Introduction

ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING AND ITS IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AMONG CHILDREN IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

The digital era has transformed childhood and adolescence, creating both unprecedented opportunities and significant risks. Among these, cyberbullying has emerged as a pressing concern, profoundly affecting the mental health and well-being of children and young people across the world. This is particularly true in Southeast Europe (SEE), a region characterised by rapid digitalisation coupled with diverse socio-economic and cultural challenges. The book *Addressing Cyberbullying and Its Impact on Mental Health among Children in Southeast Europe* seeks to explore this complex phenomenon, providing evidence-based insights and promoting a collaborative regional approach and most importantly, the highest level of child participation focused on the development of prevention and intervention approaches to address contemporary issues and diverse children's needs. In today's world, where digital technologies play a central role in children and young people's lives, the internet presents both remarkable opportunities and significant risks. While digital platforms enable communication, learning, and entertainment, they also expose children to new forms of harm, including cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is widely recognised as a persistent and pervasive problem, one that directly threatens children's mental health and well-being. The problem is particularly concerning in Southeast Europe (SEE), a region facing socio-economic challenges, post-conflict transitions, and varying levels of digital infrastructure and child protection mechanisms (Vejmelka, Sušac, & Rajhvajn Bulat, 2021).

This volume, *Addressing Cyberbullying and Its Impact on Mental Health among Children in Southeast Europe*, emerges from a unique regional collaboration that has not only focused on the problem of cyberbullying but has also exemplified the power of child participation in shaping the discourse and solutions. Developed under the Global Campus of Human Rights through its European Regional Master's Programme in Democracy and Human Rights (ERMA) and driven by the Global Campus Child Leadership Team (CLT) for Southeast Europe, this project was planned around children at its core.

Children proposed the publication's topic, voted on the abstracts, reviewed contributions, and helped shape its contents. This is a landmark initiative in SEE, demonstrating that children's active involvement in designing strategies and knowledge production is not only possible but essential.

This chapter provides an overview of cyberbullying prevalence in SEE, its mental health consequences, regional policies and legal frameworks, as well as recommendations for prevention and intervention. The chapter will highlight the role of children as agents of change in addressing cyberbullying while presenting a synthesis of key themes and findings from the collected contributions of authors represented.

The Power and Potential of Child Participation

What makes this publication unique is its demonstration of meaningful, structured child participation in shaping responses to cyberbullying. Children and young people played a leading role in conceptualising this volume. From selecting the topic to reviewing submissions, their participation has enriched every stage of the project.

Child participation in addressing cyberbullying is not only their right but a practical necessity. Children possess firsthand knowledge of the dynamics of online peer interactions and can offer valuable insights into the development of prevention strategies, and ultimately, they can and want to proactively change their peer dynamics towards positive, friendly relationships among themselves. For this, they need adequate support of trustworthy adults and children together with clear guidance and equal, fair rules, as well as reporting practices and systems that timely respond when they decide to reveal their problems. Their involvement ensures that interventions are relevant, effective, and address their actual needs (Convention of the Rights of the Child, Vejmelka et al, 2022; Larson et al, 2018).

Fortunately, child participation is in focus of many international organisations and regulations (Eurochild, European Union, Eu Commission, UNICEF), which all emphasise that future initiatives should institutionalise child participation in policy-making, program design, and evaluation, and the same should be implemented at SEE. Children should be included in the development of school codes of conduct, national legislative reforms, and regional cooperation frameworks. This participatory approach offers a blueprint for future initiatives. When children are recognised as experts in their own lives and as key stakeholders in policy design, prevention programs become more responsive and effective. Children offer unique insights into the dynamics of cyberbullying, as well as practical suggestions for interventions that resonate with their lived experiences.

Ethical Dimensions of Child Participation

Meaningful child participation in research and knowledge production is not only a methodological choice, but a highly demanding ethical process. In this volume, child participation is understood as a structured, guided, and responsible practice, grounded in the highest ethical standards of child protection, empowerment, and respect for children's capacities and vulnerabilities. Participation is not inherently ethical; it becomes ethical only when it is carefully designed, adequately supported, and continuously reflected upon. From an ethical perspective, children cannot be expected to participate meaningfully without being equipped with appropriate skills, knowledge, and emotional support. In this project, participation was intentionally designed to be neither overwhelming, exposing, uncomfortable, nor burdensome for children. On the contrary, the process aimed to create safe, trusting, and non-judgmental spaces that allowed children to express themselves authentically, to reflect on their experiences, and to engage in genuine co-creation. Such an approach acknowledges that ethical participation requires time, preparation, and continuous guidance.

A core ethical principle underpinning this work is the recognition that children's voices can only be expressed freely when power imbalances are actively addressed. This was achieved through close collaboration with experienced adults who possess both professional knowledge and ethical competence in working with children, particularly in sensitive discussions related to violence, mental health, and digital risks. This is especially crucial when working with children from vulnerable or at-risk groups, for whom participation may involve additional emotional or social risks. Importantly, the children involved in this publication were not participating for the first time. Their engagement was embedded within broader programmes in which they had undergone multiple rounds of training, gradually building skills related to communication, critical reflection, active citizenship, advocacy, and rights-based participation. These competencies enabled them to engage confidently, responsibly, and meaningfully in ethically demanding activities such as reviewing academic abstracts, discussing sensitive topics, and contributing to decision-making processes.

Such an approach positions child participation as a highly ethical process, rather than a symbolic gesture. It reflects a commitment to children's well-being, dignity, and agency, while ensuring that participation contributes positively to their development rather than exposing them to harm. By framing participation as a guided, reflective, and ethically safeguarded practice, this volume strengthens its methodological robustness and aligns with international standards on ethical child participation in research and policy development.

THE GROWING CONCERN OF CYBERBULLYING IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Cyberbullying has emerged as a pressing issue in Southeast Europe, mirroring global trends but amplified by the unique social, political, and economic dynamics of the region. The prevalence of cyberbullying varies across SEE countries, reflecting differences in digital infrastructure, socioeconomic status, legal frameworks, and cultural norms regarding peer interactions and violence.

Prevalence of Cyberbullying in SEE

According to data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) 2021/22 survey, cyberbullying victimisation rates in SEE range from 10% to 20%. Romania and Bulgaria report some of the highest rates, with approximately 18% and 16% of adolescents reporting that they had been cyberbullied in the previous couple of months (HBSC, 2022). Croatia and Slovenia report lower yet still significant rates, ranging from 10% to 13% (HBSC, 2022). Cyberbullying perpetration rates follow a similar pattern, with Romania and Bulgaria reporting the highest levels of aggression, with up to 15% of adolescents admitting to bullying others online. However, the latest national research in Croatia on elementary school students raises serious concerns. It highlights worrying trends of normalisation of violence, with significantly higher rates of children in the role of perpetrator, as many as one quarter of the national sample. Alarming, there is also an increase in sexually inappropriate behaviours among young, elementary school children, both online and in the classroom. Even more troubling is the growing trend of sextortion, with one third of 8th-grade students reporting that they experienced threats or blackmail to share their self-generated sexual content by someone they personally know (Vejmelka et al, 2025).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, research highlights significant exposure to various forms of peer violence, including cyberbullying. Surveys suggest that between 15% and 50% of children experience bullying, with cyberbullying increasingly common (Muratbegović & Vujović, 2016). A recent survey by the Safer Internet Center (2024) found that over 50% of children had received inappropriate or disturbing messages online at least once. Furthermore, 16.9% of participants reported taking action against cyber violence, typically using in-app reporting tools rather than formal channels such as law enforcement or school authorities. In Serbia, data from UNICEF (2019) indicate that 27% of children have experienced cyberbullying. The study highlights gender differences in cyberbullying experiences: girls are more frequently victims of harassment, particularly involving sexualized content, while boys are more likely to engage in perpetration. Cyberbullying in Serbia often overlaps with traditional bullying, forming a continuum of peer violence that spans both offline and online environments.

The Global Kids Online study (Livingstone et al., 2020) found that 27% of Albanian children aged 9–17 years reported having been treated in a hurtful or nasty way online, while 12% admitted to having bullied others. Alarming, children from rural areas and lower-income families were more vulnerable to cyberbullying, largely due to lower digital literacy and a lack of parental support in navigating online spaces. In Kosovo, 22% of children experienced peer violence in the online environment (Musmurati & Zymeri, 2014). Montenegro's data reflect similar concerns. A study from 2015–2016 reveals that 14% of children had distressing online experiences, mostly involving exposure to social media-hosted fights and interactions with strangers. These behaviours are underreported as only 4% of children reported online issues, highlighting a reluctance or lack of knowledge about available online reporting channels. (Logar et al., 2016).

These figures emphasise that cyberbullying is a pervasive issue in SEE, demanding a coordinated and systemic response. The digital divide and socio-economic disparities further compound children's risks.

The Impact of Cyberbullying on Mental Health and Well-being of Children in SEE

Cyberbullying has a deeply negative impact on the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents in Southeast Europe, leading to increased levels of mental health difficulties consistent with years of international research findings. Children identified as both victims and perpetrators, or bully-victims, face the highest risk of mental health challenges, including internet addiction, low self-esteem, and family conflict (Vejmelka, Matković, & Kovačić Borković, 2020). Additionally, cyberbullying negatively impacts education, as victims frequently disengage from learning, show reduced academic performance, and exhibit truancy, increasing their risk of social exclusion (Ajduković, Rajhvajn Bulat, Sušac, & Vejmeka, 2020). Regional studies reveal consistent patterns of emotional distress among victims, who often suffer in silence due to a lack of trust in adults or inadequate reporting mechanisms. In Croatia, a recent study confirms that higher levels of mental health difficulties were associated with all three roles: witnessing, experiencing, and committing online sexual harassment. Furthermore, lower perceived support was linked to experiencing online harassment. (Rajter et al., 2025). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, research shows age and gender differences in cyberbullying behaviours. Older students displayed higher levels of aggression, boys are more often the perpetrators of bullying, while girls tend to be more frequent victims (Bjelošević et al., 2020; Černi Obrdalj & Rumboldt, 2008). In Croatia, the *DeShame Croatia* study (Vejmelka et al., 2023) found that 34.2% of adolescents who had experienced online sexual harassment reported feeling upset, while 31.1% felt worried.

In the SEE region, children remain silent when reporting online bullying. In Croatia, only 4-10 % of high school students would report an event of online sexual harassment to adults,

and many are trying to stop the perpetrator on their own, with 40% of children trying to ignore it (Vejmelka et al, 2023). In Montenegro, many high school students reported experiencing peer violence, often choosing to remain silent: only 20- 40% of high school students reported incidents, with a significant number expressing distrust in school staff's capacity to address violence effectively (NGO Juventas, 2023; Nikolić et al., 2018).

These findings underline the urgent need for comprehensive prevention strategies, accessible mental health support, and school policies that foster trust and encourage reporting. This underlines the need for supportive adult interventions and more accessible reporting mechanisms.

Regional and National Strategies to Address Cyberbullying in Southeast Europe: Progress, Challenges, and the Need for Coordinated Action

Across Southeast Europe, countries have increasingly recognised the growing threat of cyberbullying and its harmful effects on children's mental health and well-being. In response, various national strategies, programs, and legal frameworks have been introduced to prevent and address cyberbullying. Despite these important developments, efforts across the region remain fragmented, inconsistently applied, and often hampered by insufficient resources, limited professional capacity, and inadequate coordination between key stakeholders.

Croatia stands out as one of the more proactive countries in the region, integrating cyberbullying prevention into national policies and strategic frameworks for over 20 years, in line with EU standards and frameworks. The updated Protocol on Addressing Violence Among Children and Youth (2024) and the National Plan for Children's Rights (2022–2026) specifically address cyberbullying, emphasising child participation and cross-sectoral cooperation (Ministarstvo rada, mirovinskoga sustava, obitelji i socijalne politike, 2024). Educational initiatives, such as the Safer Internet Centre (csi.hr), promote digital literacy, non-violent communication, and responsible online behaviour among children and young people (Centar za nestalu i zlostavljano djecu, 2023). While Croatia has made significant policy strides, the implementation and scaling of these initiatives at the community level remain ongoing challenges, particularly in ensuring sustained training for educators and social services.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen fragmented but promising initiatives. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina play a significant role in the prevention of peer violence, including bullying and cyberbullying. Their engagement is reflected in the implementation of educational programs, dissemination of research findings, and provision of direct support to children and families exposed to violence. However, it is important to emphasise that these initiatives are primarily project-based and lack the characteristics of longterm, systemic, and institutionally embedded programs. As a result, continuity and

sustainability often depend on donor support and temporary funding cycles, rather than enduring national strategies or stable policy frameworks. However, these initiatives are largely project-based and lack long-term systemic integration. The Vesta Association (2008) introduced one of the early comprehensive school programs focused on educating students and teachers and promoting safer school environments. Save the Children and partner organisations have also provided training for children and parents on safe Internet use and ways to prevent and report cyberbullying (Muratbegović & Vujović, 2016). A particularly significant development in recent years is the establishment of the Safer Internet Center in Bosnia and Herzegovina, formed within the broader initiative *“Combating Violence Against Children: Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Digital Environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”* The Center operates under the coordination of the Child Protection Consortium, which includes UNICEF BiH, Save the Children, and IFS-EMMAUS, supported by the Global Partnership Fund *“Ending Violence Against Children.”* This initiative underscores a growing recognition at the national and international level of the urgent need to address not only cyberbullying but also wider forms of digital violence, exploitation, and abuse.

While Serbia also organised many actions, it is important to stress that the national team joined the deShame project, enabling national representative results on the high school age children and their parents within a regional research context (Vejmelka, 2025). Montenegro has undertaken a series of coordinated efforts to address bullying and promote safe school environments, but challenges remain in fully addressing the evolving dynamics of cyberbullying and in strengthening trust and communication between students and school authorities. One of the most significant national initiatives is the program “School Without Violence – Safe School Environment”, implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sports in partnership with UNICEF Montenegro, starting from the 2005/2006 school year. Initially piloted in two elementary schools, the program gradually expanded to six additional schools in 2008 and, by the 2011/2012 school year, included a total of sixteen elementary schools across the country. The program is designed to engage students, teachers, school staff, parents, and the wider community in a coordinated response to peer violence. Its primary objective is to establish sustainable mechanisms within schools that enable the entire school community to recognise, prevent, and respond effectively to bullying, thereby contributing to the reduction of violence and the promotion of a safer educational climate (Krkeljić, 2014). The newest achievement is national deShame results on sexual harassment in high schools, as well as opening the Montenegro Safer Internet Centre in September 2025 (Vejmelka, 2025).

Regionally, there has been progress in embedding cyberbullying within legal frameworks and child protection laws. Nevertheless, significant gaps remain, particularly in the enforcement, monitoring, and evaluation of these policies. Many educators, social workers, and law enforcement officers lack specialised training to respond effectively to cyberbullying cases. Furthermore, coordination between educational institutions, social services, law enforcement, and mental health professionals is often fragmented, limiting the effectiveness of prevention and intervention efforts.

To move forward, Southeast Europe requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral response to cyberbullying that combines legislative action, education, community engagement, and digital literacy initiatives. Regional collaboration and knowledge-sharing among SEE countries can help bridge current gaps and foster more cohesive strategies. Most importantly, children's active participation should be institutionalised in the design, implementation, and evaluation of anticyberbullying policies and programs. By centring children's voices and experiences, SEE countries can create safer, more inclusive digital environments that protect children's rights and mental health.

Cyberbullying and how to approach it in SEE: A Model for Regional Action

In today's digital world, our children watch the same YouTubers, navigate the same TikTok trends, join the same online communities, and face similar pressures. The digital environment is globalised, yet our region is uniquely connected by shared languages and cultural familiarity. This means that challenges as well as solutions are also shared. Therefore, responses must be regionally informed, culturally appropriate, and guided by children themselves. This volume presents a collection of thoughtful and evidence-based contributions from leading researchers and practitioners across Southeast Europe. Each manuscript offers nuanced insights into the complex phenomenon of cyberbullying and its mental health impact on children in the region. What sets this publication apart is not only the depth of its research but also the authors' shared commitment to improving child protection systems and advocating for meaningful child participation in designing safer digital environments.

Authors of the papers in this volume are dedicated to deepening our understanding of children's and adolescents' mental health and behaviour in the digital environment, with particular attention to violent and harmful interactions online. Although the papers originate from different social and institutional contexts, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, they share a common thread: **a call for understanding, empowerment, collaboration, and the creation of safer and more compassionate digital environments for young people.**

The objectives of this publication are clear:

- ➔ **To deepen knowledge** about mental health and behaviour among children and adolescents, particularly in relation to online violence.
- ➔ **To inspire future activities**, interventions, and policies based on children's expressed needs and lived experiences.
- ➔ **To strengthen cooperation between children and adults**, positioning children not merely as recipients but as co-creators of solutions.

- ➔ **To support meaningful child participation**, grounded in agency, respect, and shared decision-making.
- ➔ **To highlight examples of promising practices** from the region.
- ➔ **To emphasise our cultural proximity and interconnectedness** — in language, social norms, everyday experiences, and the ways our children grow, learn, and socialise today.

Valmira Morina, in the first paper, offers a broader socio-political and cultural perspective of cyberbullying in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It shows how online abuse is shaped by gender norms, media narratives, and structural inequalities, particularly affecting girls and young women. The paper highlights the strong link between cyberbullying and mental health, and emphasises that addressing digital violence is not only a technological matter but also a social and cultural responsibility. In the second paper, Maja Šenk brings forward the perspectives of teachers and school professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, showing how cyberbullying affects students' emotional well-being, sense of belonging, and academic participation. It highlights low trust in institutional support and calls for more consistent, empathetic, school-based prevention and response. The third paper, Croatian colleagues Miroslav Rajter, Roberta Matković and Tomislav Ramljak present national-level data from Croatia on online sexual harassment among high school students regarding their mental health. It demonstrates that victims, witnesses, and perpetrators are all negatively affected, underlining that online sexual harassment disrupts entire peer networks and requires prevention strategies based on social support and trustworthy relationships. In the fourth paper, Sunčica Dimitrijoska and Natasha Pavićević-Stojmenovska focus on North Macedonia and stress the need for strong social support systems when addressing cyberbullying. They call for coordinated action among schools, families, and mental health services to ensure that children are not left to cope with online violence alone.

Collectively, the contributions in this volume demonstrate a region-wide recognition of cyberbullying as a critical issue affecting the mental health and well-being of children. The authors emphasise that addressing this challenge requires a holistic, multi-sectoral approach that combines legislative action, education, community engagement, and child-centred policies. Their work highlights the importance of ensuring that children are not merely passive recipients of protection but active participants in creating safer digital spaces.

The shared vision that runs through each contribution is the acknowledgement of children as rights-holders with the capacity to influence change in their digital environments. The findings and recommendations outlined in this volume serve as both a call to action and a guide for policymakers, educators, mental health professionals, and child protection advocates committed to building safer, more inclusive online

spaces for children across Southeast Europe. Their collective efforts reflect the broader mission of this publication, one that places children not only at the heart of the problem but also as key agents in its solution. By involving children meaningfully in the design and implementation of policies and programs, SEE countries can move toward safer, more inclusive online environments.

Why Together?

Cyberbullying poses an urgent threat to children's mental health, social development, and safety in Southeast Europe. Despite efforts to address the problem, challenges remain in developing comprehensive, coordinated strategies that are sustainable and responsive to children's needs. In a world where digital spaces transcend borders, so must our collective responses. Taken together, this publication forms a regional map of learning:

- ➔ showing where our struggles overlap,
- ➔ where our strengths align,
- ➔ and how we can learn from one another.

This volume underscores the need for multi-sectoral action that integrates education, child protection, mental health services, and law enforcement. Countries in SEE must work to:

- ➔ Strengthen and harmonise legal frameworks that address cyberbullying.
- ➔ Develop and implement evidence-based prevention and intervention programs.
- ➔ Promote digital literacy and resilience, especially among children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- ➔ Ensure accessible and effective reporting mechanisms that foster trust between children and institutions.
- ➔ Facilitate regional cooperation to share data, best practices, and strategies.

Most importantly, children must be actively involved in all aspects of designing, implementing, and evaluating strategies to combat cyberbullying. Their leadership in this publication demonstrates the transformative potential of child participation. Governments, educators, and practitioners must recognise children not only as beneficiaries but as co-creators of policies and practices that shape their digital lives.

By placing children's voices and experiences at the centre of efforts to prevent cyberbullying, Southeast Europe can move towards creating safer, more inclusive digital environments that uphold the rights and dignity of every child. This publication therefore stands as:

- ➔ a **reminder** that we are connected,
- ➔ an **invitation** to co-create solutions,
- ➔ and a **commitment** to safeguarding the mental health and dignity of every child navigating the digital world.

We invite researchers, practitioners, educators, families, and young people themselves to read this volume not only as documentation but as a beginning, a continuation, and a shared promise to move together toward safer, more resilient, and more compassionate digital futures.

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Valmira Morina, researcher

UNSA/UNIBO | valmiramorina.biz@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0007-9808-4108

CYBERBULLYING AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN KOSOVO AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Child-Friendly Abstract

Cyberbullying is a serious problem for children in Kosovo and Bosnia, and it's getting worse. As more kids spend time online, some of them use the internet to bully others. This problem affects many children, especially girls. In Kosovo, girls and women who have jobs that involve being seen by many people, like journalists and activists, are often targeted by online bullies. Some bullies share private photos without permission, which can hurt children's feelings and cause stress. In Bosnia, the situation is also tough because many kids face bullying along with fake news and hate messages, especially during political events. This makes it harder for children to feel safe when they're online. A sad story from Bosnia in 2022 showed how serious the problem is: a young man took his own life after being cyberbullied, which shows just how damaging online bullying can be. Both Kosovo and Bosnia are trying to fix this by making new laws and offering help to children who are bullied. But more needs to be done. There needs to be better education about bullying, stronger laws to protect children, and more support for kids who are struggling with their feelings. It's important that both countries continue working to create safer online spaces so kids can enjoy the internet without being hurt by bullying. Everyone must work together to make the internet a safer place.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, society, politics, culture, children, mental health

Abstract

Cyberbullying among children in Kosovo and Bosnia represents a growing challenge that is deeply influenced by both societal and political dynamics. In these regions, the increasing use of digital platforms has created new opportunities for harassment, with vulnerable groups, particularly young girls, often becoming targets. In Kosovo, patriarchal cultural norms

contribute to widespread online abuse, remarkably directed at women and girls in public roles, such as journalists and activists. This abuse often includes the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, exacerbating the intersection of cyberbullying with gender-based violence, with severe consequences for children's mental well-being. In Bosnia, the context of cyberbullying is similarly complicated by the spread of misinformation and ethnic-based hatred, which have been especially prevalent during periods of political tension. The hostile digital environment in Bosnia makes it increasingly difficult for children to navigate online spaces safely, further escalating the mental health risks associated with cyberbullying. A high-profile case of a young man who tragically took his own life in 2022 after being targeted by cyberbullies highlights the extreme consequences that these online behaviours can have. Despite efforts in both countries to revise laws and offer support to victims of cyberbullying, more comprehensive education, stronger legislation, and better mental health resources are essential for tackling this issue effectively. As Kosovo and Bosnia continue to address the complex challenges posed by cyberbullying, creating safer online spaces for children must remain a priority to mitigate the long-term harm caused by these digital abuses.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, socio-political and cultural dimension, children, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying, defined as bullying that takes place through digital platforms such as social media, online games, and messaging services, is an increasingly pervasive issue worldwide (Hinduja and Patchin 2019, 5). It manifests in various forms, including harassment, threats, name-calling, spreading false information, and the non-consensual sharing of personal images or videos. Although cyberbullying can affect anyone, it is particularly concerning when it impacts children and adolescents. Young people are especially vulnerable due to their developing emotional and cognitive abilities, making them more susceptible to the harmful effects of online abuse (Ólafsson, Livingstone and Haddon 2014, 15). As the digital world becomes more integrated into daily life, the prevalence of cyberbullying continues to rise, posing a significant challenge to educators, parents, policymakers, and mental health professionals alike.

In the Balkan region, and more specifically in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, cyberbullying takes on a unique character shaped by the socio-political, cultural, and technological contexts of each country. Both countries, still emerging from the shadows of post-conflict legacies, face a variety of structural issues that exacerbate the effects of cyberbullying. In Kosovo, adolescents experience significant levels of cyberbullying victimization, with outcomes shaped by factors such as gender differences, family dynamics, school environment, and community context (Millaku, Tasevska, et al., Exploring bullying and cyberbullying behaviors among adolescents in Kosovo: Gender differences, victimization, and fear predictors. 2025). Furthermore, the study highlights that adolescents in these countries experience significant levels of cyberbullying victimisation,

influenced by factors such as family dynamics, school environment, and community context. This research aims to investigate the extent and impact of cyberbullying in these two countries, with particular emphasis on how these socio-political environments influence the online behaviour of both perpetrators and victims (Millaku, Tasevska, et al. 2025). More specifically, it examines the cultural factors that contribute to cyberbullying, the effectiveness of legislative frameworks, and the psychological consequences for children who fall victim to online abuse (Katic 2022). The study's objectives are threefold: (1) to investigate the socio-political and cultural contexts that foster cyberbullying in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina; (2) to evaluate the legislative and institutional responses to cyberbullying in both countries, including prevention programs and enforcement; and (3) to assess the psychological implications of cyberbullying on child victims, particularly its impact on their mental health and well-being (Barranco, et al. 2022). The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to a deeper academic understanding of the challenges faced by children in the digital age, especially within the Balkan context. By exploring the intersection of technology, culture, and law, this study aims to shed light on how cyberbullying is framed and addressed within these countries. Furthermore, it seeks to provide data-driven recommendations for policymakers, educators, and civil society actors to improve digital safety for children and implement more effective strategies for combating online abuse. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial that these countries enhance their efforts to safeguard the mental and emotional well-being of their youth and ensure that children can navigate the online world without fear of harassment or harm. This study adopts a deskbased research methodology. It relies exclusively on the analysis of secondary data sources, including academic literature, reports from international organizations, national legislation, survey data, and media coverage related to cyberbullying in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. No primary data collection involving human subjects, particularly children, was conducted. All information utilized in this research is publicly available and was reviewed in accordance with ethical standards for secondary data analysis. The selection of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina as case studies was based on their shared post-conflict trajectories, comparable digital ecosystems, and documented prevalence of cyberbullying among children. Secondary sources were chosen according to relevance, recency, and methodological transparency, allowing for a reproducible and cross-contextual analysis of regional dynamics.

CASE STUDIES AND MEDIA ANALYSIS

High-Profile Incidents

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, cyberbullying has led to devastating and irreversible consequences. In October 2022, 22-year-old Mladen Dulić from Laktaši was humiliated during a job interview when the manager insulted him; a friend recorded the incident and later posted it on TikTok. Despite reporting the abuse to the police, no immediate action

was taken, and Dulić tragically died by suicide the same day. This horrifying incident reveals not only the cruelty of online humiliation but also the alarming failures of institutions that should have acted faster to protect him. The fact that this was the third suicide linked to cyberbullying in Republika Srpska within months reflects a systemic societal problem that remains largely unaddressed (Katic 2022).

In Kosovo, the situation has been no less alarming. In 2024, 17 students in Fushë-Kosova selfharmmed after participating in a viral TikTok challenge (Koha.net, After 17 students in Fushë-Kosovo injured themselves responding to a viral challenge on TikTok, parents used social media to mobilize in order to prevent new cases 2024). Similarly, in Gjakova, at least 19 girls aged between 9 and 17 engaged in self-harm influenced by another viral TikTok trend (Telegrafi, Prompted by the challenge in TikTok, the number goes to 19 schoolgirls who are suspected to have injured their hands with pencil sharpeners 2024). That children so young could be manipulated into hurting themselves speaks volumes about the psychological power of digital platforms, and the shocking absence of adequate parental controls, school interventions, and platform responsibility.

A 2024 survey conducted by Save the Children Kosovo revealed concerning data regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying among children on various social media platforms, with TikTok identified as the most dangerous. According to the survey, 78% of children reported experiencing bullying on TikTok, marking it as the highest-risk platform for children in Kosovo (Albania 2024). This was followed by Snapchat, where 57% of children reported being bullied, and Instagram, with 45%. Facebook, while generally less problematic, still saw 28% of children experiencing cyberbullying (Koha.net 2024). These figures underscore a significant issue in the digital landscape of Kosovo, where a large portion of the younger population is exposed to harmful online behaviours. The high rates of bullying on TikTok and other platforms highlight the growing danger children face on social media, where bullying is often anonymous and untraceable. This environment allows harmful behaviours to persist without significant intervention or consequences.

The persistence of cyberbullying across these platforms suggests a systemic issue that requires a coordinated response. The lack of effective child-friendly reporting mechanisms, coupled with insufficient online safety education, exacerbates the problem. Furthermore, the study from the Save the Children Kosovo survey suggests many children who experience bullying do not report it, often due to fear or believing nothing will change. This indicates a significant gap in trust between children and the systems designed to protect them (Gashi 2024, 8-9). The normalisation of such harm is a direct reflection of the failures in addressing online safety, and it highlights the urgent need for policy reforms, digital literacy initiatives, and stronger regulations to protect children from online abuse.

Media Coverage and Public Discourse

Media coverage in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo has been pivotal in bringing cyberbullying into the public consciousness, but the response has often been reactive rather than proactive. This reactive nature of media coverage in both countries underscores a critical gap in the handling of online abuse. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a study conducted by the Communications Regulatory Agency and UNICEF found that over 50% of surveyed children reported experiencing uncomfortable situations online. Alarming, more than 85% of these incidents went unreported (Balkans 2024). This silence is not due to a lack of awareness among children, but rather a reflection of their profound distrust of the adult authorities, systems, and institutions that are supposed to protect them. This lack of trust is often rooted in past failures by the justice system to address online harm effectively, leaving children feeling that reporting such incidents would be futile or lead to further victimisation. The lack of action and recognition of these issues has allowed a culture of silence to persist, where victims of cyberbullying are left to cope alone (UNICEF, *Voices of Youth 2024: Insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina* 2025).

In Kosovo, media coverage took a pivotal turn when the “Albkings” group, a Telegram platform notorious for sharing non-consensual intimate images of women and girls, was exposed. Journalist Ardiana Thaci, who courageously reported on this case, found herself targeted by online harassment and threats as a result (Journalism 2024). Her victimisation demonstrated the dangers faced by whistleblowers and media personnel reporting on sensitive online abuse (Telegrafi 2024). Rather than being commended for uncovering a criminal network, she faced attacks, highlighting the dangerous reality that speaking out against online abuse can result in personal harm. This chilling reality discourages others from stepping forward, reinforcing the cycle of silence and perpetuating such harmful practices. While public discourse in both Bosnia and Kosovo is beginning to recognise the responsibility of social media platforms in mitigating online abuse, substantial policy change remains elusive. The gap between growing awareness and real action continues to hinder the implementation of effective protection for children. Every day that this gap persists, more children fall victim to cyberbullying, with lasting consequences for their mental health and well-being.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Legal Developments in Kosovo

Kosovo has made important but insufficient efforts to address cyberbullying legally. Kosovo has made important, but still insufficient, legal efforts to address cyberbullying. In 2024, the Kosovo Women's Network proposed an amendment to the Criminal Code to add a new **Article 249 on Gender-Based Cyber Violence** in order to criminalise online offences

like harassment, threats, defamation, and non-consensual intimate image sharing. This statistic highlights a disturbing trend where justice often remains out of reach for victims, leaving many individuals without the necessary support and accountability they deserve (Kosovo Women's Network 2024, 11). One of the most alarming gaps in Kosovo's legal response to cyberbullying is the lack of specific provisions for children (NGO 2.0 2019, 12-14). The absence of comprehensive laws that address the unique vulnerabilities of minors in the digital world is an unforgivable blind spot in the legal system. Children, who are among the most affected by cyberbullying, remain largely unprotected by targeted legislation. This oversight not only exposes young people to greater harm but also fails to acknowledge the severity of the issue for minors. To effectively combat cyberbullying, Kosovo must expand its legal framework to specifically protect children, ensuring that their safety and well-being are prioritised in both the physical and digital spaces.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Fragmented Legal Approach

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legal frameworks addressing cyberbullying vary significantly between its entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting distinct priorities influenced by political and ethnic considerations. In Republika Srpska, the legal approach to cyberbullying is primarily focused on maintaining public order and controlling online expression. The adoption of a public order law criminalises online content deemed to "disturb social order," including offensive or insulting material. Violations can result in fines up to 800 BAM (approximately 400 euros) or imprisonment for up to 30 days (Reporters Without Borders 2016). This approach prioritises the regulation of digital content to preserve societal norms, which may inadvertently suppress free speech and critical discourse. Additionally, the Ministry of Interior's Department for Cybercrime utilises the GRIDCOP system to identify and address online child exploitation, demonstrating a commitment to combating digital sex crimes against women and children (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2022).

Conversely, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits a more fragmented approach, with varying priorities across its cantons. In some cantons, cyberbullying is treated as a misdemeanour, punishable by fines ranging from 150 to 250 euros (Kurtic 2022). This lenient response reflects a lack of uniformity in legal priorities, leading to inconsistent protection for children. The absence of a comprehensive national strategy results in a legal landscape where children's protection against cyberbullying depends largely on their geographical location, rather than on consistent legal safeguards (Muratbegovic, et al. 2016). These disparities underscore the urgent need for a cohesive national strategy that addresses cyberbullying comprehensively, ensuring consistent protection for all children across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Institutional Gaps and Ethical Concerns

Both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina face significant challenges in addressing online harm, particularly cyberbullying, and protecting children in the digital space. In Kosovo, while the Kosovo Women's Network has worked to propose amendments to the Criminal Code to address gender-based cyber violence, there is still a critical absence of child-specific protections (Kosovo Women's Network 2024). This gap is even more alarming given the lack of consistent and accessible reporting mechanisms for children who fall victim to online abuse. Many children do not know how to report incidents or are reluctant to do so due to fears of retaliation or the belief that nothing will change. Furthermore, schools across Kosovo rarely incorporate comprehensive online safety education, leaving children ill-prepared to handle cyberbullying or recognise its signs (Saliu, et al. 2022).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation is even more complicated, with distinct legal frameworks in its two entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Euro 2019). Republika Srpska has made some efforts to address online abuse, but these measures are inconsistent, and there is no unified approach across the country. Meanwhile, in the Federation, laws are even more disjointed, with some cantons only imposing minimal fines for cyberbullying, offering no real deterrence to perpetrators. Without a national strategy, each region and canton operates in isolation, leaving children exposed to varying levels of protection based solely on where they live. This piecemeal approach fails to address the scale of the problem, leaving many children unprotected. The lack of a coordinated approach, child-friendly reporting mechanisms, and education on online safety across both countries reflects a larger institutional failure. In 2022, over 70% of children who experienced cyberbullying in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina did not report it (Al Jazeera Balkans 2024, Telegrafi, Bullying, the silent phenomenon of schools in Kosovo 2020). The root cause lies not in a lack of opportunities to report but in a deep-seated belief that their complaints would be ignored, demonstrating a critical breakdown in trust in the systems designed to protect them. Until systemic reforms are enacted, both countries will continue to fail their most vulnerable population - children.

PREVENTION PROGRAMS AND EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Regional Initiatives in Bosnia

The OSCE Mission in Bosnia's "No to Internet Violence!" campaign plays a significant role in addressing cyberbullying by combining school-based education, public awareness campaigns, and youth engagement. Evaluations conducted by the OSCE and other involved organisations indicate that this initiative has raised awareness about the risks and impacts

of online violence, but behaviour change among children has been slower to follow (OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023). The gap between increased awareness and actual changes in behaviour suggests that, despite the positive efforts, short-term campaigns alone are not sufficient to alter deeply ingrained patterns of online abuse. Children are exposed to online risks daily, and addressing this requires more than just one-time interventions.

Similarly, the “Together Against Cyberbullying” program by the Center for the Promotion of Civil Society, alongside the introduction of the “Red Button” reporting app, has seen some success in facilitating the reporting of cyberbullying incidents, particularly within schools (SMART Balkans 2023). The app serves as an accessible tool for children to report online harassment. Increased incident reporting has been noted, indicating greater recognition of the issue. However, the impact of these programs is limited by their temporary nature. Once funding for these initiatives ends, the programs often lose momentum, and without consistent follow-up, their effects diminish. While these programs have contributed to increased awareness and improved reporting mechanisms, long-term structural changes and continuous support are necessary to create lasting improvements in the fight against cyberbullying.

Kosovo's Youth-Centered Campaigns

UNICEF Kosovo's “Think Before You Share” campaign has made significant strides in raising awareness about responsible online behaviour, achieving an impressive reach with 350,000 views, peer-support networks, and webinars focusing on fostering digital empathy (UNICEF Kosovo Programme 2024). By empowering youth to become agents of change, the program encourages them to take an active role in shaping their online communities. This approach is critical because it not only educates youth about the importance of safe and responsible internet use but also promotes a sense of collective responsibility for addressing digital issues such as cyberbullying. However, the program's impact is not without limitations. According to an evaluation conducted by UNICEF Kosovo, while urban areas have benefitted from the program's success, schools in rural and marginalised regions still lack equal access to such initiatives (Kosova Education Center, The training cycle under the “Peer Mediation” program was successfully completed in 2024). Without ensuring that these regions receive the same level of support and resources, the program risks perpetuating a divide where only certain communities benefit, leaving others vulnerable to online risks.

Similarly, the Kosovo Education Center's teacher training programs have been vital in equipping educators with the knowledge and skills needed to address cyberbullying and promote online safety (Kosova Education Center, The training cycle under the “Peer Mediation” program was successfully completed 2024). However, this initiative's success is hindered by a lack of nationwide policy enforcement and ongoing support. A report from

the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MASHT/MESTI) on the implementation of teacher training programs highlights that, while the training is helpful, teachers often face an overwhelming burden as they are expected to implement these practices without consistent institutional backing (Ministry 2022-2026, 63). The absence of a standardised, government-enforced policy means that the responsibility of tackling cyberbullying falls disproportionately on individual educators, making it difficult to sustain long-term change. To ensure that these efforts have a lasting and meaningful impact, comprehensive policy enforcement and ongoing support for teachers are essential.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CYBERBULLYING

Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

In both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, patriarchal cultural norms contribute significantly to the prevalence of online violence, particularly targeting girls and young women. Recent research on adolescents in Kosovo shows that verbal bullying, including name-calling and teasing, is the most frequently reported form of aggression, highlighting the prevalence of online and offline gendered insults among youth (Millaku, Tasevska, et al. 2025). These insults often reflect broader societal misogyny, amplified in digital spaces. Such behaviour is part of a disturbing pattern where the online abuse of women is minimised and trivialised, often being dismissed as “normal teenage drama.” This dismissal prevents a serious societal response to the issue, allowing harmful gender stereotypes to persist and escalate online violence.

The internet has become a platform for the continuation of these real-world gender inequalities, with young women often being targeted for expressing themselves, whether through their appearance, opinions, or social activities. In many cases, these victims face harassment and violence in silence, as they fear further retaliation or victim-blaming. The deep-rooted misogyny that exists in both societies is reflected in how online violence against women and girls is tolerated or ignored, further exacerbating their vulnerability in digital spaces. Comparably, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, traditional concepts of honour and shame continue to shape how young women are treated online. According to reports, when young women post videos or share content expressing themselves, they are often met with widespread online harassment, including victim-blaming from peers and adults. Instead of receiving support, their reputations are frequently called into question, with many suggesting that they “asked for it” by their actions (Center for Investigative Reporting 2024). This pattern reflects deeply ingrained cultural values where a woman’s honour is prioritised over her well-being, often leading to her further victimisation and marginalisation in digital spaces.

Ethnic and Social Divisions

Ethnic divisions in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are also mirrored in online spaces, where children from minority communities face targeted cyberbullying, often accompanied by hate speech. In Kosovo, Roma and Ashkali children are frequent targets of online abuse, with derogatory comments and discriminatory messages directed at them (KosovaPress 2023). These acts of digital bullying serve to further isolate these marginalised communities and perpetuate negative stereotypes. The online platforms amplify the exclusion they already face in broader society, making it more difficult for them to feel safe or accepted. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar patterns are seen with children from ethnic minority groups, including Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. During periods of political tension, such as the aftermath of the 2020 elections, online platforms were rife with hate speech and discriminatory comments aimed at individuals from different ethnic backgrounds (Human Rights Watch 2020).

These digital attacks not only escalate ethnic tensions but also create an environment where children internalise hate and division. When online bullying based on ethnicity goes unchecked, it normalises such behaviour, teaching children that discrimination and exclusion are acceptable ways of asserting dominance (United Nations Office at Geneva 2024). Both countries lack effective and consistent measures to address these forms of online violence, and without comprehensive interventions, these patterns of harm will continue. Public discourse around these issues is slowly evolving, but real, systemic changes are necessary to ensure that children are protected from digital harm, regardless of their gender or ethnicity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CYBERBULLYING

The psychological toll of cyberbullying on children in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina is both profound and devastating, leaving emotional wounds that can last a lifetime. Victims of cyberbullying often experience crippling anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, self-harm, and even suicidal ideation, which are traumas that remain invisible to the eye but are deeply embedded in the psyche (Nixon, Current perspectives: The impact of cyberbullying on adolescent health. 2014). According to a UNICEF U-Report survey conducted in 2019 across 30 countries, including Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, one in three young people reported being a victim of online bullying, and nearly one in five reported skipping school as a result of cyberbullying and online violence (UNICEF 2019). Behind these global statistics are real children in Kosovo and Bosnia, battling profound internal struggles without the support or understanding they desperately need. The damage extends beyond mental health and directly impacts children's ability to function socially and academically. Teachers across both countries have reported rising rates of absenteeism, disengagement, and deteriorating academic performance among students who have experienced cyberbullying (Nixon 2014).

Children who should feel safe and encouraged to learn are instead living in constant fear of digital mockery and attack, a fear that often seeps into their offline interactions, isolating them even further from peers and trusted adults.

Particularly vulnerable are LGBTQ+ youth, who face the cruel double burden of cyberbullying compounded by social rejection within their own families and communities (Abreu and Kenny 2017). For these children, online spaces that should provide opportunities for connection instead become arenas of brutalisation, leaving psychological scars that few support systems in either Kosovo or Bosnia are prepared to heal. The failure to provide adequate protection and care for these groups reflects deeper societal prejudices that urgently need to be confronted. The impact is even more severe for minority children, especially those from Roma, Ashkali, and Balkan Egyptian communities in Kosovo (OSCE Mission in Kosovo 2020) and marginalised ethnic groups across Bosnia. Targeted online harassment reinforces existing patterns of exclusion and discrimination, creating an endless cycle where marginalised children are bullied into deeper marginalisation. Yet, when these children seek help, they often find none. Mental health services remain tragically underdeveloped and inaccessible, particularly for rural and minority populations. In Kosovo, most child psychologists are clustered in urban centres, leaving vast regions without any specialised support. In Bosnia, the lack of culturally sensitive services means that many children's psychological pain is misunderstood or ignored altogether (World Health Organization 2014). Without serious investment in accessible, inclusive mental health services, children will continue to suffer in silence, unseen, unheard, and unaided. Cyberbullying is not a harmless rite of passage or an unavoidable byproduct of growing up in a digital world (Nixon 2014). It is a form of violence that systematically erodes children's emotional, social, and academic foundations. Unless society confronts the deep psychological consequences of this abuse with the seriousness it demands, we will continue to fail an entire generation, leaving them to fight invisible battles with little hope of winning.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying in Kosovo and Bosnia is deeply entrenched in each country's unique socio-political and cultural context. The disproportionate targeting of girls in Kosovo and the ethnically charged harassment in Bosnia highlight the need for tailored interventions. Although awareness and policy discussions have improved, both countries lag in enforcement, psychological support, and cross-sector collaboration. Practical implications include the urgent need for harmonised laws, digital literacy programs in schools, and state-supported mental health services. At the national level, both Kosovo and Bosnia would benefit from strengthening child protection systems by integrating online safety modules into school curricula, establishing clear child-friendly reporting procedures, and ensuring sustained financing for youth mental health services. Regionally, greater cooperation, such as shared data systems, cross-border training for educators, and joint prevention campaigns, would

enable countries to exchange good practices and respond collectively to emerging digital risks. These must be tailored to each country's unique sociopolitical environment. Bosnia requires unified legal frameworks that transcend ethnic divisions, while Kosovo needs a child-sensitive, gender-inclusive cybercrime policy. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of cyberbullying on youth development and the role of social media algorithms in perpetuating harmful content. Furthermore, empirical studies that involve victim interviews, school assessments, and comparative analysis with other Balkan states would strengthen the regional evidence base. Ultimately, addressing cyberbullying must become a national priority that transcends politics, ensuring a safer digital future for all children.

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Maja Šenk, researcher

Global Campus of Human Rights, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina | senk.maja@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0007-1788-5457

FROM SCREENS TO SCARS: THE TOLL OF CYBERBULLYING ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Child-Friendly Abstract

Many children and teens spend a lot of time online - usually making new friends, playing games, and chatting. This is not always fun, because sometimes being online can bring challenges, like cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is when people use the Internet, games, or social media to hurt others. Some research shows that one in three children has been bullied online and even skipped school because of it. This study explores how cyberbullying affects the mental health of students in high schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It will focus on feelings like sadness and loneliness that cyberbullying can cause. I talked to teachers and pedagogues in high schools to understand how cyberbullying affects young people's friendships and self-confidence, why students sometimes do not get the help they need, and how schools can do more to support them. The main goal of this study is to help make the internet a safer place for children and teens in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Keywords: cyberbullying, online safety, mental health, children, teens

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of cyberbullying among high school students in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a particular focus on the emotional and mental health consequences. Through a qualitative study conducted in seven high schools in Sarajevo, insights from teaching and professional staff were collected on the frequency, forms, and consequences of cyberbullying. The results show that students are often exposed to verbal and emotional violence via social networks, which leads to anxiety, depression, isolation, and reduced academic performance. It was observed that although schools have formal prevention mechanisms, their implementation is limited, and students' trust in the system is insufficient.

The paper emphasises the need to strengthen digital literacy, emotional support, and systemic education of all stakeholders to more effectively respond to the challenges posed by cyberbullying.

Keywords: *cyberbullying, mental health, high school students, Bosnia and Herzegovina, cyberbullying prevention*

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, digital communication has become an integral part of young people's daily lives. With the increasing use of smartphones and social networks, a new form of violence has emerged. The form that no longer occurs only in school hallways but has also moved into the digital space: the so-called cyberbullying or electronic violence. Therefore, cyberbullying involves any form of harassment, threats, insults, shaming, or exclusion of another person via the Internet or digital devices. This form of violence is often invisible to adults and school staff, and its psychological damage can be as, if not more, devastating than traditional peer violence.

Li (2010) found that cyberbullying is harassment that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, text, apps, 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, which can cause embarrassment or humiliation. Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behaviour.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, cyberbullying is increasingly present among high school students, but it is still little talked about. In a society facing numerous transitional challenges, digital literacy is often underdeveloped, and institutions such as schools are usually not adequately prepared to address this problem. Young people in BiH use social networks just like their peers around the world, but often without systemic protection, education about digital security, or easily accessible psychological support.

In this study, qualitative research methodology included semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers, relevant school staff, and mental health professionals. The research explores how cyberbullying harms victims' social relationships and leads to loneliness, emotional distress, and low self-esteem. It also explores how cultural stigmas about mental health and a lack of institutional support make it harder for students to access the help they need.

The main objectives of this research were to deepen the understanding of:

- ➔ The prevalence of cyberbullying among high school students in BiH,
- ➔ Cyberbullying consequences on the mental health of young people (e.g., depression, anxiety, self-esteem),
- ➔ Assess the reactions of the state and schools to the occurrence of online violence,
- ➔ Propose concrete steps and recommendations for prevention and intervention.

The significance of this paper lies in raising awareness of the problem's seriousness and the need for a strategic approach to its suppression. Although cyberbullying is a global phenomenon, it is essential to understand the local context to develop effective prevention and support measures. This research aims to contribute to better protection of young people's mental health in BiH through education, policy, and practice.

CYBERBULLYING: A CONTEMPORARY FORM OF VIOLENCE

Although the basic definition of cyberbullying has already been noted in the introductory part of the paper, this chapter examines the concept itself in more detail, its characteristics and forms, differences from traditional forms of peer violence, and the psychological impact that this form of violence has on young people.

Definition and Characteristics of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, as already mentioned, is a form of bullying that occurs through digital technologies, most often via mobile phones, computers, and the Internet. It involves intentional, repeated, and aggressive behaviour directed at an individual, aiming to hurt, intimidate, humiliate, or isolate them. Unlike traditional bullying, which mainly occurs face-to-face and within a specific time frame (e.g., school hallways during school hours), cyberbullying is constant, 24 hours a day, and often occurs anonymously (PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, n.d.).

As Participant 1 explained, in their experience, cyber violence includes the creation of fake profiles, the anonymity of the perpetrator, the publication of humiliating photos, offensive comments, and threats that are transferred to real life. On the other hand, the Social Media Victims Law Center (2025) recognises different forms of cyberbullying, such as exclusion, harassment, cyberstalking, fake profiles, catfishing, and many more. Cyberbullying occurs daily on social media, messaging platforms, and gaming platforms. It is repeated behaviour

with the intention of intimidating and/or embarrassing a person (UNICEF, 2022). In this way, it is easy to publicly ridicule, insult, exclude, or embarrass someone by sharing photos, videos, or other content.

The Lasting Effects of Cyberbullying

Vejmelka, Strabić and Jazvo (2017) believe that exposure to online risks can have various longterm negative consequences for every fully mature adult person, but especially for children and youth, and they emphasize the importance, above all, of understanding the behavior and interaction of young people in cyberspace, all with the aim of designing good prevention strategies, and recognizing and helping online risky behaviors. Participant 2 further highlighted this by explaining that children who are victims of cyberbullying often experience emotional difficulties such as stress, isolation, anger, and helplessness. These intense feelings can lead to significant mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Victims may have problems at school, exhibit high absenteeism rates and declining grades, and may even consider suicide or engage in self-harm.

Research studies have indicated that cyberbullying is becoming a major issue in schools and has various negative effects. Different data and clinical practice confirm that exposure to cyberbullying and peer violence in childhood and adolescence negatively affect physical and mental health in adulthood. Exposure to this type of violence affects the consolidation of a negative self-image, low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence, increased anger, anxiety, depression, and the appearance of stress-related somatic symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, etc.), which is observed in all genders and at different ages (Bottino et al, 2015). Cyberbullying can be devastating for victims and their families. The psychological harm inflicted by cyberbullying is also reflected in school failure, school avoidance, school violence, and suicide. It is even possible that the damage from cyberbullying would be greater than bullying because there is no escape for the victims. Harmful materials and online content could be easily preserved and quickly and widely spread. Further, many people who would not harass others face-to-face might cyberbully peers because they believe that they could hide or that it would be acceptable to engage in such behaviour virtually (Beran & Li, 2005).

The most negative effect of cyberbullying is that it can potentially lead to suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people, resulting in about 4,400 deaths per year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). For every suicide among young people, there are at least 100 suicide attempts. Over 14 per cent of high school students have considered suicide, and almost 7 per cent have attempted it. Bullying-related suicide can be connected to any type of bullying - including physical, emotional, cyberbullying, and sexting, or circulating suggestive or nude photos or messages about a certain person (BullyingStatistics.org, n.d.). The study that examined associations among depression, suicidal behaviours, bullying, and victimisation experiences demonstrated that depression

mediated the association between bullying/victimisation and suicide attempts, but differently for males and females. Specifically, depression mediated the link between traditional victimisation and suicide attempts similarly across genders, whereas depression mediated the link between cyber victimisation and suicide attempts only for females (Bottino et al, 2015).

Moreover, a systematic review of 25 quantitative and longitudinal studies published between 2018 and 2022, retrieved from databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, Science Direct, and SAGE, analysed the effects of traditional and electronic bullying on the mental health of adolescents. The findings show that mental health problems are present in all participants in violence - victims, bullies, and bystanders - but victims suffer the most severe consequences. They report high levels of anxiety, stress, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts (Agustiniingsih, Yusuf, Ahsan, & Fanani, 2024).

Particularly concerning is that the range of prevalence of cyberbullying (from 7.02% to 56.88%) is higher than that of traditional bullying (from 16.9% to 26.1%). This refers to the pervasiveness of digital violence and its potential to damage the mental health of young people in the long term. The authors emphasise the need for targeted interventions and preventive measures in schools that involve parents, teachers, and mental health professionals. Comprehensive strategies aimed at early recognition and appropriate responses can significantly reduce the harmful consequences of violence among young people (Agustiniingsih, Yusuf, Ahsan, & Fanani, 2024).

Cyberbullying in Bosnia and Herzegovina

This chapter presents international and domestic documents protecting children in the digital space, as well as an overview of research dealing with risky behaviours of young people in the online environment. In addition to global recommendations, emphasis is placed on domestic studies that indicate patterns and forms of cyberbullying among high school students in BiH. BiH is a signatory to numerous international documents protecting children in the digital space (Council of Europe, 2001). One of the key ones is the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, which BiH ratified on 23 November 2001 (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Sarajevo Canton, 2006). Thus, it has become part of the international community dedicated to combating digital crime and protecting citizens, especially children and young people, in cyberspace.

BiH has also committed to respecting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), through Annex I to the Constitution of BiH (Rizvanović, 2023), and participating in initiatives such as those implemented by the ITU – International Telecommunication Union, which promotes cooperation among all stakeholders involved in protecting children on the Internet. The recommendations specifically relate to the development of national

policies for child safety online and the improvement of information literacy among parents, teachers, and children. According to a UNESCO report (2015), the problems of misuse of information and communication technologies and digital violence are taking on global proportions, with children and youth identified as the most vulnerable group. In this context, it is recommended that systematic research be conducted, especially in developing countries, including BiH.

The number of studies dealing with cyberbullying in the context of BiH is still somewhat limited. However, research in Bosnia and Herzegovina has shown that an increasing number of students are exposed to peer and online violence. Studies with nationally representative samples indicate that perpetrators are more often boys, while victims are usually girls. Over two-thirds of students reported experiencing some form of peer violence. In particular, investigations into cyberbullying in high schools and gender-based violence in primary schools highlight the widespread nature of these issues and the urgent need for effective prevention and support measures (Šahinović & Jeftić, 2017; Kuralić-Čišić et al., 2017).

Table 1: The forms of violence that are most susceptible to peer-reviewing regarding the class they are attending

Grade	Physical	Emotional	Sexual	Social	Other forms	Multiple answers	Total	ANOVA
I	31 13.10%	95 35.98%	123 51.90%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	8 3.40%	257 100.00%	x ² =71.34 p<.005 V=0.3
II	19 7.20%	70 26.51%	191 72.30%	0 0.00%	2 0.80%	2 0.80%	284 100.00%	
III	16 12.90%	44 16.70%	84 67.70%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	144 100.00%	
IV	8 6.60%	55 20.82%	75 62.00%	2 0.30%	0 0.00%	6 3.80%	140 100.00%	
Total	78 10.30%	264 24.50%	473 62.60%	2 0.30%	2 0.30%	16 2.10%	825 100.00%	

This table summarises the forms of violence that most often occur among secondary school students in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the studies above. This data indicates an urgent need to develop systemic mechanisms for child protection, as well as additional research that would shed light on the dynamics of digital violence in schools.

As everywhere in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to high school students in BiH. The pandemic has further intensified children's presence in digital spaces. Since April 2020, students in BiH have completely switched to online learning methods. This has significantly increased their time spent in the virtual environment, which, on one hand, has contributed to the development of digital skills, but on the other hand, has also increased exposure to various forms of online violence.

Although there are no official studies directly examining the correlation between the pandemic and the increase in cyberbullying among children and young people in BiH, certain experts and representatives of relevant institutions pointed out alarming trends. According to Saša Risojević, a psychologist and director of the Nova generacija Association, peer violence has increased threefold in 2021 compared to the previous year, with a large part of this violence moving into the digital space (Ilijaš.info, 2021). He further claims that “it has changed its form and is now more common on the Internet through social networks, the so-called cyberbullying. Perpetrators create fake profiles, make derogatory comments, and thus violate the integrity of the child”. Risojević emphasised that the most common symptoms of children exposed to this type of violence are anxiety and depression, which often occur out of fear of admitting that they are victims (Ilijaš.info, 2021). According to UNICEF (2015), as many as 55% of children in BiH have experienced some form of violence in a school environment. This statistic is devastating, but what is even more worrying is that as many as 70% of cases of peer violence remain unreported. The reasons for not reporting vary – from fear of retaliation to shame and distrust in the school system and the institutions that are supposed to deal with this problem (Mreža za izgradnju mira, 2024).

Given all the above, it is clear that BiH, although formally aligned with international documents and obligations, still does not have a sufficiently systematic approach to the problem of cyberbullying against children and youth. The lack of current, empirical research, as well as the limited implementation of existing strategies, indicates the need to strengthen institutional capacities and digital literacy among all stakeholders, and to gain more direct insight into the experiences of those who work with high school students daily. For the stated reasons, the next chapter will present the results of qualitative research conducted in high schools in Sarajevo.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: WHAT SCHOOLS REVEAL ABOUT CYBERBULLYING

To gain a deeper insight into the forms, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among high school students in BiH, qualitative research was conducted, bringing the perspectives of high school teaching and professional staff on this ubiquitous problem. This research aims to investigate the frequency of cyberbullying among high school students in BiH, its impact on the mental health of young people, as well as the reactions of schools and the state, to propose effective prevention and intervention measures. The questions that guided this research were the following:

- ➞ What forms of cyberbullying are most common among high school students in BiH?
- ➞ How does cyberbullying affect the mental health of young people?
- ➞ How do schools and the state respond to such cases, and what prevention and intervention measures can be most effective?

Research Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to gain a deeper understanding of school staff's perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying among high school students. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to uncover complex patterns of behaviour, emotional reactions, and institutional responses that cannot be fully quantified through direct conversations with interviewees. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility in the conversations but also ensured consistency on key topics such as forms of violence, school responses, the level of trust between students and teachers, and challenges in prevention and intervention.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing the identification of recurring themes and patterns across participants' responses. Specifically, participants' statements were coded and grouped into themes representing the most common forms, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying, as well as the perceived effectiveness of school and state responses.

Sample

The research was conducted in Sarajevo, in collaboration with seven high schools. All participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, which was ensured by not disclosing any personal information during the research process or in the presentation of results. Real names were replaced with codes (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) to uphold ethical standards and protect participants' privacy while accurately representing their contributions. The selected schools allowed a diverse perspective on the issue of cyberbullying.

Ethical Considerations

No additional ethical approval was required because the research participants were adults. However, if the research were to include minors, it would be necessary to adhere to the Code of Ethics for Research with Children in BiH, which requires informed consent from parents or guardians and the disclosure to children of the purpose and methods of the research.

Limitations

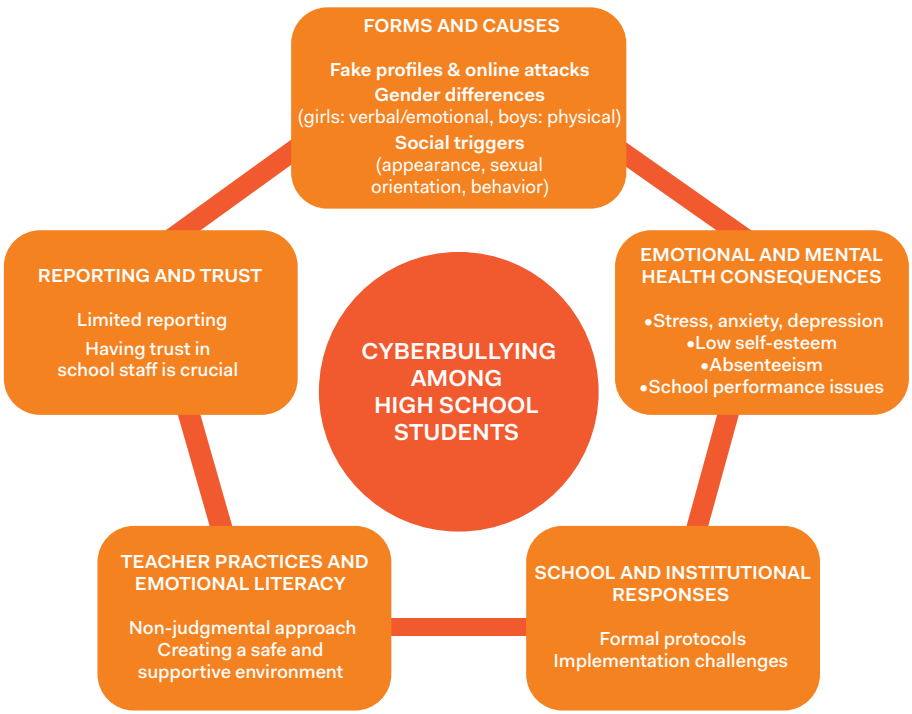
The main limitation of this research is the geographical focus on Sarajevo, which may affect the generalizability of the results to the entire BiH. Also, the research relied on participants' subjective perceptions, which may be influenced by personal biases or limited access to certain information. The research did not include direct participants - underage students, which may limit insight into their actual experiences and attitudes towards cyberbullying.

RESEARCH FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The data collected through semi-structured interviews with participants were subjected to thematic analysis, a methodology that enabled the systematic identification and interpretation of recurring themes and patterns across participants’ narratives. Through iterative coding processes, participants’ responses were systematically categorised and analysed to reveal key insights into the multifaceted nature of cyberbullying within educational contexts.

This analytical approach brought to light five primary thematic clusters that collectively showcase the complexity of cyberbullying experiences in high schools: **Forms and Causes**, which encompasses the various manifestations of online harassment including fake profiles, genderdifferentiated patterns of aggression, and social triggers; **Emotional and Mental Health Consequences**, addressing the psychological impact including stress, anxiety, depression, and academic disruption; **Reporting and Trust**, examining students’ disclosure behaviors and the critical role of trust in staff relationships; **School and Institutional Responses**, analyzing formal protocols and their implementation challenges; and **Teacher Practices and Emotional Literacy**, exploring pedagogical approaches that foster safe and supportive learning environments. These thematic domains provide a comprehensive framework for understanding both the detrimental effects of cyberbullying and the institutional factors that influence prevention and intervention efforts.

Graph 1: Visual representation of the major thematic clusters based on participants’ responses



FORMS AND CAUSES OF CYBERBULLYING

Fake Profiles and Online Threats

The research primarily showed that cyberbullying manifests through various digital means, with fake profiles as a prominent method of harassment. Participant 1 noted that cyberbullying includes the “creation of fake profiles, accusations that someone is using fake profiles and online identities, anonymity of the perpetrator, posting of photos with offensive and threatening messages, offensive content, threats that continue in reality”. Participant 3 agreed with this statement and added that “verbal violence is the most common form of violence among children. It is the least visible and the least reported because children do not take it seriously, but rather as something that is said ‘in passing’”. They believe that verbal violence has additionally moved into the digital space “since online classes began. Children have numerous online groups that school staff cannot control”.

This finding was supported by specific incidents documented in the interviews. One of the participants provided an illustrative example, when “a group of students created a fake profile on social media and used it to send inappropriate messages to a girl in class, in order to make fun of her”. The anonymity provided by digital platforms appears to encourage perpetrators while simultaneously making detection and intervention more challenging for educational institutions.

Gender Differences in Cyberbullying Behaviour

The responses show distinct gender-based patterns in cyberbullying, with clear differentiation between male and female approaches to online bullying. Participant 4 observed that “various forms of cyberbullying occur when girls argue about friendships and romantic relationships. Verbal, emotional or psychological violence is dominant among girls. It is less noticeable, lasts longer and has more serious consequences”. This statement aligns with broader patterns of aggression and bullying, as participants indicated that “girls are more likely to engage in verbal and emotional violence, while physical violence is more common among boys”. The research findings suggest that while boys’ aggressive behaviors tend to have “short-term but more clearly visible consequences,” girls’ cyberbullying is characterized by its subtle, prolonged nature, making it more difficult for educational institutions to detect and react.

Social Triggers and Target Selection

Respondents also highlighted that cyberbullying victims are often selected based on characteristics that differ from perceived social norms and behaviours. Participants identified several vulnerability factors, including “different ways of dressing, appearance, sexual orientation (real or assumed), gender identity, disability, and any characteristic that

deviates from the majority.” Research has documented that, in these cases, cyber violence often takes the form of group action directed at an individual, indicating the collective nature of cyberbullying and its potential to cause more harm through peer reinforcement.

EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Psychological Impact

The emotional consequences of cyberbullying have been recognised as one of the most severe aspects of peer violence among high school students. According to the data collected in this research, the participants emphasised that children who are victims of cyberbullying show signs of remoteness, irritability, decreased school performance, and low self-confidence.

Participant 2 warned: “Children who are victims of cyberbullying often experience emotional difficulties. These intense feelings can lead to significant mental problems such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. They may even consider suicide or engage in self-harm”. Participant 5 further emphasised that students most often do not talk about these experiences immediately. “Children only come forward when they have been suffering for a long time. Sometimes parents come forward, but often they do not know what is happening, because the child does not want to worry about them.”

Academic and Behavioural Disruption

These responses indicate that cyberbullying often becomes visible through changes in behaviour, such as absenteeism or even dropping out of school. It is also worrying that the participants believe that the emotional consequences for girls are more pronounced and long-lasting, because they are more often victims of psychological forms of violence - humiliation, exclusion from groups, and gossip in online spaces. All this confirms that the consequences of cyberbullying are deeply emotional and multi-layered, and that the absence of an adequate and timely reaction can lead to serious consequences for the mental health of students.

REPORTING AND TRUST

Limited Disclosure and Delayed Reporting

A critical finding emerged regarding students’ reluctance to report cyberbullying incidents and the delayed nature of disclosure when it does occur. Participant 5 observed that “children only come forward when they have been suffering for a long time. Sometimes parents come forward, but often they do not know what is happening, because the child does not want to

worry about them”. This pattern of delayed reporting significantly complicates intervention efforts and allows harmful behaviours to persist and escalate.

The Critical Role of Trust in School Staff

The research emphasized that effective intervention depends fundamentally on trust relationships between students and educational personnel. The data showcased that “students’ trust in school staff is essential for effective prevention and intervention in cases of cyberbullying”. However, despite students’ awareness of available support systems, “a significant percentage of incidents remain unreported,” presenting the difference between actual reporting mechanisms and students seeking help or reporting cases of cyberbullying. This finding underscores the importance of building authentic, trusting relationships that foster trust in school staff and in early intervention.

SCHOOL AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Formal Protocols and Policy Framework

The research showed that educational institutions possess comprehensive formal mechanisms for prevention and intervention against cyberbullying among students, including protocols and policy frameworks. Participants pointed out that schools have access to various tools, including the “Protocol on handling cases of violence in schools, Strategy for prevention of violence against children and Action plan for the protection of children in the digital environment 2021–2024 (FBiH)”. This formal infrastructure provides a foundation for systematic responses to cyberbullying incidents. However, this is where another challenge emerges, the lack of practical implementation of these documents.

Implementation Challenges and Practical Limitations

Despite the existence of formal protocols, significant challenges arise in their practical implementation. Participant 6 discussed the disconnect between policies and practice: “We have the tools, but the question is how we actually use them. There are education programs, but children will not stay after school for additional workshops. They lose interest because it takes up their free time.” Additionally, the technological advancement of students makes supervision difficult. Participant 6 also provided evidence of this, saying that “children no longer use school computers for bullying as before. They now know how to hide what they are doing. There are messages that disappear in seconds - how do you catch them?” These findings highlight the gap between existing policies and practical implementation in addressing cyberbullying, as well as differences in tech-savviness among students and teachers, which further limit cyberbullying prevention.

TEACHER PRACTICES AND EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Creating Safe and Supportive Environments

Participant 8 stressed the importance of a sensitive approach: “When students feel that you are not judging them, only then do they start talking about real problems. I talk openly with children about various things, and I try to notice when they are having a bad day and not push them. If they had a difficult test before my class, I played the guitar, and we sang. I try to have a different approach than my older colleagues”. This implies the importance of developing teachers’ emotional literacy and creating more open, safe school environments. It is necessary to sensitise further and educate all parties involved, students, parents, and school staff, to build a sustainable support system that responds to the challenges of the digital age.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In BiH, there are different ways to report cyberbullying and peer violence, but many parents and children are not sufficiently informed about them. Violence can be reported directly to school staff, parents, or through helplines. Blue Telephone and Safe Line for children and young people are examples of such lines. Also, non-governmental organisations in BiH offer the possibility of reporting violence anonymously through their online platforms, which can be of great help to those who are afraid to speak openly about the problems they are facing.

The fight against cyberbullying requires a comprehensive approach that includes education, prevention, and support. Education of children, parents, and teachers on how to recognise and react to online violence is crucial. Schools should implement programs that promote nonviolent communication and empathy among students. Also, an important step in solving the problem is providing psychological support to victims of any violence, not only cyberbullying. Victims often need professional help to recover from the trauma and regain a sense of security. Developing safe places in schools and communities, where children can turn for help, can significantly reduce the incidence of violence.

Cyberbullying in BiH is a problem that must not be ignored. We can create a safer environment for our children and young people with adequate education, prevention, and support. Every child deserves a childhood free from fear and violence, and it is up to all of us to make that possible for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, here are key recommendations that can help schools prevent and respond to cyberbullying among students.



Increase the level of digital literacy of school staff

Teachers, pedagogues, and psychologists must be further educated on forms of cyberbullying, digital tools and ways of recognising subtle signs of emotional distress in students. Through regular education and professional development, staff should develop the skills to respond effectively to digital bullying.



Introduce regular preventive workshops for students

Schools should organise continuous workshops and interactive sessions on the topics of peer bullying, online safety, emotional literacy, and empathy development. Such content should be part of the classroom community's teaching, but also available as extracurricular activities.



Strengthen the role of pedagogical-psychological services

It is necessary to ensure that all schools have active, accessible, and adequately trained PP services. Their role must be clearly defined and recognised by students, parents, and teaching staff, so that children have a safe space to report violence and receive help.

By implementing these measures, schools can create a safer digital environment and empower students and staff to effectively recognise and address cyberbullying.

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Miroslav Rajter, PhD, associate professor

Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Croatia | mrajter@pravo.unizg.hr | ORCID: 0000-0002-2608-3196

Roberta Matković, sociologist, PhD candidate, Mental Health Department

Public Health Institute of Split Dalmatia County, Croatia | roberta.matkovic@nzjzsplit.hr | ORCID: 0000-0002-6967-4148

Tomislav Ramljak, Master's degree in Social Work, PhD Candidate

Centre for Missing and exploited children Croatia, Croatia | tomislav@cnzd.org | ORCID:0009-0004-7759-932X

HOW DOES ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AFFECT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CROATIA?

Child-Friendly Abstract

Many teenagers in Croatia use the internet every day. Sometimes, they come across or are part of online sexual harassment. This means things like getting unwanted sexual messages, hurtful sexual jokes, or having private pictures shared without permission.

We asked more than 2,000 high school students about their experiences. Almost all of them (9 out of 10) had seen this kind of behaviour online. About 4 out of 10 said it had happened to them, and about half of them admitted doing it to others.

We also looked at how this affects young people's feelings and well-being. Teens who were harassed felt sadder and more depressed, and they said they had less support from friends. Those who saw online harassment also felt worse, showing that even watching it happen can be upsetting. Teens who took part in harassing others often felt more pressure from friends, they were less happy, and they also struggled with negative feelings.

These results show that online sexual harassment is common and harmful. It not only hurts the victims, but it also affects witnesses and even those who do it. To make the internet safer, it's important for young people to know what this behaviour is, to feel safe asking for help, and to support each other. Parents, teachers, and schools should talk openly about online risks and show kids how to stay safe and respectful online.

Keywords: online harmful behaviours, sexual harassment, children's well-being

Abstract

Children and adolescents who engage with specific online content are exposed to the risk of online sexual harassment. This type of unwanted behavior can be considered a distinct form of cyberbullying, potentially leading to detrimental psychological consequences.

In Croatia, the Center for Missing and Abused Children / Center for a Safer Internet conducted a nationally representative study (N=2016) among high school students (mean age 16). The findings indicate that 93.1% of participants had witnessed, 41.2% had experienced, and 48.5% had perpetrated some form of online sexual harassment. Furthermore, the study examined how witnessing, experiencing, and perpetrating such harassment relates to various aspects of psychological well-being. Results revealed that higher levels of depression were associated with witnessing, experiencing, and committing online sexual harassment. Self-efficacy was positively correlated with involvement in cyberbullying in any modality. Finally, experiencing online sexual harassment was linked to reduced levels of social support.

These findings underscore the need for targeted preventive interventions to promote online safety. Many children and adolescents remain uninformed about the nature of online sexual harassment, often feeling ashamed and fearful, which deters them from reporting such incidents. Preventive efforts should therefore focus on empowering young people to report online sexual harassment and on enhancing peer support for victims. Parents and teachers, as key figures in children's lives, must be adequately informed about online risks and trained to support children who are exposed to online sexual harassment. By doing so, we can better safeguard the psychological well-being of children and young people in the digital environment.

Keywords: online, sexual harassment, students, psychological well-being

INTRODUCTION

Online sexual harassment (OSH) involves unwanted sexual behaviours conducted via digital platforms, including explicit messaging, non-consensual sharing of images, and sexually derogatory language (Henry et al., 2020). Adolescents frequently experience and perpetrate OSH, particularly through social media, with psychological impacts such as anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem (Kowalski et al., 2014). It is increasingly recognised as a distinct form of cyberbullying with a sexual dimension, sometimes termed technology-facilitated sexual harassment, which can range from sexual jokes and name-calling to non-consensual sharing of intimate images and threats of sexual violence. Recent reports indicate that OSH is a prevalent issue worldwide. For example, a global survey by Plan International found that 58% of girls and young women (15–25 years old) had experienced online harassment, often on social media platforms (Plan International, 2020). In European studies, anywhere from one-quarter to nearly half of teens report having been targets of

sexual harassment online, with even higher proportions witnessing such incidents (Henry et al., 2020). This high prevalence of OSH in youth populations is concerning, given its documented links to negative psychological outcomes.

Several well-established psychological theories help illuminate why OSH occurs and how it may impact adolescent well-being. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) states that behaviour is learned through observing and imitating others' actions and the outcomes of those actions. Applied to OSH, this theory suggests that adolescents may learn and normalise sexually harassing behaviour by observing peers, family members, or media figures engaging in it. At the same time, bystanders' reactions (or lack thereof) teach observers about the social consequences of OSH. In many online scenarios, harassers face minimal immediate consequences due to anonymity or tacit peer approval. According to Social Learning Theory, the absence of punishment (or the presence of reward) can reinforce harassing behaviour. Another relevant perspective is General Strain Theory (GST) from criminology, which has been applied to explain deviant behaviour in adolescents. GST proposes that individuals who experience stressors or "strains" (such as abuse, peer conflict, or negative life events) may develop negative emotions like anger or frustration, which in turn create pressure for corrective action, sometimes through deviant coping behaviours (Agnew, 1992). In the context of OSH, adolescents might perpetrate harassment as a maladaptive coping mechanism or retaliation if they themselves feel strained – for example, teens who have been victimised (either online or offline) or who feel socially rejected might lash out by sexually harassing others online. The strain of being harassed could lead to anger or desensitisation, which is then expressed by harassing peers in return (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011). The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) offers further insight into why adolescents might engage in sexual harassment in digital environments at rates higher than one might expect in face-to-face interactions.

A growing body of research has examined the impact of cyberbullying and OSH on young people's mental health in recent years. Overall, these studies consistently find that involvement in online harassment – whether as a victim, a perpetrator, or even as a witness – is associated with poorer psychological well-being. Victims of cyber sexual harassment are at particular risk for a range of adverse outcomes. Being the target of sexualised aggression or public humiliation online can lead to elevated levels of stress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Henry et al., 2020; Kowalski et al., 2014). Although fewer studies have focused on witnesses, initial evidence indicates that just witnessing cyberbullying or online abuse correlates with increased anxiety and lower well-being among youth, even if they are not directly targeted (Rivers et al., 2009). Some research on cyberbullying perpetrators indicates they, too, may experience psychological or emotional difficulties, such as elevated levels of depressive symptoms, conduct problems, or peer relationship challenges (Kowalski et al., 2014; Zych et al., 2015).

Despite the ubiquity of internet use among Croatian adolescents, there has been limited research specifically examining OSH in this context. Much of the existing literature on online risks in Croatia has focused on general cyberbullying or internet safety, leaving a knowledge gap regarding sexual forms of cyber violence. To address this gap, the present study uses data from the Croatian deSHAME project, a large, nationally representative survey of high school students, to examine the relationship between OSH involvement and psychological well-being. This study is novel in simultaneously considering three forms of involvement – witnessing OSH, experiencing OSH (victimisation), and perpetrating OSH – and how each relates to indicators of adolescents' wellbeing (including depression, self-esteem, self-efficacy, peer pressure, and social support). Identifying the links between OSH and well-being can help in designing targeted school-based interventions and support systems. Recent European research indicates that adolescent involvement in online harassment and related sexualized online behaviors is widespread, with victimization rates commonly ranging between approximately 20% and 45%, while large proportions of young people, often around one half or more, report witnessing sexualized or otherwise harmful online interactions, suggesting that the Croatian findings align with broader European patterns while also indicating particularly high exposure rates (Castellanos et al., 2023; Smahel et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2021).

The main aim of this study was to examine the role of OSH involvement in adolescents' psychological well-being. Based on the literature above, we expected that adolescents who have experienced OSH would report poorer well-being (e.g., higher depression, lower self-esteem and support) than those who have not, and that witnessing OSH or perpetrating OSH would be associated with certain adverse psychological outcomes.

METHODS

Participants and Procedure

The study utilised a non-proportionally stratified sampling method, with data collected from randomly selected high school students in Croatia (N=2016, 53.8% male, 43.9% female). The participants were drawn from 21 secondary schools across 20 counties and the City of Zagreb. The sample included first- (Mage=14.76; SDage=0.54) and third-grade (Mage=16.74; SDage=0.53) students from various educational tracks, including four-year vocational schools, high schools, and three-year vocational schools (Vejmelka et al., 2023).

Instruments

A questionnaire developed by the Childnet project team was adapted and piloted for use in this study (Vejmelka et al., 2022). Ethical approval was obtained from the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia, Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law at the University

of Zagreb. Parental consent was secured, and students were assured of the anonymity and voluntary nature of their participation (Ajduković & Keresteš, 2020). For the purposes of this study, only a portion of the data from a broader project is used.

Involvement in OSH

To assess participants' experiences of OSH (witnessing, experiencing and committing), they were asked how often in the past year other young people (e.g., peers from school or the local community) treated them in 10 specific sexually harassing ways online (e.g., on social media or via messages). Response options ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Example items included having intimate photos shared without consent or receiving unwanted sexually explicit messages. Cronbach's α reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.89.

Similarly, students reported how often in the past year they had engaged in 10 specific acts of OSH toward others, such as sending unsolicited sexual content or using derogatory sexual language. Reliability for this scale was $\alpha = 0.88$.

Regarding the witnessing, the participants answered whether they were aware of 22 different forms of OSH, ranging from insults to revenge pornography. The reliability for this scale was 0.95.

The results for all three types of involvement were dichotomised into yes/no categories based on witnessing/experiencing/committing any type of mentioned behaviour.

Psychological well-being

To assess psychological well-being, a 10-item scale was used across five domains: depression (two items), self-esteem (two items), peer pressure (one item), self-efficacy (three items), and social support (two items). Respondents answered all items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the measured construct. The scores were calculated as item means, both for individual domains and for the total score. The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.75$.

Statistical Analysis

Analyses were performed in R 4.2.2 (R Core Team, 2024) using reflexR (Rajter, 2022): descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and Welch-corrected t-tests with FDR adjustment. All variables met Kline's (2016, p. 72) skewness < 3 and kurtosis < 7 criteria.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

In the first part of the results the descriptive parameters are shown. Chart 1 presents the number of participants based on their involvement in online sexual harassment.

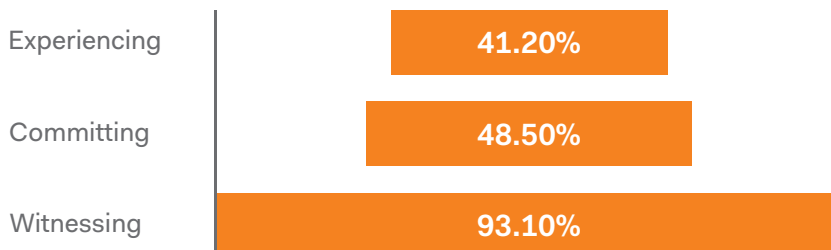


Chart 1: Percentage of participants involved in online sexual harassment (OSH) (N=2016)

The majority of students (93.1%) reported witnessing OSH at least once, while 41.2% reported being victims and 48.5% reported having committed some form of OSH. These findings suggest that OSH is a highly prevalent phenomenon in the digital lives of Croatian high school students, particularly in terms of exposure to such behaviours.

The descriptive parameters for psychological well-being are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for psychological well-being and its domains (N=2016)

Variable	M ²	SD ³	Min ⁴	Q1 ⁵	C ⁶	Q3 ⁷	Max ⁸	Skew ⁹	Kurt ¹⁰	SW ¹¹	SWp ¹²
Psychological well-being	3.7	0.63	1.6	3.3	3.8	4.2	5.0	-0.46	-0.13	0.98	<.001
Self-esteem	3.8	1.17	1.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	-0.86	-0.13	0.87	<.001
Self-efficacy	3.7	0.92	1.0	3.3	3.7	4.3	5.0	-0.83	0.74	0.93	<.001
Social support	4.3	0.87	1.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	5.0	-1.59	2.70	0.79	<.001
Depression	3.0	1.12	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	5.0	-0.04	-0.80	0.96	<.001
Peer pressure	2.0	1.09	1.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	5.0	0.91	0.04	0.82	<.001

²Mean; ³Standard deviation; ⁴Minimum; ⁵First quartile; ⁶Median; ⁷Third quartile; ⁸Maximum; ⁹Skewness; ¹⁰Kurtosis; ¹¹Shapiro-Wilk statistic; ¹²p-value for Shapiro-Wilk test;

The overall mean for psychological well-being was above the theoretical mean, suggesting a relatively high average level of well-being. Among the individual domains, participants reported the highest levels for social support (M = 4.3) and self-esteem (M = 3.8), while peer pressure was the lowest (M = 2.0). Depression scores were at the theoretical scale mean (M = 3.0), with a fairly wide range.

Correlation Analysis

The analysis of correlations (table 2) was conducted both to assess the relationships between the domains of psychological well-being and the involvement in OSH.

Table 2: Correlation analysis of psychological well-being and involvement in OSH

No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Psychological well-being	—							
2	Self-esteem	.820***	—						
3	Self-efficacy	.702***	.481***	—					
4	Social support	.606***	.464***	.363***	—				
5	Depression	-.466***	-.249***	.052*	.010	—			
6	Peer pressure	-.354***	-.155***	-.042	-.042	.267***	—		
7	Committing OSH	-.042	-.015	.082***	-.051*	.087***	.163***	—	
8	Experiencing OSH	-.156***	-.109***	.045*	-.095***	.249***	.121***	.301***	—
9	Witnessing OSH	.097***	.090***	.255***	.142***	.240***	.007	.182***	.184***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results show that psychological well-being was positively correlated with self-esteem, self-efficacy, and social support, and negatively correlated with depression and peer pressure. These correlations are not surprising considering that the overall results are a linear combination of items involved in domains, the absolute sizes of the correlations indicate that the relative importance of domains is not completely dependent on the number of items, but that self-esteem and self-efficacy share the most common variance with the overall well-being.

Experience of OSH was associated with lower psychological well-being, lower self-esteem, and lower social support. It was also positively associated with higher depression and peer pressure. Committing OSH was weakly associated with higher depression and peer pressure. Witnessing OSH was positively related to depression, and interestingly, also showed a small positive correlation with self-efficacy, which may indicate complex dynamics of exposure and coping. Interestingly, the correlations between the modalities of involvement in OSH were relatively low.

Analysis of Differences

The final analysis was the analysis of differences in psychological well-being based on the involvement in OSH. The results are shown separately for committing, experiencing and witnessing OSH.

Table 3: Differences in psychological well-being based on committing OSH

Variable	Committing OSH	N ¹	M ²	SD ³	t ⁴	p ⁵	D ⁶	P _{adj} ⁷
Psychological well-being	No Yes	1038 978	3.73 3.68	0.645 0.623	1.91	.057	0.085	.068
Self-esteem	No Yes	1038 978	3.80 3.76	1.190 1.145	0.65	.514	0.029	.514
Self-efficacy	No Yes	1038 978	3.61 3.76	0.968 0.870	-3.69	<.001	-0.164	<.001
Social support	No Yes	1038 978	4.31 4.22	0.899 0.830	2.30	.022	0.102	.033
Depression	No Yes	1038 978	2.95 3.14	1.130 1.109	-3.92	<.001	-0.175	<.001
Peer pressure	No Yes	1038 978	1.84 2.20	1.024 1.132	-7.40	<.001	-0.330	<.001

¹No. of participants; ²Mean; ³Standard deviation; ⁴t statistic; ⁵p-value;

⁶Cohen's D effect size; ⁷corrected p value (false discovery rate)

Participants who reported committing OSH demonstrated somewhat higher self-efficacy and higher levels of depression and peer pressure compared to those who did not engage in such behaviour. Although these differences were small in magnitude, they suggest that perpetrators of OSH may not be entirely socially competent or emotionally resilient. Rather than reflecting social power or confidence, committing OSH may partly stem from insecurity, susceptibility to peer influence, or maladaptive attempts to cope with personal difficulties.

Table 4: Differences in psychological well-being based on experiencing OSH

Variable	Committing OSH	N ¹	M ²	SD ³	t ⁴	p ⁵	D ⁶	P _{adj} ⁷
Psychological well-being	No Yes	1186 830	3.79 3.59	0.629 0.625	7.08	<.001	0.320	<.001
Self-esteem	No Yes	1186 830	3.89 3.63	1.129 1.206	4.85	<.001	0.221	<.001
Self-efficacy	No Yes	1186 830	3.65 3.73	0.957 0.874	-2.03	.042	-0.091	.042
Social support	No Yes	1186 830	4.33 4.17	0.885 0.833	4.33	<.001	0.195	<.001
Depression	No Yes	1186 830	2.81 3.37	1.078 1.104	-11.48	<.001	-0.521	<.001
Peer pressure	No Yes	1186 830	1.90 2.17	1.029 1.159	-5.37	<.001	-0.246	<.001

¹No. of participants; ²Mean; ³Standard deviation; ⁴t statistic; ⁵p-value;

⁶Cohen's D effect size; ⁷corrected p value (false discovery rate)

Victims of OSH reported significantly poorer psychological functioning across almost all measured domains. They had lower levels of self-esteem and social support and experienced more symptoms of depression and greater peer pressure. The most pronounced difference was observed in depression, where victims reported notably higher levels of emotional distress compared to those who had not been victimised. This finding is consistent with previous research, suggesting that experiencing OSH can have a substantial negative impact on mental health, particularly in adolescence, a period characterised by heightened emotional sensitivity and social vulnerability.

Table 5: Differences in psychological well-being based on witnessing OSH

Variable	Committing OSH	N ¹	M ²	SD ³	t ⁴	p ⁵	D ⁶	P _{adj} ⁷
Psychological well-being	Yes No	1877 139	3.72 3.48	0.620 0.770	-3.63	<.001	-0.347	<.001
Self-esteem	Yes No	1877 139	3.81 3.40	1.131 1.540	-3.11	.002	-0.306	.003
Self-efficacy	Yes No	1877 139	3.75 2.82	0.854 1.320	-8.17	<.001	-0.836	<.001
Social support	Yes No	1877 139	4.30 3.81	0.811 1.348	-4.20	<.001	-0.437	<.001
Depression	Yes No	1877 139	3.11 2.05	1.099 0.980	-12.23	<.001	-1.021	<.001
Peer pressure	Yes No	1877 139	2.02 1.99	1.080 1.251	-0.28	.781	-0.026	.781

¹No. of participants; ²Mean; ³Standard deviation; ⁴t statistic; ⁵p-value;

⁶Cohen's D effect size; ⁷corrected p value (false discovery rate)

Witnessing OSH, although often overlooked, emerged as an important factor associated with poorer mental health outcomes. Students who witnessed OSH, even without directly participating in it, reported lower psychological well-being, lower self-esteem, and significantly higher depression. Importantly, witnessing OSH was also associated with substantially lower self-efficacy, indicating that exposure to such harmful content may undermine adolescents' belief in their ability to manage social situations and cope with problems. The large effect size observed for depression suggests that witnessing OSH is not a neutral experience but may contribute to feelings of helplessness, fear, or moral conflict, especially if adolescents are unprepared to respond or intervene.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide clear evidence that involvement in OSH is meaningfully associated with psychological well-being among Croatian adolescents. These high involvement rates highlight that OSH is not a marginal issue but rather a common experience in the lives of teenagers. This ubiquity alone has important implications: when harmful behaviour becomes so widespread, it may come to feel "normal" to adolescents, potentially lowering their guard against it and increasing their tolerance for it.

Consistent with expectations and prior research, adolescents who had experienced OSH showed significantly poorer psychological well-being compared to those who had not been victimised. Notably, victims reported higher levels of depressive symptoms and felt lower levels of social support. In our sample, the difference in depression between victims and non-victims was especially pronounced, suggesting that being targeted by sexual harassment online can take a serious emotional toll. This finding aligns with a growing body of international literature demonstrating the mental health risks of cybervictimisation. For instance, studies in other countries have similarly found that youth who are sexually harassed or cyberbullied report elevated depression, anxiety, and even trauma symptoms relative to their peers (Henry et al., 2020; Kowalski et al., 2014). Our finding that victimised adolescents perceived less social support suggests that victims may feel isolated or stigmatized. They might fear reaching out for help, perhaps due to self-blame or worry that adults will restrict their internet access if they disclose what happened. From a theoretical standpoint, the impact on victims resonates with General Strain Theory, which would view the harassment as a source of strain that produces negative emotionality (like depressive mood) and erodes social bonds (Agnew, 1992). It also underscores the importance of social support as a protective factor – without feeling supported, victims are more vulnerable to the emotional harm of OSH.

A novel contribution of this study is the examination of adolescents who witnessed OSH. We found that even witnessing OSH was associated with several negative well-being indicators - lower overall psychological well-being and self-esteem, and higher depressive symptoms. In fact, the effect size for the difference in depression was quite large, suggesting that merely being exposed vicariously to OSH can profoundly affect an adolescent's emotional state. This is an important finding because much of the discourse on online harassment focuses on victims and perpetrators, yet the bystander experience is pervasive – in our sample, 93% had seen OSH happen – and evidently impactful. Adolescents might empathise with the victim and feel anger or sadness on their behalf, leading to distress. They might also experience vicarious trauma, particularly if the content is especially graphic or violating. Another factor is the feeling of helplessness or guilt: a witness might think “I should do something to stop this”, yet feel illequipped to intervene safely. Over time, this can erode their self-esteem or self-efficacy, as suggested by our finding of lower self-efficacy among those who witnessed OSH. Essentially, seeing peers humiliated can undermine an adolescent's confidence in their social environment and in their ability to control or prevent negative events. This interpretation is supported by theories of social learning and moral development – witnessing cruelty without resolution or punishment can create internal conflict and stress. It is also congruent with prior research on bullying bystanders in offline settings: for example, Rivers et al. (2009) found that students who frequently observed bullying had heightened levels of psychological distress, including anxiety and self-harm ideation. International research specific to online harassment bystanders is still emerging, but our findings echo the notion from general cyberbullying studies that “no one comes out unscathed” in a hostile

online environment. This underscores the need for interventions that support not only victims but also witnesses. Encouraging active bystander behaviours (such as reporting content or supporting the victim) might mitigate the helplessness that witnesses feel and improve the overall social climate. It also highlights, in line with Social Learning Theory, that bystanders have a role in either reinforcing or challenging harassing behaviour.

An intriguing aspect of our findings is related to adolescents who perpetrated OSH. Nearly one in two students acknowledged having engaged in at least one form of OSH toward others in the past year. We found that, on average, perpetrators reported slightly higher depression and felt more peer pressure compared to non-perpetrators. These results challenge a simplistic view of perpetrators as confident “alpha” youth bullying others purely from a position of power. Instead, our data suggest a more complex profile: adolescents who commit OSH may themselves be struggling in certain areas. The differences were statistically significant but modest in magnitude, indicating that while not all perpetrators are troubled, there is a general trend where those engaging in harassment are not the most well-adjusted teens. One possibility is the overlap of roles – many perpetrators might also have been victims of either OSH or other forms of bullying (the “bully-victim” dynamic). As GST would suggest, their own victimisation or life stress could drive them to retaliate or exert control through harassing others (Agnew, 1992; Patchin & Hinduja, 2011). Another consideration is that these teens may be acting under peer influence or social insecurity. Thus, an adolescent might harass others online to avoid becoming an outcast, even if they are internally dealing with sadness or moral conflict. Our data hint that such learned behaviour does not confer genuine psychological benefits; engaging in harassment is not making these teens happier or more secure – if anything, they have comparable or higher levels of internal distress than non-perpetrators. This nuance is important: it humanises the perpetrators to some extent, suggesting that interventions should not paint them all as simply “bad kids,” but rather as youth who also might need guidance, empathy training, and emotional support. However, it is also important to note that not all perpetrators are necessarily depressed or pressured – there will be others who are more calculating or who derive enjoyment from power over victims (traits akin to moral disengagement or even psychopathic tendencies). Still, the overall trend in our sample leans towards viewing OSH perpetration as part of a broader context of adolescent maladjustment and peer dynamics rather than an isolated problem of a few “bad apples.”

In sum, the theoretical frameworks help explain both the genesis of OSH behaviours and their consequences: toxic online environments can normalise deviance (Social Learning), and the pain caused by OSH can reverberate through victims, perpetrators, and witnesses alike (General Strain and social learning of fear).

The findings of this study carry important implications for educators, parents, policymakers, and mental health practitioners seeking to combat OSH and support adolescents’ well-being. Firstly, the high prevalence of OSH in Croatian teens calls for urgent educational and policy

attention. Schools should explicitly address OSH in their curricula and policies. This could involve incorporating discussions of online sexual respect and harassment into sexuality education or digital citizenship courses. Additionally, given that witnesses form the majority, empowering bystanders is key. Schools can implement bystander intervention training tailored to online scenarios, teaching students' skills like how to safely call out a harasser (if it's someone they know), how to collect evidence and report serious incidents to platform authorities or school staff, and how to show support to the victim.

For parents, the implications are to become proactively involved in adolescents' digital lives in a supportive rather than punitive way. Many adults may not realise that OSH among teens is as common as our data indicates. It's crucial that victims do not fear that telling a parent will result in having their phone taken away or internet cut off – a common reason teens cite for not disclosing online harm. Parents can instead focus on guiding their children in safe online behaviour, encouraging empathy, and making it clear that they will support their child if they become a victim and will hold them accountable (constructively) if they are a perpetrator.

Finally, online safety interventions at the technology and policy levels should complement these educational and psychosocial efforts. Social media platforms popular among youth have a responsibility to enforce community standards against sexual harassment. Our data shows widespread harassment calls for stronger moderation and reporting systems that are youthfriendly (easy to use, with quick responses). Collaboration between platforms and schools could be beneficial – for instance, tech companies could provide online toolkits or workshops in schools about respectful online communication and how to use safety features (blocking, reporting, privacy settings).

Study Limitations

Cross-sectional self-report data limit causal inference and may be subject to response bias; findings may not generalise beyond Croatian secondary schools. Future research could benefit from incorporating qualitative methods to deepen understanding of the context and subjective experiences of OSH.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pervasive nature of OSH (OSH) among Croatian adolescents and its association with psychological well-being. The high prevalence rates—wherein over 90% of participants reported witnessing OSH, approximately 40% experienced victimisation, and nearly 50% admitted to perpetration—highlight the normalisation of such behaviours within adolescent digital interactions.

Victims of OSH exhibited elevated levels of depressive symptoms and perceived lower social support, corroborating existing literature that links cybervictimisation to adverse mental health outcomes. Witnesses also demonstrated increased psychological distress, suggesting that mere exposure to OSH can have detrimental effects. Perpetrators reported higher peer pressure and depressive symptoms, indicating that engagement in OSH may be both a cause and consequence of psychological challenges.

The associations between OSH involvement and diminished psychological well-being highlight that these digital behaviours have real-world consequences for youth development. Any comprehensive strategy to improve adolescent mental health or to create safer online environments must address OSH. This includes educating young people about consent and respect online, empowering bystanders to act, supporting victims through accessible reporting and counselling, and holding perpetrators accountable while guiding them towards healthier social interactions. By tackling OSH on multiple fronts – through policy, education, parental engagement, and mental health support – we can strive to reduce its prevalence and mitigate its harms. Ultimately, promoting a culture of digital respect and empathy will not only curb OSH but also contribute positively to the overall well-being and development of the next generation.

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Sunchica Dimitrijoska, PhD, Professor

Institute for Social Work and Social Policy, University "St. Cyril and Methodius", Skopje, North Macedonia
suncica.dimitrijoska@fzf.ukim.edu.mk | ORCID: 0009-0002-7594-1393

Natasha Pavićević – Stojmenovska

Association of Social Workers of Macedonia - ZSRM, Skopje, North Macedonia
natasha.pavicevic@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0007-8888-3731

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AFFECTED BY CYBERBULLYING: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Child-Friendly Abstract

Cyberbullying happens when someone uses the internet, phones, or social media to hurt others with mean words, pictures, or messages. Unlike normal bullying, it can follow children everywhere, even at home. This makes children feel sad, scared, or alone.

Cyberbullying can affect children's feelings for a long time. It may cause stress, sadness, or low confidence. That is why it is very important that children are not left alone with this problem. Parents, teachers, and friends should listen, give support, and help children feel safe.

This paper shows how children can feel stronger, more protected, and safer online when families, schools, and doctors work together.

Keywords: cyberbullying, children, support, safety.

Abstract

Cyberbullying, as a complex form of psychological and social violence, knows no boundaries of time or space. Its danger lies in anonymity, the rapid spread of content, and the lack of direct supervision, which often leaves victims without adequate support and protection. Distinguishing between types of violence helps more accurately identify the problem and develop specific preventive and response measures. Educating children, parents, and teaching staff about digital literacy and ethical communication is key to reducing this form of violence. The impact of cyberbullying on children's mental health is profound, multifaceted, and longstanding. Research confirms that exposure to

digital violence increases the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Proactive measures are needed that involve schools, parents, the healthcare system, and policymakers.

Keywords: cyberbullying, digital literacy, mental health, prevention, protection, children, social support

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying against children refers to any form of psychological abuse that occurs via the internet and digital technologies, including mobile phones, social networks, messaging apps, and other online platforms. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2008), digital violence is a form of abuse that involves the use of digital technologies with the intent to cause harm, either directly or indirectly. The terminology in the literature includes synonyms such as electronic violence, internet violence, online violence, cyberbullying, cyber violence, and harassment in digital space.

According to the Handbook for development of cyber security culture in the educational system of North Macedonia (2023) Cyberbullying includes “any form of violent, offensive, or harassing behavior that occurs through electronic means of communication, most commonly manifested through messages, comments, images, or videos aimed at hurting, humiliating, or intimidating a child or adolescent” (Dionisieva, 2023, p. 14) The Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth of the Republic of North Macedonia defines cyberbullying as digital violence aimed at harming the mental and emotional well-being of a child.

Various forms of cyberbullying can be identified in literature, particularly among young people, manifested in different ways across the digital space:

- ➔ **Flaming.** Short, heated arguments between two or more individuals, characterised by angry and vulgar language, insults, and threats. The bully’s goal is to provoke anger, sadness, and/or humiliation through deliberate conflict (e.g., “You look disgusting in this picture”; “Your female brain can’t understand what I meant”) (Kowalski, R. M., Limber, S. P., & Agatston, P. W. (2012).
- ➔ **Harassment.** Repeatedly sending cruel, hostile, and provocative messages to an individual or group, often through private messaging. The bully aims to place the victim in a degraded or submissive position through threatening behaviour (e.g., “If you don’t do my homework, I’ll tell everyone at school you’re stupid”). Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2015).
- ➔ **Denigration.** Fabricating and spreading false information about the victim via electronic means to damage their reputation or destroy social relationships (e.g., “Ivana, do you know that your friend Ana kissed your boyfriend yesterday?”). Willard, N. (2007).

- ➔ **Masquerading / Impersonation.** Using someone else's identity to send messages or share content, often through fake social media profiles. This can be particularly dangerous if the bully shares the victim's private information (e.g., address, phone number) with others. Vandebosch, H., & Van Cleemput, K. (2008).
- ➔ **Outing and Trickery.** Publishing confidential information that the victim shared with the bully in confidence, commonly among former friends who reveal secrets, private photos, or messages (e.g., "Check out this ugly picture my ex-best friend sent me"). Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2010).
- ➔ **Social exclusion.** This type of bullying occurs both online and offline. Victims are deliberately left out of group chats, discussions, or online communities (e.g., "Don't add Bojan to this group"). Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. K. (2014).
- ➔ **Cyber threats and Cyberstalking.** Involves sending threatening messages and making unwanted contact attempts that cause the victim to fear for their safety. This is especially expressed in cases involving strangers who attempt sexual manipulation or blackmail using photos (e.g., "If you don't send me a nude picture, I'll come over and kill your brother"). Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2004).
- ➔ **Happy slapping.** Involves initiating physical violence with the intention of recording and sharing the footage online, such as videos of fights among youth at sports events. Slonje, R., & Smith, P. K. (2008).

THE IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

In today's digital society, cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly prevalent form of violence against children and adolescents, with serious consequences on their mental health. This form of abuse is characterised by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to send offensive, threatening, or humiliating messages, share compromising content, or intentionally exclude individuals from digital communities. UNICEF emphasises that cyberbullying is a serious threat to children's emotional development, stating that "institutions must cooperate with schools, parents, and the IT sector to protect children at all levels" (UNICEF North Macedonia, 2022). Cyberbullying characteristics with particular impact on children's mental health:

- ➔ **Available 24/7:** The child cannot "escape" the bullying, as it occurs continuously in the digital space.
- ➔ **Wide audience:** Humiliating content spreads rapidly and can reach a large number of people.

- ➔ **Anonymity of the perpetrator:** Makes it difficult to identify the bully and protect the victim.
- ➔ **Long-term effects:** Leaves psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation.

A systematic analysis of multiple research studies highlights a strong correlation between exposure to cyberbullying and the development of various forms of psychological distress in children and adolescents, confirming that children who experience cyberbullying often develop symptoms of anxiety, depression, helplessness, and low self-esteem:

- ➔ A study conducted by Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Lattanner (2014) found that victims of cyberbullying show significantly higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation compared to children who have not been exposed to such violence. Furthermore, it was found that adolescents who have experienced cyberbullying are twice as likely to develop suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide. Certain groups of children, such as those with disabilities, children from minority backgrounds (ethnic, religious, or sexual), or those with limited family support, are more vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying. According to Smith et al. (2008), adolescents who lack a strong social support network are more likely to internalise the negative emotions caused by cyberbullying.
- ➔ A large-scale study by Modecki et al. (2014), involving over 130,000 young people in 30 countries, found that the effects of cyberbullying on mental health are often even stronger than those of traditional bullying. Participants exposed to digital abuse showed higher levels of emotional dysregulation, more frequent depressive episodes, and more pronounced social isolation.
- ➔ In a meta-analysis conducted by van Geel et al. (2014), a statistically significant link was found between cyberbullying and suicidal behaviour. Victims were 2.3 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts compared to children who had not been exposed to such abuse.
- ➔ Similarly, a study conducted in Croatia (Sesar, Milić, & Pandža, 2020) revealed that children who experience cyberbullying often do not report the abuse to adults, leading to internalisation of the problem. The study showed that 47% of respondents experienced emotional difficulties such as insomnia, panic attacks, and concentration problems, while 31% developed symptoms of depression.
- ➔ In a study conducted in North Macedonia (Dionisieva, 2023), which included both primary and secondary school students, over 35% of children reported having been victims of cyberbullying, while about 20% experienced serious emotional

responses, including anxiety and sleep disorders. Although some institutional prevention mechanisms have been developed, the findings indicate a need to strengthen psychosocial support systems in schools and to improve digital literacy among children and parents.

UNICEF (2022) once again emphasises that cyberbullying represents a serious threat to children's emotional development, stressing the need for collaboration between institutions, schools, parents, and the IT sector to ensure children's protection at all levels. The constant accessibility of digital technologies means that a child can be exposed to bullying at any time, further complicating efforts to combat this phenomenon.

The impact of cyberbullying on children's mental health is profound, complex, and long-term. Research confirms that exposure to digital violence increases the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMBATING CYBER VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

One of the key legal sources is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, which relates to the protection of children from all forms of violence, including cyber violence. Article 19 of this Convention emphasizes the obligation of states to take all necessary measures to protect the child from physical or mental violence, neglect, or abuse, while General Comment No. 13 highlights that states are obliged to ensure protection in the digital environment, which includes the prevention of cyber violence and abuse via the internet (United Nations, 1989; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011).

The Republic of North Macedonia ratified this Convention on December 2, 1993. Additionally, the country ratified the Optional Protocols to the Convention concerning the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography (October 17, 2003), as well as the involvement of children in armed conflict (January 12, 2004) (Council of Europe, 2003; Council of Europe, 2004). General Comment No. 25 (2021) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child specifically addresses children's rights in the digital environment. This document explicitly recognises that the digital environment has a significant impact on children's lives and calls on states to provide appropriate protection against the risks of cyber violence, while also promoting children's rights to access information, privacy, and freedom of expression (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

The Republic of North Macedonia has ratified the Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention, 2001) and its Additional Protocol. This Council of Europe Convention provides a legal basis for combating computer-related crime, including crimes committed via the internet, such as cyber violence, harassment, and child abuse. The Budapest Convention

plays a key role in preventing cyber violence at the international level and enables international cooperation in the fight against cyber violence and online crime, which is directly linked to the prevention of online child abuse (Council of Europe, 2001).

In addition to the aforementioned documents, it is important to highlight the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021–2024), developed by the European Commission, which includes specific guidelines for protecting children from violence, including online violence. As part of this strategy, the development of specific national policies and protocols for handling cases of digital abuse is recommended, as is the strengthening of cooperation among educational, judicial, and social institutions (European Commission, 2021).

UNICEF and UNESCO also continue to promote international standards for children's digital safety, calling on member states to develop inclusive and participatory policies that incorporate children's voices in shaping online protection measures.

Despite these obligations and international standards, institutional implementation of recommendations and protection mechanisms in the Republic of North Macedonia remains fragmented and underdeveloped. The existing legal framework lacks clear definitions of digital violence against children, and institutional responses are often ad hoc and uncoordinated. The lack of specialised services, limited capacity for professional training, and weak intersectoral cooperation further hinder the effective implementation of international standards in practice.

Legal framework for cyberbullying against children in the Republic of North Macedonia

In the context of child protection, education, and safeguarding the rights to freedom and safety in the digital environment, several key laws govern these areas.

The Law on Social Protection provides a legal foundation for protecting the social rights of citizens, including children at risk. While the law does not explicitly use the term “cyberbullying against children”, it ensures protection from all forms of violence, including those occurring in digital environments. This law addresses the provision of social services for children, victims of violence, and other vulnerable groups, and includes preventive measures aimed at curbing cyberbullying and other forms of abuse. Under this legislation, the state is obligated to provide specialised services for prevention and protection of victims, including children who are victims of cyberbullying (Law on Social Protection, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 104/2019).

The Law on Child Protection is the key legal document that defines the rights and obligations related to safeguarding children's rights, including the prevention of cyberbullying. While the

term “cyberbullying” is not explicitly used, the law covers all forms of violence against children—physical, psychological, and digital. It establishes institutional mechanisms for protection and is based on international conventions, offering clear guidelines for action by relevant institutions such as social services and the police in cases of reported violence (Law on Child Protection, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 33/2018).

The Criminal Code addresses criminal acts related to abuse, threats, and other forms of violence, including internet misuse and identity theft. Although it does not explicitly mention “cyberbullying of children”, it includes offences that often correspond to cyberbullying behaviours, such as threats, harassment, and sexual exploitation via digital platforms. The code applies to digital abuse even without using specific cyber-related terminology (Criminal Code, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 37/2011).

The Law on Justice for Children does not directly mention cyberbullying either, but it is focused on enhancing child rights protections within the justice system. This includes the protection of child victims of violence, which may encompass digital violence. This law emphasizes the best interest of the child in all legal proceedings, alternative (non-judicial) measures for offenses committed by minors to support rehabilitation, compensation rights for children who are victims of violence, mandatory training for justice professionals on children’s rights and childhood in the legal context (Law on Justice for Children, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 26/2024).

The Law on Primary Education regulates the educational system, including the school’s responsibilities in protecting students. It also outlines the obligations of schools to educate students about internet safety, prevent cyberbullying, and provide psychosocial support to children who are victims of violence. According to this law, educational institutions are required to ensure a safe environment for all students, and teachers are obligated to identify and report any form of violence against children. While the law does not use the specific term “cyberbullying,” it provides general protection for students. (Law on Primary Education, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 103/2017).

The Law on Secondary Education expands responsibilities for protecting students in high schools, including mandatory preventive measures to prevent violence in schools and in the digital environment. Schools are required to implement educational programs on internet safety, and to direct students to guidance and support in cases of cyberbullying. The law also regulates the role of schools in cooperation with child protection institutions. The law does not explicitly mention “cyberbullying,” but it provides a foundation for protecting students within educational institutions (Law on Secondary Education, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 77/2018).

The Law on Electronic Communications provides a framework for internet user safety, including children. Although the law does not explicitly use the term “cyberbullying,” it regulates security

in electronic communication, which can include forms of online abuse. The law defines security protocols for digital communication, including obligations for platforms and internet providers to protect user privacy and prevent online abuse. This law is essential in the fight against cyberbullying, as it allows for the implementation of measures to block or remove harmful content from the internet and enables timely intervention by regulatory bodies (Law on Electronic Communications, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 147/2020).

The Law on Personal Data Protection deals with the protection of internet users' privacy, including children. While it does not explicitly mention "cyberbullying," it provides mechanisms for protecting personal data, which is important for preventing cyberbullying tactics such as identity theft and harassment. Although the term is not specifically used, this law plays a crucial role in preventing violence (Law on Personal Data Protection, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 42/2020).

The Law on Media regulates media conduct, including responsibility for protecting children from harmful content. While it addresses the protection of children from violent and harmful content in the media, the term "cyberbullying" is not clearly defined. The law does not deal explicitly with cyberbullying, but it includes the protection of children from violent and harmful media content. It also regulates media responsibility in informing and educating the public about the importance of child protection and violence prevention, including cyberbullying. Media are obligated not to disseminate content that promotes violence or discrimination, and they must also monitor and report on issues related to child protection in the digital world. This law is especially important as it allows for the sanctioning of media outlets that violate children's rights or promote negative social norms (Law on Media, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 71/2019).

Protocols and Guidelines for Dealing with Violence in Schools in North Macedonia

In the Republic of North Macedonia, there are protocols and guidelines for dealing with violence in schools, including cyberbullying. These documents have been developed by educational institutions, civil organisations, and government bodies, to provide a safe and supportive environment for students:

➡ **Protocols for Reporting and Protecting Students:** Some schools, such as OOU "Petar Pop Arsov" in Skopje, have developed their own protocols for dealing with cases of violence, abuse, or neglect. These documents are available on their website. (ooupetarpoparsov.edu.mk)

➡ **Protocols for Preventing Violence in High Schools:** In 2021, a Protocol for Preventing and Dealing with Cases of Violence was presented, developed by a working group

consisting of representatives from 10 high schools in Skopje. This protocol aims to educate students and create a safe environment for all. (radiomof.mk)

➔ **Government Conclusions on Prevention and Safety in Schools:** In May 2023, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted conclusions recommending the formation of expert teams in schools, in cooperation with the expert services of intermunicipal centres for social work. The focus of these teams is to conduct individual meetings with students and organise meetings with parents to improve safety and organisation in schools. (mia.mk)

➔ **Ministry of Education and Science (MoES):** The MoES has set up email addresses for reporting violence: prijavinasilstvo@mon.gov.mk and paraqitdhune@mon.gov.mk. These addresses are open for reports from students, parents, and teachers and are used to report cases of violence in schools. (news.net.mk)

SUPPORT MODELS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM CYBERBULLYING

The “Whole School Approach” model (United Kingdom) is a strategic framework applied at the whole-school level, aimed at building a culture of prevention, intervention, and recovery across all forms of violence, including cyberbullying (Livingstone, Stoilova, & Kelly, 2021):

- This approach is based on the involvement of all school actors, including the wider community, whereby the school not only reacts to violence but proactively prevents it through education, collaboration, and support.
- The mechanism that enables the implementation of this model is based on establishing protocols for problem identification, education of all participants, and continuous performance evaluation. At the national level in the UK, educational policies mandate staff training and conduct detailed monitoring and evaluation.
- Additionally, this model promotes partnerships with NGOs and local health and social services, creating an integrated approach to child protection.
- An interesting aspect of this model is the inclusion of peer education programs, where students help their peers recognize and report violence. This approach not only addresses violence but also strengthens critical thinking and digital literacy among youth, which is crucial for cyberbullying prevention.

The “Barnahus” model, developed in Iceland and later adopted by other Nordic countries, was created in response to the need for an integrated system of protection for children who have experienced various forms of violence (Tournier-Wendel & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2018):

- This model provides children with comprehensive protection, including judicial, social, and health interventions, without additional victimisation.
- The integration of all relevant sectors in one location is a key strength of this model, protecting children from further stress.
- In the context of cyberbullying, this model allows for quick and effective response, psychological evaluation, and rehabilitation of victims.
- It also enables cooperation with families, which is especially important in cases where violence is perpetrated by peers in digital space

The “Digital Rights and Resilience” model is based on the concepts of digital citizenship and resilience, aiming to empower children with knowledge about their rights and develop skills to cope with digital challenges. This model has been implemented in Estonia, known for its high level of digitalisation, and is a mandatory part of the educational system. The “Digital Rights and Resilience” model is based on digital citizenship and resilience, aiming to equip children with knowledge of their rights and skills to handle online challenges. In Estonia, digital competence is a mandatory core competence in the national curriculum, adapted from DigComp 2.1 and DigCompEdu, and supported by programs such as Digital Accelerator and Digital Key (Education Estonia, n.d.; Digital Competence Initiative in Estonia, 2022).

These three models represent innovative approaches to protecting children from cyberbullying and can be adapted to the specific conditions in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is essential to implement these models within the education, health, and justice systems, with continuous training and education. By combining these approaches, the country can create a system that not only protects but also empowers children to navigate the digital environment.

Institutional response to cyber violence against children in the Republic of North Macedonia

The **Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth** plays a key and multifaceted role in the child protection system, facing specific challenges in the area of digital violence. In addition to coordinating the work of **Centers for Social Work (CSWs)**, the Ministry is responsible for establishing strategic policies, intersectoral cooperation, and developing crisis response protocols. The Ministry is tasked with drafting strategic documents and aligning the work of various sectors. It develops **national strategies for the protection of children’s rights**, but there is a noticeable lack of specific guidelines and standardised procedures for responding to cases of cyber violence. This normative gap hinders consistent and effective institutional responses, especially in cases where digital violence goes beyond the educational system and requires broader social and psychological intervention. Although **CSWs** are often the first point of contact with the victims, the Ministry’s role is crucial in ensuring continuous training of professional staff and strengthening the capacity to recognise and respond promptly to cyber violence.

According to UNICEF’s analysis, “effective protection of children in the digital space requires a synchronised institutional response and strategic leadership from central state actors.” In this context, the Ministry must take a more proactive role in integrating digital safety into existing child protection policies. The lack of coordinated data on reported cases, as well as the limited number of digital security experts within the social protection system, further complicates the institutional response.

Centers for Social Work (CSWs) play a key role in protecting children at risk, including in cases of cyber violence. Their primary task is to identify and assess risks to the child’s safety, and to coordinate with other relevant institutions—schools, police, healthcare institutions, and the prosecutor’s office—to implement protective measures. However, effective response to cyber violence is often limited due to several systemic challenges:

- Firstly, many CSWs lack professionals trained to understand and assess digital violence, which hampers the evaluation of the seriousness of a reported case and passing appropriate decisions in the best interest of the child.
- The digital literacy of employees in the centres is often not at the level necessary to recognise sophisticated forms of violence, such as the manipulation of personal data, blackmail, or sexual harassment via social media.
- Additionally, reporting cyber violence cases is rare, both by children and their parents. The reasons include fear of stigmatisation, shame, lack of knowledge about where to seek help, and distrust in institutions. As a result, CSWs often learn about cases of violence too late, and indirectly—most often when the consequences have already seriously impacted the child’s mental health.

Educational institutions play a key role in preventing cyber violence, as they are the primary environment in which children form digital habits. In the Republic of North Macedonia, the Ministry of Education and Science has adopted guidelines and developed digital literacy programs, but their implementation varies across schools. Although there is a *“Manual for Developing a Culture of Cybersecurity in the Educational System”* (Dionisieva, 2023) that promotes a culture of safety in schools, its implementation remains selective. There is no systematic obligation for school psychologists to record and address cases of cyber violence, which further complicates prevention and intervention efforts. Teachers are often not adequately trained to recognise and respond to signs of digital harassment.

The police and high-tech crime units have institutional authority to receive reports and conduct investigations into cyber violence. However, in practice, parents often avoid reporting incidents, either out of fear of stigmatising their children or due to a lack of trust in the system. According to a UNICEF Report (2022), only 11% of parents in the Republic of North Macedonia know how and to whom to report digital violence.

Health and mental health sector. Children exposed to cyber violence often suffer psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, isolation, and even suicidal thoughts. In North Macedonia, there is a chronic shortage of school psychologists and social workers. Moreover, children in rural areas have significantly less access to mental health services. The healthcare system in the country rarely links mental health symptoms in children to possible digital violence, indicating a need for additional training for doctors and psychologists.

The NGO sector and civil society in the Republic of North Macedonia play an important role in preventing and educating about digital violence. Organisations such as the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and the International Forum of Solidarity – Emmaus conduct campaigns and workshops, but their resources are limited, and access to their programs often depends on international donors. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work with child victims of violence often face challenges such as unstable funding and insecure sources of support. It is necessary to enable direct funding for NGOs through state budgets and to establish regulations that facilitate ongoing and structured cooperation with government institutions.

It is also important to mention important training resources for dealing with cyberbullying in North Macedonia:

- ➔ **Training for High School Students:** As part of the “Youth Participation for Strong and Sustainable Community Development” project, training sessions were held for high school students on preventing and dealing with cyberbullying. Participants gained knowledge on recognising cyberbullying and skills to conduct peer workshops in their schools. (mladi.eu.mk)
- ➔ **Manual for Dealing with Cyberbullying:** SOS Children’s Village developed a manual for dealing with cyberbullying, which is intended for civil organisations but can also be useful for parents and teachers. The guide is available in both Macedonian and Albanian languages. (mladi.eu.mk)

International Cooperation and Protection of Children from Cyber Violence: The Case of North Macedonia in a Comparative Western Balkan Perspective

The Republic of North Macedonia actively cooperates with international organisations to improve the protection of children from cyber violence. One significant example is UNICEF’s project “Protecting Children Online”, implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ombudsman. The project included developing protocols, conducting teacher training, and establishing a helpline.

Additionally, with the support of the Council of Europe, North Macedonia adopted the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2023–2026, which includes measures to protect vulnerable groups, with a particular focus on children. Compared to other countries in the region, the Republic of North Macedonia demonstrates notable progress, though implementation challenges remain. Serbia stands out with its operational protection model through the National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet, while Croatia has an integrated curriculum and preventive campaigns. Bosnia and Herzegovina operates through local initiatives and non-governmental organisations.

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND ENHANCING PREVENTION OF CYBERBULLYING: CHILDREN, PARENTS, AND PROFESSIONALS

Establishing a good relationship with a child victim of cyberbullying, parents, and professionals

To establish a good relationship with a child who is a victim of cyberbullying, it is essential to create an empathetic and safe environment. The child must feel protected, able to freely express emotions, and assured that it will be listened to without judgment. Using child-friendly language, nonverbal communication, and active listening techniques significantly contributes to building that relationship (Livingstone, 2019).

According to research, children often do not report cyberbullying due to fear of being misunderstood or punished by having their internet access taken away (Stoilova, Livingstone & Khazbak, 2021). Therefore, it is important to make it clear to children that they are not to blame for the violence they have experienced and that they have the right to protection and support.

Parents are the most important allies in the child's recovery process. However, they are often in shock themselves, uninformed, or tend to either exaggerate or minimise the seriousness of the issue. It is necessary to build a partnership with parents, educate them about the forms and consequences of cyberbullying, and encourage them to provide emotional support to their child.

Effective protection of the child requires **cooperation among professionals from different sectors**: schools, social work centres, healthcare institutions, and the police. It is crucial that all professionals share a common ethical framework, have clear protocols, and mutual trust. In addition, professionals must be sensitive to working with children and trained to recognise trauma. Ongoing training in digital violence and intersectoral cooperation is essential (Council of Europe, 2023).

Preventing cyberbullying through the education system

“Effective prevention of cyberbullying requires an integrated approach that combines education, staff training, restorative practices, and cooperation with parents” (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013, p. 30). Cyberbullying prevention demands a multidisciplinary approach that includes student education, teacher training, the implementation of restorative practices, and active parental involvement. Integrating these components into a unified school strategy can significantly reduce the incidence of cyberbullying and contribute to creating a safe and supportive school environment:

- ➔ Prevention is not just about providing information—it involves creating an environment where *violence is unacceptable, and diversity is respected*. In this context, working with **students** should focus on strengthening social-emotional skills such as conflict resolution, assertive communication, and emotional recognition. Cyberbullying prevention is more effective when integrated into a broader school policy against all forms of discrimination and violence. Schools need to develop *anti-bullying protocols* and involve students in creating *digital codes of conduct*.
- ➔ Prevention programs should be continuous and diverse, not just reactive. The most effective models include content on empathy, digital footprints, and the legal consequences of cyberbullying, integrated into the curriculum (e.g., civic education, computer science).
- ➔ **Teachers** are often the first to notice changes in students’ behaviour—withdrawal, anxiety, or conflict. Therefore, their ability to recognise and respond to signs of cyberbullying is crucial, as they serve as the first “filter” in identifying violence.
- ➔ Mandatory training for teaching staff on the types of cyberbullying, communication with victims, and reporting mechanisms should be part of a national digital safety strategy in education. The role of teachers must be redefined to address the challenges of digital society.
- ➔ Schools should train professional associates (psychologists, pedagogues, social workers) in **restorative practices**, as this elevates prevention to a higher level, shifting the focus from punishment to building relationships and a culture of dialogue. Training teachers in restorative approaches enables more effective conflict resolution and reduces the recurrence of bullying behaviour (Thorsborne, 2017, p. 22).
- ➔ **Parents** are often unaware of their children’s digital habits. **Educating parents** on violence prevention and healthy communication can reduce the number of cases where children become victims, even from their own siblings. Additionally, parents

should be trained to recognise and respond to symptoms of victimisation, such as anxiety, withdrawal, or behavioural changes.

- ➔ Finally, the key strategy in preventing cyberbullying is educating students on digital literacy and ethical online behaviour.

Good practices in the Republic of North Macedonia and the region

In the Republic of North Macedonia, several notable initiatives have been developed that constitute effective practices for addressing cyberbullying. Schools that operate in accordance with the recommendations of the Bureau for Development of Education have introduced thematic classes on digital literacy and online safety, as well as standards for responding to incident reports (Bureau for Development of Education, 2023). Furthermore, local selfgovernment units, in partnership with civil society organisations such as HERA and “Youth Can,” implement preventive workshops targeting students and parents, with an emphasis on media literacy, emotional regulation, and psychosocial support (HERA, 2022).

Research indicates that children most frequently receive support from peers, parents, and teachers, whereas formal institutions are often perceived as slow, inaccessible, or insufficiently prepared to respond effectively (UNICEF, 2021). These findings underscore the need for more efficient reporting mechanisms, strengthened psychological services, and improved student awareness of their rights and available support options.

Research indicates that timely reporting and rapid institutional response significantly reduce the risk of long-term psychological consequences among young victims. Croatia stands out with its “e-Škole” model, while Slovenia and Bulgaria have strong preventive and research-based systems that offer psychological support, promote parental involvement, and run systematic campaigns.

Regional analyses suggest that 15% of children in Southeast Europe are exposed to some form of cyberviolence, highlighting the necessity for systemic and coordinated interventions (UNESCO, 2022; UNICEF Regional Office, 2020). Limited access to mental health services and constrained resources represent common challenges across the region.

Systemic challenges in implementing support models for child victims of cyber violence

Despite the existing normative framework, the implementation of support models for victims of cyber violence in North Macedonia is hindered by several significant systemic limitations.

First, there is a clear lack of adequately trained personnel in schools, social work centres, and security institutions. Shortages of psychologists, pedagogues, and ICT professionals—combined with frequent staff turnover and inconsistencies in available training—significantly hinder the consistent implementation of established protocols. Although a *National Protocol for Handling Cases of Violence Against Children* exists, its application remains uneven and lacks systematic monitoring (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2021).

Second, chronic shortages of financial and material resources result in an unequal territorial distribution of specialised services. Most psychological counselling centres, digital reporting platforms, and support programs are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural communities significantly underserved (UNICEF, 2021). Inadequate ICT infrastructure further complicates the timely detection of and intervention in high-risk situations.

Third, interinstitutional coordination remains fragmented. Although several institutions are involved at the national level—including schools, social work centres, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Interior—there is still no integrated coordination mechanism. This leads to parallel procedures, unresolved cases, and a weak system for monitoring and follow-up (Council of Europe, 2022).

These challenges indicate that bridging the gap between the legal framework and the practical protection of children requires long-term reforms, including institutional consolidation, digital transformation, and certified professional development programs.

METHODOLOGY FOR ACTION RESEARCH THROUGH THREE CASE STUDIES

General Approach

The research follows a qualitative action research methodology, focusing on three in-depth case studies from different regions: one urban, one rural, and one mixed/peripheral municipality. Action research is used not only for analysis but also to initiate changes in the practices of social protection and social services regarding cyberbullying.

Ethical Considerations

- Obtaining informed consent from parents and participants
- Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of children and families
- Recommendations for immediate support in cases where serious mental health risks are identified.
- All documents were treated as confidential, and only those permitted to be shared in accordance with official duties and the Law on Personal Data Protection were disclosed.

Case Study 1: Urban Area – Skopje

A 13-year-old student from an urban school in Skopje has become a victim of cyberbullying through social media platforms and group chats. The child is exhibiting symptoms of anxiety, reduced class participation, avoidance of peers, and increasing social withdrawal.

Focus: A victim of cyberbullying showing symptoms of anxiety and social withdrawal

Methods:

➔ Interviews with the child, parents, teachers, and school professionals (psychologist, pedagogue, social worker)

- **Child:** Reports to her parents and her class teacher that she has been receiving humiliating messages and edited images shared in a class group chat. She expresses fear of attending school due to ongoing mockery and harassment that continues offline.
- **Parents:** Notice disrupted sleep, irritability, reluctance to attend school, and significant time spent isolated in her room.
- **Teachers:** Observe declined academic engagement, minimal verbal participation during classes, and withdrawal during breaks.
- **School professionals:** Identify heightened anxiety, signs of emotional exhaustion, and avoidance of social interactions, especially with classmates involved in the bullying.

➔ Semi-structured interview with a social worker from the Center for Social Work (CSW)

- Confirmed that the school reported the case to the Center for Social Work, where the initial risk assessment indicated that the situation required immediate protection of the child.
- Emphasised the importance of immediate inter-sectoral and multi-agency cooperation due to the child's escalating emotional distress.
- Highlighted the need for continuous communication with the family, counselling, and regular monitoring of the child's psychological state.

➔ Document analysis

- **Intervention records:** Include the initial report by the class teacher, notes from documentation of observed emotional changes, and notes from records of meetings with the family.
- **Meeting minutes:** Indicate that the cyberbullying originates from a group of classmates who coordinated posts and messages.
- **Notes from psychological assessment reports:** Show symptoms consistent with generalised anxiety, fear of peer interactions, and a moderate risk of long-term social isolation.

**Researcher's observational diary during child protection meetings**

- Notes limited preparedness among school staff to respond to digital forms of violence.
- Documents defensive reactions from some parents of bullies, who minimise the severity of bullying.
- Observes the child's discomfort during meetings, reliance on the school psychologist for reassurance, and avoidance of eye contact with school staff and peers

Action Component: Recommendations for developing an emergency intervention plan at the school; initiating training for teaching staff.

Case Study 2: Rural Area – Municipality in Eastern Macedonia

A case of cyberbullying occurring in a small rural primary school involving a 10-year-old student, where awareness among parents and local institutions is low. The bully is a student from the same school, and the school community shows limited recognition of the seriousness of the incident. Institutional response is minimal or delayed.

Focus: Low awareness among parents and institutions; the bully is a student from the same school

Methods:

**Focus group with teachers and school support staff**

A focus group was conducted with eight school employees, including teachers, the school pedagogue, and the psychologist.

Key findings:

- Teachers report frequent interpersonal conflict among students but often view them as “normal peer behavior”
- The bully, an 11-year-old student, is described as academically strong but socially dominant and occasionally aggressive.
- Staff acknowledge that parents rarely attend meetings and show limited interest in digital safety or anti-bullying training.
- The school support staff expresses concern that cases of cyberbullying are often handled informally and not documented according to protocol.

**Visit and analysis of the role of the local Center for Social Work (CSW)**

A visit to the small local CSW office revealed:

- The CSW is understaffed, with limited presence in rural schools and few preventive activities targeting bullying.

- Social workers confirm that they rely on schools to initiate reports, but such reports are rare.
- There is no established communication channel or regular coordination between the school and the CSW.
- Staff express the need for greater community awareness, noting that rural areas often normalise aggressive behaviour among youths.



Review of actions/lack of institutional response

- The school did not file a formal report to the CSW, assuming the issue would de-escalate naturally.
- No structured intervention was initiated; no psychological assessment of the victim or the bully was conducted.
- Parents of both the victim and the bully were not adequately informed; the meeting with them took place only after pressure from the pedagogue.
- There is no evidence of a coordinated response or follow-up plan between the school and any external institution.

Action Component: Initiating a dialogue between the CSW and the school

Case Study 3: Peripheral Municipality – Multiethnic Context

A case of cyberbullying affecting a 14-year-old student in a peripheral, multiethnic municipality where cultural norms and mistrust toward formal institutions influence how families respond to school-related problems. Cultural barriers limit communication between parents and institutions, leading to hesitancy to report incidents and seek support.

Focus: The influence of cultural barriers towards institutions

Methods:



Interviews with local NGO activists, an educational mediator, and school professionals (psychologist, pedagogue, social worker)

Local NGO activist:

- Reported ongoing challenges in building trust between minority communities and public institutions.
- Noted that parents often rely on extended family networks instead of school or social services when such problems arise.
- Highlighted that cyberbullying cases frequently go unreported due to fear of stigmatisation.

Educational mediator:

- Emphasised that linguistic and cultural misunderstandings often prevent effective communication between schools and families.
- Stated that some parents do not perceive online harassment as a serious issue, considering it a “normal part of growing up”.
- Mediator often acts as a bridge, visiting families and explaining school procedures.

School professionals (psychologist, pedagogue):

- Mentioned difficulties in engaging parents in preventive activities or joint meetings in general and for cyberbullying.
- Described the victim as showing early signs of anxiety, reduced motivation, and reluctance to participate in group activities.
- Staff reported that previous attempts to involve families from different ethnic backgrounds were only partially successful due to mutual distrust.

**Analysis of previous cases and institutional procedures**

- Review of school records shows four earlier bullying-related incidents in the past two years, none officially reported to the Center for Social Work (CSW).
- In two cases, the families resolved the issue privately, outside institutional channels.
- School protocols exist on paper but are rarely fully implemented due to lack of cooperation and fear of escalating interethnic tensions.
- There is no coordinated mechanism for engaging mediators or community organisations in handling cyberbullying incidents.

Action Component: Proposals and recommendations for a local action plan involving mediators and multiethnic cooperation to prevent cyberbullying.

Data Analysis Methods

- Thematic analysis to identify patterns (themes: institutional response, mental health, parental support, cultural barriers)
- Comparative analysis across the three case studies
- Reflexive journaling for the researcher’s continuous self-evaluation

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Improve the implementation of the existing legal framework** through mandatory and continuous training for teachers, school psychologists, social workers, law enforcement officers, and media professionals on recognising, documenting, and reporting cyber-violence against children.

2. **Strengthen national protocols and inter-institutional coordination**, including mandatory standardised annual reports on case management and direct communication channels between schools and relevant institutions.
3. **Integrate a unified national reporting platform**, connected to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Interior, enabling automated case distribution and monitoring of institutional interventions.
4. **Plan and secure adequate financial, material, and human resources** to ensure equal regional access to specialised services for child victims of cyber-violence.
5. **Develop digital literacy infrastructure**, modernise school computer laboratories and strengthen ICT support within all educational institutions.
6. **Enhance public education** through systematic and continuous programs for parents, teachers, and students focusing on digital safety, media literacy, and early detection of risky online behaviours.
7. **Activate student parliaments and peer-to-peer programs** as prevention mechanisms for awareness-raising, peer support, and anonymous reporting of cyber-violence.
8. **Include vulnerable groups of children** in policymaking on digital safety based on the principle “nothing about us without us.”
9. **Strengthen local coordination** between schools, social work centres, health institutions, and the NGO sector to ensure rapid intervention, timely referrals, and comprehensive psychosocial support for affected children.
10. **Establish a regional network** with Southeast European countries to exchange methodologies, indicators, data, and good practices for protecting children from cyber-violence.

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