

CYBERBULLYING AS A MODERN PHENOMENON OF THE PRESENT TIME AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUTH

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Abstract

Cyberbullying as a modern phenomenon that affects the most vulnerable part of our society - children and youth - is a current threat. Even in the context of the current situation related to COVID 19, cyberbullying has an increasingly dangerous impact on young people. Online space is a threat, which produces number of factors that negatively affect the development of our society. The threats of online space that affect society are becoming more sophisticated and very difficult to eliminate. Authors of presented article point out to the various forms of negative impact of cyberbullying on society, especially on children and young people. Authors also mention prevention possibilities of cyberbullying and protection and support of potential and actual victims of cyberbullying. Nowadays this problem is much discussed topic because of its ability to threaten a wide range of potential victims. Therefore it is more than necessary to pay scientific attention to cyberbullying and to constantly examine its impact on society.

Key word: cyberbullying, youth, prevention, victims, online space

JEL Code: I29, J70, K32

Introduction

Cyberbullying is a modern phenomenon that emerged in the online space in the current century. The risk of cyberbullying significantly increases as more and more of our activities move online. New technologies have revolutionised the way that many of us work. We can now communicate electronically with colleagues three thousand kilometres away as easily with collaborators in the same building (Luik, Naruskov 2018). It is important to bear in mind the special risks faced by the most vulnerable members of society – children and adolescents – when they go online. This has become a more urgent issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of work, family life and interaction with friends now take place online. Everything has

had to adapt to the circumstances necessary for our survival in the present time. The online space has become a vital part of life, and this has had a strong impact on adolescents and children. They were in a way “forced” to live on the internet, social networks and in various applications. In these conditions, there was naturally an increase in cyberbullying (online bullying, internet bullying). This reinforced the view that has developed in the last ten years that cyberbullying is a serious problem amongst young people. (Gamez-Guadix et al. 2015) Many students in elementary and secondary schools report experiencing cyberbullying both in and outside school and a growing body of research focuses on this issue. (Cao, Liu, 2020)

The terms “bullying” and “cyberbullying” are not defined in the criminal law of the Slovak Republic. Legislators have responded to this deficiency by an amendment of Act No. 300/2005, the Criminal Code, as amended (“Criminal Code”), that came into force on 1/7/2021 amending the legal classification of crimes under Section 360b of the Criminal Code – “dangerous electronic harassment”. The definition of this crime refers to a long-term pattern of humiliation, intimidation, unauthorised action in the name of the victim or other harassment. It also includes the unauthorised disclosure or making available to a third party of visual, audio or audiovisual recordings of the victim of a personal nature obtained with the victim’s consent that could significantly undermine their dignity or cause other serious harm to their rights through an electronic communication service, computer system or computer network that significantly impairs the quality of life of the victim.¹

The amendment cited in the previous paragraph reflects the need for legislation to react to social conditions and changes that take place in society.

The present article investigates the defining characteristics of cyberbullying, its effects on young people and the ways in which it can be prevented. The authors also use qualitative and quantitative indicators to demonstrate the scale of the risks that cyberbullying poses for society, especially for young people in the Slovak Republic. Description, explanation, interpretation and prediction are used to cast light on the phenomenon of cyberbullying and its associated risks. To provide relevant information and establish qualitative indicators, the authors conducted guided interviews with specialists engaged in practical work related to cyberbullying.² To establish quantitative indicators to determine whether cyberbullying is a

¹Section 360b of the Criminal Code.

² Guided interviews were conducted with three police officers working in the field of prevention who had three or more years’ experience, and with six teachers working in elementary and secondary schools with five or more years’ experience.

growing phenomenon, the authors processed statistical data collected during seminars on cyberbullying that one of the authors had conducted in elementary and secondary schools.³

1. Cyberbullying and its attributes

As mentioned in the previous section, cyberbullying is one of the most serious negative phenomena that can now be found in nearly every school. Experience in the field indicates that the age limits for online bullies and their victims are getting lower. There has also been an increase in the sophistication and brutality of cyberbullying. The methodological guidelines for schools and educational establishments on preventing and handling bullying and cyberbullying are laid down by Guideline No. 36 issued in 2018 (“Guideline”). The Guideline defines the basic signs, forms and manifestations of bullying, the possibilities for prevention, and methods for handling it when it occurs. Bullying is defined as “behaviour of a pupil intended to injure, threaten or frighten another pupil, or a deliberate, as a rule repeated, attack on a pupil or group of pupils who for various reasons are unable to defend themselves effectively.” Cyberbullying is described as a direct form of bullying involving the abuse of information-communication technologies (phones, tablets, the internet and social network) to deliberately threaten, injure or frighten, which often occurs in combination with other forms of bullying. (Janková, 2020) Schools, especially elementary schools, perform several functions. They play a very important role in upbringing and socialisation. They are indispensable in the education and re-education of children and adolescents and the prevention of various negative social phenomena. School is a critical formative element in the lives of children and adolescents.

It would be reasonable to ask: “Why do you focus so much on schools when cyberbullying takes place either on the internet (for example, through e-mails, chat, through videos on websites such as YouTube or on social networks) or through mobile phones (for example, through apps such as WhatsApp or through nuisance calls)?” Our research findings provide interesting answers. Cyberbullying takes place online but it very often starts in school, in the classroom, amongst the students. Young people find it much easier to overcome social barriers when they are online than when they are physically present (for example, in school). For this reason, it is very common for bullying in school to be linked to cyberbullying outside the school, as our analysis of information from our guided interviews indicated. In cases of cyberbullying between children, the aggressor and the victim usually

³ The statistical data was processed from more than 70 questionnaires completed by elementary and secondary school students from Rožňava District in eastern Slovakia.

know each other in real life. The victims nearly always suspect who is behind the attacks. This is not a hard and fast rule, of course. The victim and the aggressor/perpetrator of cyberbullying are sometimes complete strangers to each other.

Other questions that often arise in relation to the topic of our research are: “What is the main difference between bullying and cyberbullying? Why is cyberbullying so much more dangerous than bullying and why does it represent such a severe risk for children and adolescents? Does cyberbullying have a negative effect on society as a whole?” Answers to these questions will be given in later sections.

In the area covered by the present research, it is not uncommon to encounter confusion between the terms “cyberharassment” and “cyberbullying”. Cyberharassment covers a broader area. Cyberbullying is limited to bullying that occurs in schools and educational establishments. We will now turn to the basic differences between bullying and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is an invasion of the victim’s privacy that lasts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. From a sociological and psychological perspective, it is the exploitation of the aggressor’s dominance. Anonymity can be considered an element that supports dominance. The aggressor provokes feelings of fear, stress and inferiority in the victim using social networks and online spaces. Cyberbullying involves the aggressive, deliberate actions of a group or an individual using electronic means of communication repeated over time against a victim who cannot defend themselves or whose defences are eliminated (Campbell et al. 2019).

People’s online behaviour is determined by three basic characteristics known as the AAA principle:

- Accessibility – the internet and virtual space are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. People can connect to the internet at home, at school, at work or almost anywhere.
- Affordability – an internet connection costs just a few euros, making it affordable for nearly everyone, including children.
- Anonymity – this is one of the most important characteristics of communication on the internet and in virtual spaces. It is easy for people to control how much of their identity they disclose. They can decide whether to use their real name or a pseudonym, to use their own photograph or somebody else’s.⁴

⁴ Drobný, M. Gregussová, M. (2015) *Kyberšikanovanie.sk*. Bratislava: ©eSlovensko o.z., first edition, p. 21.

The rapid growth of contemporary media and social networks, and the possibilities and speed that they offer make it almost impossible to fully map the spread of information and its effects on young people. Aggressors (perpetrators) can remain anonymous, which often gives them a feeling of strength. The identity that they present on the internet is often very different from what they show in real life. Age, appearance, sex and other characteristics are immaterial for cyberbullying. It can take place between pupils of the same age or between people of different ages belonging to different social groups (pupil teacher, friend-friend). In certain circumstances, there could be a risk of cyberbullying occurring unintentionally. This could happen if an aggressor injures a victim by acting rashly, without consideration. The aggressor does not usually see the effects and may not become aware of the how much damage they have caused.

Bullying generally happens face to face. This is one of the basic differences between bullying and cyberbullying. It can also be said that while it is usually possible to “close the door” on bullying, there are almost no limits in cyberbullying. Direct bullying involves mainly physical attacks, stealing property and the like.

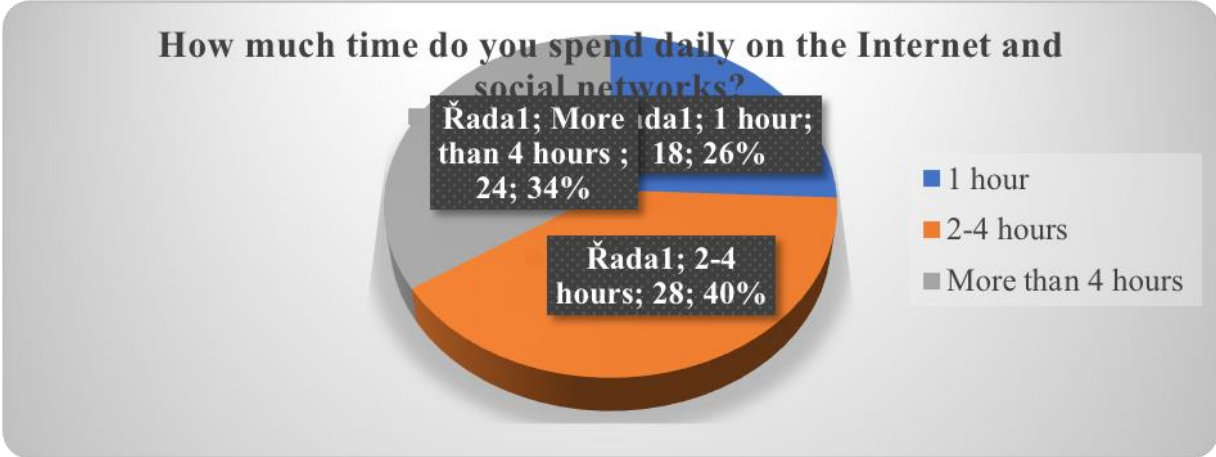
It is vital to recall these general aspects of the issue before proceeding to the specific findings and individual concepts that characterise cyberbullying and the danger it represents and building upon them to specify preventive measures. It must be noted that although the pathological effects of cyberbullying are borne mainly by children and adolescents, it is also harmful to the wider society. If society wants to deal with this contemporary negative phenomenon, it is essential not only to identify it but to provide as much information as possible about it to the whole community but especially to young people. One way to do this is through seminars that are now being organised in elementary and secondary schools to raise awareness of cyberbullying in young people and society as a whole.

2. Internet, social networks and cyberbullying in elementary and secondary schools

As mentioned above, our survey was based on 70 questionnaires completed by elementary and secondary school students. The questions were formulated based on our experience and the recommendations of experts with whom we conducted guided interviews. The aim of the survey was in part to obtain information and in part to verify hypotheses regarding use of the internet and social networks and experiences of cyberbullying among elementary and secondary school students.

Our first question was intended to highlight the real presence of the internet and social networks in the lives of children and adolescents. As our graph shows, as many as 40% of all respondents spend 2-4 hours on the internet every day. This confirmed to us that the issue of internet and social network use and the dangerous phenomena that may result from their use are of urgent concern.

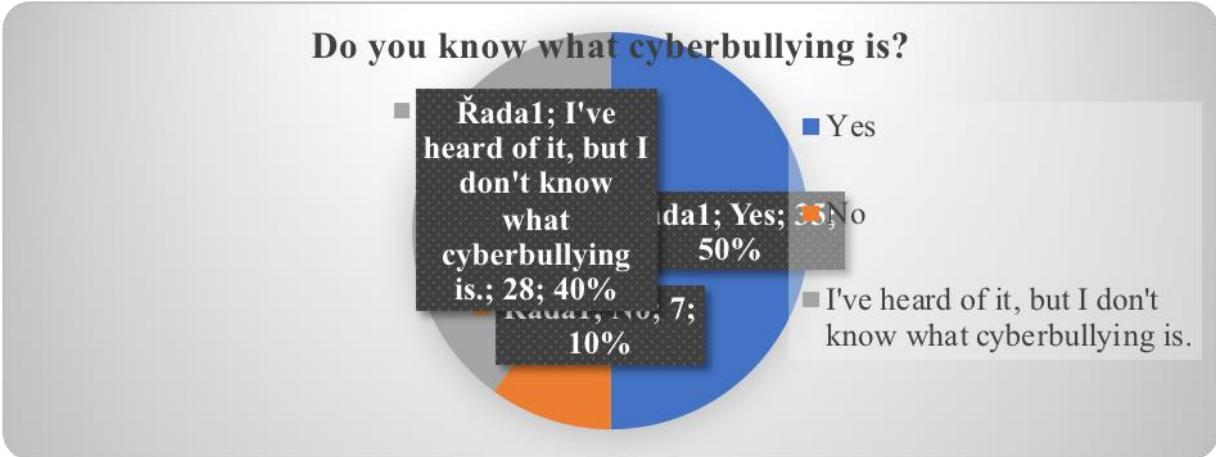
Fig. 1: Time that children and adolescents spend on the internet and social networks



Source: authors' own processing based on processing of questionnaires.

Our second question inquired whether young people were familiar with the term “cyberbullying” or whether they had ever encountered it. Our findings indicate that exactly half of our respondents had encountered the term “cyberbullying”. On the other hand, 28 respondents who had encountered the term did not know exactly what it meant.

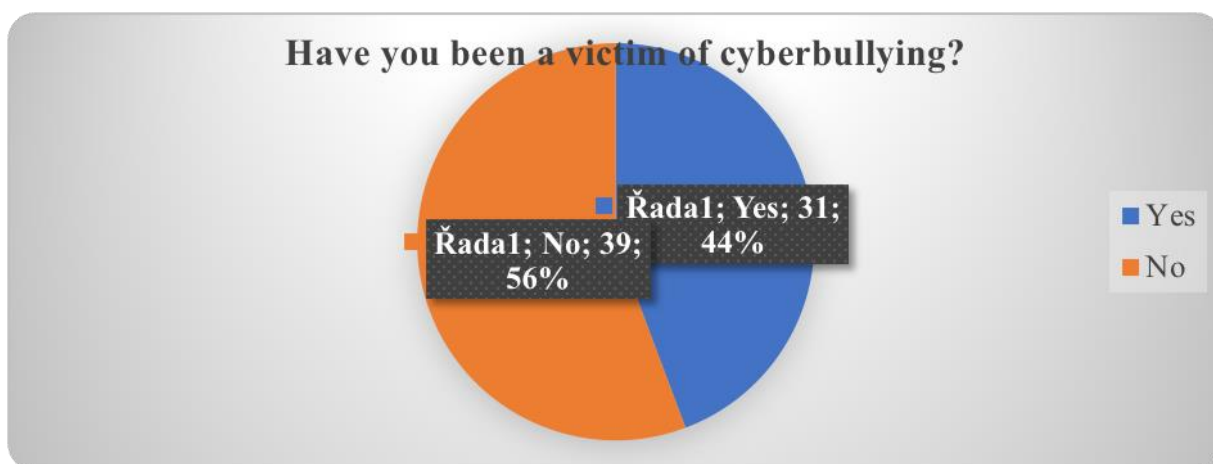
Fig. 2: Recognition of the term “cyberbullying”



Source: authors' own processing based on processing of questionnaires.

Following this question, we explained to children in detail what cyberbullying is and what its defining characteristics are. We also told them what signs can identify cyberbullying. We presented the characteristics of victims and aggressors and their typical behaviour in cyberbullying. The next question was asked after the explanation and clarification of the term “cyberbullying” for pupils and students.

Fig. 3: Direct experience of cyberbullying



Source: authors' own processing based on processing of questionnaires.

Our findings indicate that 44% of respondents had been victims of cyberbullying. Given the total number of respondents, those points to a widespread and alarming phenomenon. Analysis of the responses to this question showed that prevention of cyberbullying receives very little attention in schools and families. Our findings also indicated that prevention is of vital importance in relation to this phenomenon. We decided to focus on these three questions in reporting the results of our questionnaire because they are primary questions that are crucial for further research into cyberbullying among young people. The questionnaire naturally included other questions but there is insufficient space to discuss them in detail in the present paper. These other questions included: “What measures to prevent cyberbullying would you find acceptable?”, “When you encountered cyberbullying, did you tell an adult about it?” and “What measures do you think should be taken to combat cyberbullying?”

3. Effective prevention of cyberbullying

It is evident that cyberbullying is happening in our society and affects every young person. School, fellow pupils and friends have the strongest influence on pupils and students. We therefore consider it very important to focus measures and activities to prevent cyberbullying on schools and educational establishments. The findings reported in this paper and in related research conducted in the school year 2019/2020 (Janková, 2020) highlight the importance of involving schools in preventive measures and interventions against this online violence. School psychologists have an important role to play here alongside teachers. The most important step in preventing victimisation is teaching pupils the rules for safe use of the internet from the moment when they start using it. It is symptomatic of the time that children are coming into contact with the internet at ever younger ages and we therefore need to adopt an approach to prevention that is accessible for even the youngest. We need to explain the situations that they can encounter in cyberspace and assure them that they need not and should not put up with streams of threats and abusive language. It is important to emphasise to young people that cyberbullying can happen anonymously at any time and almost anywhere. It is also important to present the risks to physical and mental health such as depression and anxiety (Guo et al. 2021).

The aim of preventive activities in schools and work with children and adolescents outside educational establishments is to increase their awareness of the risks associated with cyberbullying. As has been mentioned several times, cyberbullying is a pathological phenomenon in interpersonal relationships and therefore prevention of its occurrence must be based on improvements in social relations. In our view, the focus should be on fostering the development of social skills in children and adolescents. Children need to improve their ability to recognise and name their emotions and experiences, to get better at handling stress and conflicts and to have more empathy for others. The main basis for effective prevention is directly involving children as active participants in activities. An experiential form of communication with children is especially important for the prevention of cyberbullying and our own experience has confirmed that pupils and students are able to participate in a very broad range of activities. It is therefore vital that today's young people receive as much information as possible on the risks and dangers of the internet and communication devices (Nesic 2016). Collaboration is another key factor in prevention. It should involve schools, the police force, non-profit organisations and other entities involved in both the prevention and

repression of online violence. Cyberbullying amongst children and adolescents can only be prevented through a constructive, multi-institutional approach.

Conclusion

To conclude, cyberbullying is evidently a growing problem in our society and the number of victims of this dangerous modern phenomenon is rising. The effects of cyberbullying are all the more dangerous because it has physical, mental and, most importantly, social impacts. The presence of an effect on society is clear and cyberbullying thus demands further research and continuous monitoring of the danger it poses for young people. It is necessary both to react to cases as they occur and to implement effective preventive measures. Both approaches are clearly vital to contain the spread of cyberbullying in society. Increased theoretical and practical discussion of cyberbullying can be expected to increase social awareness of the phenomenon and mitigate its impacts.

The present paper presents the fundamental issues relating to cyberbullying including those related to dealing with it in practice. The key points to bear in mind are that cyberbullying causes negative attitudes society, school and social institutions amongst young people, significantly impairs their ability to create and maintain social contacts, and reduces the capacity for normal communication in society.

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