Let./Vol. 76 (142)
Issue 4/2025
pp. 124–145

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The problem of peer cyberbullying from the students' perspective

Abstract: Cyberbullying is a growing societal issue requiring an adequate social and institutional response due to the consequences it may have on all subjects involved. Given its presence among students, their views should be considered when planning preventive strategies. Therefore, researching students' perspectives on the cyberbullying problem stands out as significant. This research focuses on students' opinions on various aspects of the problem of cyberbullying – its definition, severity, presence, and causes. The study included 856 students from elementary schools in Belgrade. The results show that more than half of the students consider that cyberbullying is present among their peers. They are aware of the severity of the cyberbullying problem and its consequences; however, variations are present in view of age and gender when different aspects of cyberbullying and the factors leading to it are observed. The majority of students recognise behaviours representing cyberbullying, while they are uncertain about behaviours that are not cyberbullying *per se* but that can easily assume these characteristics depending on the context. The findings imply that an integrated approach to prevention is important, aimed at raising awareness of the gravity of the cyberbullying problem and its consequences, as well as developing digital literacy and strengthening the capacities of both families and schools for appropriate and continuous preventive action.

Keywords: cyberbullying, students' perspective, risk factors for cyberbullying, prevention of cyberbullying

UDC: 376

Scientific article

https://doi.org/10.63384/spB54z808a

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Introduction

The increase in the availability and accessibility of mobile devices, computers, and the Internet has seen a corresponding increase in the number of children and teenagers using digital technologies. They engage in numerous online activities, such as retrieving information, communicating with friends, playing games, and watching, creating, and sharing content. These activities can be perceived as advantages of an online world that enables easier communication, faster access to information, the satisfying of different individual interests, and so on. However, the very features that make the online world so appealing and accessible can also expose children to a range of potential risks. The overall increase of violence in society, for instance, is now also mirrored through the use of digital technologies and tools in the everyday lives of children and adults. This is evidenced by numerous studies (Marín-Cortés et al. 2019; Modecki et al. 2014; Patchin and Hinduja 2011) that point to the dark side of the Internet and various forms of cyberbullying that have both short- and long-term negative consequences (Baldry et al. 2015). The findings also indicate that children and the young are especially vulnerable to cyberbullying and that between 20% and 40% of them are at risk of cyberbullying or have suffered from it, with the most sensitive and susceptible being children aged 12 to 14 years (Tokunaga 2010).

Nowadays, cyberbullying is seen as a serious social problem, particularly endangering children and the young. As such, it demands the increased attention not only of parents but also of schools and creators of educational policies to overcome it. Adequate measures of prevention and intervention require a thorough comprehension of the cyberbullying problem, and a significant contribution can be gained through the perspectives of children and the young, who, compared to adults, spend more time in the digital environment and have more contact and experience with social media (Dennehy et al. 2020). Therefore, this research focuses on how students perceive cyberbullying, what kinds of behaviour they consider as cyberbullying, and what circumstances lead to it.

Basic characteristics of cyberbullying

When defining the term cyberbullying, most authors agree that it includes all such behaviours through which another person is intentionally harassed or hurt and thus being incurred harm through the use of digital media (Marín-Cortés et al. 2019; Palaiologou 2017; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013; Tokunaga 2010). The conceptualisation of cyberbullying is aggravated by the fact that it occurs in very different forms and manifests itself in various ways (Kowalski et al. 2014). It includes behaviours such as insulting and denigration, threats, flaming, cyber-stalking, slandering, masquerading, disclosing private information and trickery, sexual harassment, and sharing inappropriate content, which can be sexual or violent (Alhujailli et al. 2020; Livingstone et al. 2015; Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013). In addition, it is not rare to come across allegedly less harmful behaviour expressed as "jokes" on account of individuals or a group, such as malicious comments, spreading rumours, and so on (Alhujailli et al. 2020).

Cyberbullying is often considered as a subtype of traditional violence, with the difference that it happens in a new context—that is, digital surroundings (Li in Arato et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2010). This is the reason why many definitions of cyberbullying originate from the definition of traditional violence happening "face to face" (Dinić 2022; Tokunaga 2010); thus, they keep the elements of Olweus' definition of violence, characterised by the imbalance of power, the intention to incur harm, and repetition (Olweus 1994). As with traditional violence, the imbalance in cyberbullying can be manifested in a physical, social, relational, or psychological form, and the very fact that one person is more digitally literate than another can represent the imbalance of power (Kowalski et al. 2014). As for the repetition of violent behaviour, it can be less relevant in the case of cyberbullying, keeping in mind that only one activity is sufficient to classify certain behaviour as cyberbullying and significantly harm someone with long-lasting effects (Baldry et al. 2015). Furthermore, cyberbullying is also characterised by some specificities of its digital context, such as unlimited internet capacity, the anonymity of the perpetrator (which also contributes to the above-mentioned imbalance of power), a wide audience, and 24/7 availability (Alhujailli et al. 2020; Berne et al. 2013; Kowalski et al. 2014). Cyberbullying can also be direct or indirect, private or public, and the manner in which the victim experiences such behaviours (being harmful or not, regardless of the intention, repetition, or imbalance of power) stands out as an important factor in identifying if something is cyberbullying or not (Iqubal and Jami 2022; Peter and Petermann 2018). Furthermore, the fact that such "information" can be shared with anybody with access to technology and viewed as many times as the recipient desires adds complexity to the problem (Beghin 2020). The frequency and range of cyberbullying are not conditioned or limited by the physical proximity of a bully and a victim and the real world; as such, the violence, as the social problem, has reached a new degree of "maturity" (Patchin and Hinduja 2006).

Certain similarities and differences in traditional and digital violence raise the question of whether they can be considered close and connected phenomena, and whether cyberbullying is only a subtype of traditional violence or a separate

phenomenon requiring specific and unique approaches regarding its prevention and intervention (Liu et al. 2021). Some studies indicate a correlation between participation in traditional forms of violence and digital ones, suggesting that different types of violence are highly connected (Marín-Cortés et al. 2019; Tokunaga 2010; Wang et al. 2010)—that is, the experience of one type of violence significantly increases the probability of occurrence of other forms of violence (Finkelhor et al. 2007; Kostić and Ranaldi 2022; Turner et al. 2010). These study findings point out the significance of perceiving and better understanding the risk factors for cyberbullying.

Causes and consequences of cyberbullying

A deeper understanding of the cyberbullying phenomenon and its prevention requires examining the various psychosocial risk factors that form the basis of this type of violent behaviour. Research suggests that the same risk factors are accountable for the appearance of violent behaviour in digital space as for other forms of violence, including individual characteristics and unfavourable family, school, and social circumstances (Kowalski et al. 2014; Marín-Cortés et al. 2019; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Wang et al. 2010). Key factors include age, to some extent gender (due to the inconsistency of research results in that aspect; see Hinduja and Patchin 2015; Kowalski et al. 2014; Tokunaga 2010; Wright and Li 2013), impulsivity, insufficiently developed emotional and cognitive empathy and positive image of oneself, resistance to rules and moral norms, an inclination to conflictive problem solving, a lack of parental support and supervision, poor academic performance and an absence of the feeling of affiliation to school, problems in relationships with teachers and peers, and exposure to violence in the media, among others (Baldry et al. 2015; Liu et al. 2021; Sorrentino et al. 2023). Furthermore, risk factors concerning online activities are specific to cyberbullying, such as the time spent on social networks; sharing one's photos, videos, and data; communication with unknown persons; and so on (Arato et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2021; Marín-Cortés et al. 2019). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the quality of and time spent on internet activities are closely connected to cyberbullying risks. With that reference, the importance of the quality of communication between parents and children is emphasised as a predictive factor (Alajbeg 2018; Barlett 2023). Findings showing that school bullying represents the most predictive factor of cyberbullying risk (Baldry et al. 2015; Liu et al. 2021) are also significant.

The consequences of cyberbullying are far from harmless. They manifest in academic performance, disturbed self-confidence and trust towards others, self-harming, the consumption of psychoactive substances and alcohol, poor health (especially mental health in relation to anxiety and depression), and overall functioning (Alhujailli et al. 2020; Beghin 2020; Kostić and Ranaldi 2022; Ortega et al. 2012; Mooij 2012; Sorrentino et al. 2023). Cyberbullying has an impact not only on the victims but on all those witnessing it and others including the victim's friends and family, which creates an unfavourable climate for development and learning (Alhujailli et al. 2020; Mooij 2012; SRSG 2012).

In light of the above, it can be concluded that cyberbullying represents a complex social problem that requires a comprehensive resolution approach and the joint efforts of schools, parents, relevant social institutions, and society in general. Overcoming this problem assumes a significant position in the educational policies of many European countries (OECD 2020). Since the starting point in developing preventive programmes is to assess the current condition, it is important, inter alia, to consider the students' perspective on the issue of cyberbullying because they are the subjects in whose interest these preventative measures are developed.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to explore students' understanding of the cyberbullying problem. The study focuses on the following questions: What behaviours do students consider to be cyberbullying? What is their perception of cyberbullying as a social problem? What are their opinions about the factors contributing to its occurrence? And are there differences in students' perceptions of the cyberbullying problem in terms of age and gender? In this study, a convenience sampling approach was used to recruit 856 students from 15 elementary schools in Belgrade (Table 1). Students from the 5th to the 8th grade were invited to participate in the research, since previous studies have shown that cyberbullying is more prevalent among students aged 11 years and over and that cyberbullying among younger students (8–10 years old) is rarely present (Barlett 2023). The findings also indicate that older students at elementary schools are more often victims of cyberbullying compared to younger students (Šulc et al. 2021). The distribution of the sample per grade was such that the most convenient approach for data processing was to merge the categories in the following manner: younger students (5th and 6th grade) and older students (7th and 8th grade); thus, these formulations are used when presenting the results and discussion.

		Frequency (*f*)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	359	41.9
	Female	497	58.1
Grade	5th	241	28.2
	6th	220	25.7
	7th	252	29.4
	8th	143	16.7

Table 1: Structure of the sample

The study employed the descriptive research method, with data collected through online surveys sent by email. The survey instrument consists of three scales. The first, three-point, scale (1 – no, 2 – not sure, 3 – yes) is intended to collect data about the behaviours representing cyberbullying. It consists of fiffteen items that include the behaviours, some of which are unquestionably related to cyberbullying while others refer to behaviours which are essentially not violent but can be considered as such depending on the content, intention, and context. The scale is reliable for identifying behaviours belonging to cyberbullying ($\alpha = 0.84$). The second, four-point, scale (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – mostly disagree, 3 – mostly agree, 4 – strongly agree) consists of eight items and is used to examine students' opinions on different problems of cyberbullying; therefore, the items are interpreted separately. The third, three-point, scale (1 – cannot contribute, 2 – can contribute to a small extent, 3 – can contribute to a great extent) is used to examine students' opinions on the circumstances that can contribute to the occurrence of cyberbullying. The reliability of this scale is acceptable ($\alpha = 0.84$).

The data were collected during the 2023/24 school year. The research was carried out following ethical principles. Participants were informed of the purpose and significance of the study, reminded that participation was anonymous and voluntary, and given the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time. Parental consent for the students to take part in the study was secured through the teachers. The obtained data were processed using IBM SPSS statistics software, v. 26 using descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, and single factor analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Research results

Violent behaviours in the digital environment

The obtained data show that the majority of students recognise behaviours representing cyberbullying (Table 2). Since the scale does not include solely those behaviours that can be classified with certainty as cyberbullying, the obtained data were subjected to exploratory factor analysis aimed at reducing the set of variables. The *Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin* test ($KMO = .93$) and *Bartlett's* test of sphericity ($p < .001$) were used to verify that the data set was suitable for factor analysis. Using *oblimin* rotation and the analysis of major components, two factors were identified. The proposed structure explains 57.24% of the total variance, whereupon the factor saturation of variables is within the range from .507 to .866 for the first factor and from .536 to .728 for the second factor (Table 2). The first factor singles out the variables that undoubtedly represent cyberbullying, while the second factor distinguishes behaviours that may but do not have to be classified as cyberbullying, such as making comments on someone's posts. For further statistical analyses, the factor scores were kept as separate variables along with the

composite score made of all statements from the scale representing the variable of understanding cyberbullying.

Behaviours in the digital environment	Factor saturation	No		Not sure		Yes	
Factor 1: Behaviours representing cyberbullying		%	*f*	%	*f*	%	*f*
Mockery and inappropriate comments on someone's photos, messages, and posts on social networks	.866	14	116	5	43	81	697
Sharing somebody's sexual content without his/her consent or pressuring or threatening a person to create and share personal sexual content	.860	13	109	3	29	84	718
Sending disturbing, offensive, or threatening messages	.857	11	96	4	37	84	723
Sharing photos or videos with inappropriate, sexual, or disturbing content in common groups or on social networks	.831	12	105	6	51	82	700
Sending viruses, hacking profiles, or stealing and changing passwords	.803	12	104	5	46	82	706
Sharing false information about someone in an online space	.791	15	129	10	85	75	642
Sharing photos or videos of friends on social networks without their consent	.738	16	136	13	114	71	606
Belittling someone's opinion in online discussions	.721	20	172	13	111	67	573
Ignoring and excluding individuals from groups on social networks	.507	29	248	23	197	48	411
Factor 2: Behaviours not necessarily cyberbullying							
Making comments on someone's posts	.728	55	472	30	259	15	125
Researching somebody's followers (about who follows the person we are following)	.706	60	516	27	231	13	109
Organising events and gatherings through social networks	.676	65	559	21	179	14	118
Following one person on several social networks	.656	77	657	10	89	13	110
Participating in group discussions by making comments regarding some post	.595	42	361	30	258	28	237
Sharing someone's posts (e.g. photos) from open profiles or some common groups	.536	30	257	25	218	45	381
Extraction method: Analysis of major components Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalisation Rotation performed in four iterations							

Table 2: Factor weight matrix and students' assessment of which behaviours represent cyberbullying

Extraction method: Analysis of major components
Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalisation
Rotation performed in four iterations

To better understand students' awareness of cyberbullying behaviours, we examined differences among students given their age and gender. Statistically significant differences were found in overall understanding ($F = 41.65$; $p < .001$) and in relation to two factor scores. Younger students ($M = 2.30$; $SD = 0.41$) demonstrated greater sensitivity to different forms of cyberbullying compared to older students ($M = 2.12$; $SD = 0.40$), regarding the total score of understanding cyberbullying. The factor 1 analysis revealed significant differences ($F = 23.25$; $p < .001$), showing that younger students were better at recognising clear cases of cyberbullying ($M = 0.14$; $SD = 0.93$) than older students ($M = -0.16$; $SD = 1.05$). The factor 2 analysis, which concerns situations that are not necessarily cyberbullying, also revealed significant age differences ($F = 24.45$; $p < .001$); younger students ($M = 0.15$; $SD = 0.92$) were more likely to identify these behaviours as potential cyberbullying, while older students ($M = -0.18$; $SD = 1.06$) were less likely to do so.

The analyses indicated differences between girls and boys in their perceptions of cyberbullying situations. Girls were found to be more likely to recognise certain situations as cyberbullying compared to boys ($F = 32.75$; $p < .001$), with higher overall scores (boys: $M = 2.13$; $SD = 0.46$; girls: $M = 2.29$; $SD = 0.37$). Similar findings were obtained for factor 1, which includes clear cases of cyberbullying ($F = 32.26$; $p < .001$), while for factor 2, which includes behaviours not necessarily representing cyberbullying, gender differences were statistically significant at the .05 level ($F = 4.49$; $p = .034$). The results regarding girls ($M = 0.16$; $SD = 0.88$) and boys ($M = -0.22$; $SD = 1.11$) indicate that there is a greater probability of girls identifying behaviours that are unmistakably harmful than boys, such as sharing explicit content or sending threatening messages. On the other hand, the results obtained on the subsample of boys were below the total average. In terms of behaviours such as commenting on other people's posts or sharing someone's posts or photos from open profiles, girls ($M = 0.06$; $SD = 0.96$) were more likely to classify these behaviours as cyberbullying than boys were ($M = -0.09$; $SD = 1.04$).

Different aspects of cyberbullying

Besides identifying behaviours classified as cyberbullying, we attempted to research the perceptions of students on various aspects of the cyberbullying problem, such as severity, prevalence, and its consequences (Table 3). The majority of students in elementary school senior grades were aware of the seriousness of the cyberbullying problem (87%). They stated that cyberbullying was present in their school (61%), and most of them confirmed that cyberbullying was not only carried out by unknown persons (86%). Only 15% of students considered cyberbullying as harmless because it happens in the digital environment, and the majority (80%) recognised that cyberbullying can lead to permanent consequences. Twenty-eight per cent (28%) of students considered that cyberbullying cannot be prevented, whereas 74% stated that one can protect oneself against cyberbullying.

Although the issue concerns a small percentage, only 15%, it should be mentioned that there were students who considered that it is the fault of the cyberbullying victim, which can be interpreted through the traditionally grounded assumptions that the victim has contributed in a certain way to her/his exposure to some form of violence.

Statements on cyberbullying	*N*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*M*	*SD*
Cyberbullying is a serious problem among peers	856	1	4	3.32	0.80
Cyberbullying is not present among students in my school	856	1	4	2.23	0.90
Cyberbullying is carried out only by unknown persons	856	1	4	1.64	0.83
Cyberbullying cannot be prevented	856	1	4	1.89	1.04
Cyberbullying is harmless because it does not happen in the real world but in the digital environment	856	1	4	1.54	0.86
Cyberbullying does not incur permanent consequences	856	1	4	1.74	0.92
One can protect oneself against cyberbullying	856	1	4	2.94	0.99
Cyberbullying is the fault of the victim	856	1	4	1.64	0.84

Table 3: Perception of students on different aspects of cyberbullying

The analysis revealed significant differences between younger and older students regarding three statements (Table 4). Younger students were more likely to view cyberbullying as a serious issue among peers, while older students more often perceived it as harmless and believed that the victim is to blame. As for the other items, no statistically significant age differences were found (i.e. both younger and older students similarly perceived the presence of cyberbullying among peers, the possibility of its prevention, and the seriousness of its consequences).

Item	Grade	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Cyberbullying is a serious problem among peers	5th and 6th	3.41	0.79	11.83	.001
	7th and 8th	3.22	0.81		
Cyberbullying is harmless because it does not happen in the real world but in the digital environment	5th and 6th	1.42	0.74	22.73	.000
	7th and 8th	1.69	0.96		
Cyberbullying is the fault of the victim	5th and 6th	1.52	0.78	20.80	.000
	7th and 8th	1.78	0.90		

Table 4: Statistically significant age differences in students' opinions on cyberbullying

Statistically significant gender differences were found in students' opinions on cyberbullying (Table 5). Girls were more likely to see it as a serious problem among peers than boys, while boys were more likely to believe that cyberbullying is harmless, is carried out by anonymous individuals, and that it does not incur permanent consequences. Boys were also more likely to blame the victim. Both girls and boys perceived the presence of cyberbullying among their peers in a similar way, as well as the potential for its prevention and protection from it.

Item	Gender	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Cyberbullying is a serious problem among peers	Male	3.16	0.91	23.58	.000
	Female	3.43	0.70		
Cyberbullying is carried out only by unknown persons	Male	1.76	0.91	13.30	.000
	Female	1.55	0.76		
Cyberbullying is harmless because it does not happen in the real world but in the digital environment	Male	1.63	0.93	6.53	.011
	Female	1.48	0.80		
Cyberbullying does not incur permanent consequences	Male	1.85	0.96	9.06	.003
	Female	1.66	0.88		
Cyberbullying is the fault of the victim	Male	1.80	0.89	21.34	.000
	Female	1.53	0.78		

Table 5: Statistically significant gender differences in students' opinions on cyberbullying

Circumstances contributing to the occurrence of cyberbullying among students

The students believed that various factors contribute to cyberbullying to a lesser or greater extent and that poor relations among peers ($M = 2.61$; $SD = 0.65$) and the need to inflict harm on somebody ($M = 2.51$; $SD = 0.69$) contribute the most. They also highlighted exposure to violent content ($M = 2.42$; $SD = 0.74$), a lack of parental supervision ($M = 2.43$; $SD = 0.71$), incomprehension

of the severity of the cyberbullying problem (M = 2.42; SD = 0.69), and insufficient knowledge of the consequences of cyberbullying (M = 2.33; SD = 0.72) as key contributing factors. Some students considered the unrestricted use of digital technologies (M = 2.19; SD = 0.73) and boredom or a surplus of free time (M = 2.03; SD = 0.72) as contributing risk factors.

Statistically significant age differences were found in students' opinions about the role of unrestricted use of digital technologies (F = 22.01; p < .001) and the amount of violent content online (F = 11.72; p < .001) in contributing to cyberbullying. Younger students (M = 2.30; SD = 0.73) rated the impact of unrestricted use of digital technologies higher than older students (M = 2.07; SD = 0.72). In contrast, 7th and 8th graders (M = 2.33; SD = 0.76) assessed the contribution of violent content on the Internet and in the media to cyberbullying lower than their younger peers (M = 2.50; SD = 0.72). Both younger and older students similarly assessed boredom or excess free time, poor peer relations, a lack of parental supervision, insufficient knowledge and understanding of the cyberbullying problem, and the need to harm others as factors that contribute to the occurrence of cyberbullying.

The analysis revealed significant gender differences in students' perceptions of cyberbullying risk factors. Girls attached a more important role to poor peer relations, a lack of parental supervision, violent online content, a lack of awareness about the severity of the cyberbullying problem and its consequences, and the intent to harm others (Table 6). However, no significant gender differences emerged regarding the role of unrestricted digital technology use or boredom/surplus of free time in contributing to cyberbullying.

Item	Gender	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
Poor peer relations	Male	2.55	0.70	5.38	.021
	Female	2.66	0.61		
A lack of parental supervision	Male	2.33	0.73	11.01	.001
	Female	2.50	0.69		
A large amount of violent content on the Internet and in the media	Male	2.32	0.79	12.75	.000
	Female	2.50	0.70		
Insufficient knowledge of cyberbullying consequences	Male	2.23	0.74	11.49	.001
	Female	2.40	0.69		
Incomprehension of the severity of the cyberbullying problem	Male	2.35	0.75	7.03	.008
	Female	2.47	0.65		
Need to inflict harm on somebody	Male	2.42	0.74	11.21	.001
	Female	2.58	0.65		

Table 6: Statistically significant gender differences in students' opinions on circumstances contributing to cyberbullying

Discussion

Understanding of the cyberbullying problem

Previous research has shown that the availability and frequency of using technology and the Internet increase with age and that the amount of time spent online is directly linked with greater exposure to different risks, the frequency of cyberbullying, and the number of students involved in it (Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013). Therefore, it can be assumed that students are familiar with the cyberbullying problem and hold certain opinions on its presence among elementary school students and its possible causes. Findings also show that children between 10 and 14 years of age unwittingly undertake activities that can be classified as peer cyberbullying because they are often unaware of the harm they can inflict on their peers with such behaviour (Kostić and Ranaldi 2022). While the data suggest that students are generally aware of behaviours that are considered as cyberbullying, some ambiguity remains, particularly regarding the behaviour of *ignoring and excluding individuals from groups on social networks*. It is concerning that over half of the student participants did not identify this as a case of cyberbullying, possibly overlooking its impact on the person being ignored or excluded from some group on social networks. However, this may also be a reflection of the students' understanding of the exclusion context. The students may have been unsure whether this was an issue of cyberbullying or a reaction to cyberbullying if it concerns the exclusion of a person who is himself/herself digitally violent in a group and upsets other members.

Greater uncertainty was present concerning those behaviours that may or may not be cyberbullying situations. About a third of the students were not certain whether commenting on someone's posts or participating in group discussions represents cyberbullying. In fact, such behaviours do not qualify as cyberbullying if the content and intention are not such; therefore, the context conditions the assessment of whether it is cyberbullying or not. With that reference, it can be said that a third of the students were cautious about what is specified as cyberbullying. Studies have shown that students have difficulties in recognising subtle forms of cyberbullying, such as the exclusion of individuals or spreading rumours online, although such behaviours have a significant psychological impact on those experiencing them (Patchin and Hinduja 2015), and that jokes in digital environments are often not regarded as harmful, which leads to the normalisation of certain forms of cyberbullying (Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013).

Our factor analysis supported this distinction. Two groups of behaviours were identified: one containing situations that undoubtedly represent cyberbullying, and another comprising behaviours that may but do not have to be classified as cyberbullying, such as commenting on posts. Detailed analysis of these situations revealed that the context (intention, content) behind the behaviour represents the key criterion for observing it as cyberbullying. This is in line with the conclusions of previous research, that emphasised that one of the specificities of violence in

the digital environment is that it is difficult to differentiate the intention to incur harm to someone from other intentions (Menesini and Nocetini 2009), as well as that unintentional activities can have the same negative consequences as intentional ones (Steer et al. 2021). Therefore, understanding the victim's perspective becomes important when classifying certain behaviours as cyberbullying (Iqubal and Jami 2022; Menin et al. 2021; Nocentini et al. 2010).

In addition to how students perceive behaviours classified as cyberbullying, this research gives insight into their perceptions on the severity of the cyberbullying problem, its prevalence among elementary school children, and its consequences. The results confirm that cyberbullying is present among elementary school children. Most of the student participants recognised cyberbullying as a serious problem among their peers and were aware of the harm it can cause and the possibilities for its prevention. However, there were some differences in how seriously cyberbullying is perceived in terms of the students' ages and genders, especially among older boys, who had the tendency to normalise it or perceive it as harmless. Students are often unaware of the impact of their online activities and the potential consequences these activities imply (Hinduja and Patchin 2010); they neither experience cyberbullying as a serious problem (Smith and Slonje 2009) nor do they recognise the emotional harm that cyberbullying may inflict on others, which can lead to normalising such behaviour in the online space, more frequent incidents, and a lack of empathy towards the victims (Dennehy et al. 2020).

In line with this, some authors point out the inevitability of normalisation, minimisation, and comprehension of the cyberbullying problem, not only with students but also with parents and teachers who consider that exposure to violence is a normal part of growing up and that such experiences prepare children for the future, since technology is present everywhere and is a part of everyday life (Mishna et al. 2020). These authors specify the need to move the focus in studying the cyberbullying problem from individual perspectives (observing it from the point of view of students, teachers, and parents) to the critical perspective and an understanding of its broader social impacts, which shape personal assumptions and stereotypes that further enable and facilitate various forms of cyberbullying.

Factors contributing to cyberbullying among students

Research has shown that many factors contribute to cyberbullying, such as family dynamics and parenting styles, the influence of peers or adults, and societal and contextual factors (e.g. violence in the media, crime rates, population density, cultural values, and political and economic stability) (Kowalski et al. 2014). This study focused on the cyberbullying risk factors most relevant to students aged 10 to 14 years and their ability to identify them.

The students who participated in this study rated the importance of several factors contributing to cyberbullying: poor peer relations, exposure to violent con-

tent, a lack of parental supervision, and limited understanding of the cyberbullying problem and its consequences. These findings align with previous research showing that poor peer relations can be reflected in the digital environment and lead to cyberbullying (Huisting et al. 2012; Kollerova and Smolik 2016; Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013, 2016; Wright and Wachs 2019) and that exposure to violent content and cyberbullying occurrences may encourage aggressive online behaviour and make students less sensitive to the harm caused by cyberbullying (Modecki et al. 2014; Kuzmanović et al. 2016).

Some students felt that the unrestricted use of digital technologies and boredom or a surplus of free time, especially when unsupervised, can contribute to cyberbullying. This is a finding supported by other research showing that adolescents with more free time and without structured activities are at a higher risk of being involved in digital harassment and negative online behaviour, seeking ways to fill their time (Botino et al. 2015; Wright and Li 2013). These findings indicate that students are aware that they might turn to technology in moments of boredom, sometimes engaging in negative online behaviours due to a lack of guidance on its appropriate use. Furthermore, studies have shown that a lack of parental control and frank communication with parents about risky behaviour on the Internet, as well as lower levels of parental digital literacy, are significant risk factors contributing to cyberbullying (Bottino et al. 2015; Hinduja and Patchin 2015; Jevtić 2020, 2022; Kowalski et al. 2014; Kuzmanović et al. 2016; Pajkić et al. 2023; Patchin and Hinduja 2011).

Age and gender differences in perceptions of the cyberbullying problem

Further analyses revealed important age and gender differences in how cyberbullying was perceived and understood among the students. While the overall perception was shared across ages and genders, some differences emerged in how seriously it was regarded and how its contributing factors were interpreted.

Age differences. Younger students showed greater sensitivity and more comprehensive understanding of both explicit forms of cyberbullying and those behaviours which can but do not have to be considered as such. They were also more likely to perceive cyberbullying as a serious problem among their peers, and they attributed greater significance to the unrestricted use of digital technologies and exposure to violent content as contributing factors to cyberbullying. This may be linked to their more limited exposure to such situations and to the more prominent role of parental mediation at younger ages, as some studies suggest (Kuzmanović et al. 2019; Popadić et al. 2016). The influence parents have on the time and manner in which children use technology reflects on students' exposure to cyberbullying and probably their higher caution and awareness of the possible risks.

On the other hand, older students, who generally spend more time online and experience fewer parental restrictions, were more likely to normalise or be less sensitive to certain behaviours, interpreting them as a part of everyday digi-

tal communication, or minimise their harmful impact. This finding is in line with other studies showing that, in older students, either cognitive strategies are identified that normalise such behaviours (Smahel et al. 2020) or their influence is decreased; therefore, they experience them as less severe and interpret them as jokes and friendly teasing rather than as malicious harm (Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013). Additionally, in the present study, older students did not perceive the unrestricted use of digital technologies and exposure to violent content as risk factors for cyberbullying. These tendencies may be reflected by discrepancies in developmental changes, which mirror the way students perceive online behaviour, or may come from older students' overconfidence in their ability to navigate the digital environment, which does not necessarily reflect their actual digital literacy or awareness of cyberbullying risks. Although previous studies indicated that time spent online correlates with students' self-perceived digital skills (Kuzmanović et al. 2019; Popadić et al. 2016), spending more time online does not necessarily result in higher levels of digital literacy but rather creates a sense of competence in students. Furthermore, older students may be less exposed to violent content precisely because they have developed digital skills due to greater online experience and can filter the content reaching them, which consequently questions the assumption that more time spent online and the unrestricted use of technology also implies higher exposure to violent content and cyberbullying. These findings align with research pointing out that individual online experience, behaviour, and preferences influence the exposure to online risks and cyberbullying perception, rather than the access to technology, time spent online, or age (Barlett 2023; Hinduja and Patchin 2015).

Gender differences. In the present study, girls tended to be more sensitive to both unmistakably harmful behaviours and ones that may not necessarily be perceived as cyberbullying. They were more likely to consider the intention behind a behaviour and its harmful or emotional consequences, as well as to recognise the severity of the cyberbullying problem. This aligns with previous research showing that girls often exhibit higher levels of empathy and awareness of the harmful consequences of cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin 2015; Kovalski et al. 2014) and are more inclined to perceive cyberbullying as a serious problem among peers (Agatston et al. 2007). In this study, girls also assigned greater importance to relational and contextual risk factors for cyberbullying, such as poor peer relations, a lack of parental control, and exposure to violent content. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that girls seem to experience and participate more in indirect forms of violence that are emotional and psychological in nature, thus corresponding to the cyberbullying forms (Hinduja and Patchin 2015). Their greater engagement with and recognition of these subtler forms of harm may explain both their heightened sensitivity and their more nuanced understanding of cyberbullying dynamics.

In contrast, and similar to older students, boys were more likely to minimise the seriousness of cyberbullying, perceiving it as harmless teasing, part of normal online interaction, or behaviour without lasting consequences. They may require a more explicit indicator of harmful intent in order to classify a behaviour as cy-

berbullying. In the present study, they had tendencies to consider cyberbullying as harmless, without permanent consequences, and carried out by anonymous individuals, associating it with impersonal interactions and, thus, distancing themselves from its emotional dimension, which is in line with studies suggesting that boys experience lower levels of empathy and sensitivity to the harmful consequences of cyberbullying, perceiving it as a less serious problem (Hinduja and Patchin 2015; Kowalski et al. 2014; Popadić and Kuzmanović 2013, 2016). While research findings on gender differences concerning cyberbullying perception remain inconsistent (Hinduja and Patchin 2015; Kowalski et al. 2014; Tokunaga 2010; Wright and Li 2013), existing evidence points to the need for further exploration of the role that gender may play as a predictor of cyberbullying or victimisation, or as the factor shaping the comprehension of this problem.

The presented findings confirm the complexity of the cyberbullying problem, which is also in line with the conclusions of the researchers, who indicate that the conceptualisation of this phenomenon is complicated exactly due to the complex nature of the digital environment and the intricate nature of interactions happening in such an environment (Dennehy et al. 2020). In addition, there is research directed at understanding the multifaceted definitions of cyberbullying (e.g. Alipan et al. 2020), which vary depending on the perspective from which the problem is observed (cyber-bully, victim, or bystander); it also confirms the complexity of this phenomenon and amplifies the challenge regarding its research and more precise definition and understanding.

Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

While this research provides significant insight into students' perceptions of cyberbullying, certain limitations should be considered. The sample is not representative: the obtained results do not include the findings and experiences of students outside the central city area. Therefore, we are not familiar with the situation in other areas in that respect, especially in rural areas where access to technology and cultural norms related to its use may differ substantially. Since the data are based only on the students' self-reporting, the presence of socially acceptable responses can be expected as well as diminishing the significance of some experiences as a particular defence mechanism.

Using an assessment scale with defined items can also be limiting, since it is difficult to include all behaviours that may be considered as cyberbullying. Being guided by a specific theoretical framework of cyberbullying may condition the omission of some elements that would provide a more complete image of the wide spectrum of behaviours representing this kind of violence, which can be latent and difficult to identify. Furthermore, modes of communication and the creation of digital content are changing with technological development, which leads to the appearance of new forms of violence in the digital environment, such as memes, cyber pranks, and cyber mobs (Iqubal and Jami 2022). In addition, the role of the

context and perspective of the different participants in cyberbullying situations should not be forgotten (Menin et al. 2021; Nocentini et al. 2010), namely, how different participants experience and understand the content or intention of certain behaviour, which does not have to be bad or intentional for the victim to perceive it as such.

Research using a qualitative methodology or a mixed-method approach could address these limitations and provide a deeper understanding of students' perspectives on cyberbullying, which other researchers also point out (Dennehy et al. 2020; Mishna et al. 2022; Peter and Petermann 2018). Besides a different methodological approach, further research is required in relation to an overall examination of behaviour repertoire and the degree of impact of particular risks, as well as the perspective of other significant participants, such as parents, teachers, and expert associates at schools, who can provide a substantial contribution to understanding this problem, thus working towards the creation of effective measures for cyberbullying prevention.

Conclusion

Understanding cyberbullying, ranging from the risks, over-manifestations, and consequences on individuals and society to the possibilities for prevention, is increasingly important, particularly in the school context, with the young being an especially vulnerable group. Since students spend significant amounts of time online, understanding their perceptions on cyberbullying is essential. This study aimed to explore students' views, offering insights that can inform the development of preventive strategies in elementary schools.

Students generally recognise behaviours that undoubtedly represent cyberbullying, whereas they are uncertain about behaviours that are not cyberbullying per se but can easily assume these characteristics depending on the context. They also display awareness about the seriousness of the cyberbullying problem and its contributing factors, identifying poor peer relations, the intent to harm, exposure to violent content, a lack of parental supervision, and underestimation of the severity of cyberbullying and its consequences as key risk factors. These findings indicate the need for preventive actions aimed at fostering positive peer relations in the school context, where children and the young have most peer interactions. The focus should then be directed to limiting exposure to violent content, given its role in normalising violent behaviour. Additionally, schools and communities should offer structured activities to engage students constructively in order to positively direct boredom and the surplus of free time.

The obtained findings indicate the importance of an integrated approach to cyberbullying prevention. This implies the inclusion of all relevant subjects in preventative action-taking, harmonised with various students' needs and the different risk levels they are exposed to, as well as various activities that would strengthen their competencies (Šaljić 2017). This would, inter alia, contribute to higher sensitivity and a better understanding of the problem's specificities. It is

necessary to work on raising awareness among students, parents, and teachers about the seriousness of cyberbullying and its consequences, promoting responsible online behaviour and developing empathy, tolerance, solidarity, togetherness, and so on. With that reference, developing digital literacy is singled out as an important direction for action-taking, both in schools and families, which requires, besides strengthening school capacities, also encouraging parental involvement and empowerment for digital parenting (Senić Ružić 2021; Senić Ružić et al. 2024). All of the above represent important prerequisites for preventing the occurrence and decreasing the frequency of cyberbullying among students.

Acknowledgment

This research was funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia within its programme funding scientific and research activities at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade (Contract No. 451-03-137/2025-03/ 200163).

This research is produced under conditions of systemic repression and overt media, legal, financial, and psychological pressures exerted by the ruling structures of Serbia on its entire academic community.

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STALIŠČA UČENCEV DO PROBLEMA MEDVRSTNIŠKEGA SPLETNEGA NASILJA

Povzetek: Spletno nasilje je vse večji družbeni problem, ki zahteva ustrezen družbeni in institucionalni odziv zaradi posledic, ki jih lahko ima za vse vpletene. Glede na njegovo prisotnost med učenci je treba pri načrtovanju preventivnih strategij upoštevati tudi njihova stališča. Zato je raziskovanje stališč učencev o problemu spletnega nasilja izjemno pomembno. Ta raziskava se osredotoča na stališča učencev o različnih vidikih spletnega nasilja – o njegovi opredelitvi, resnosti, prisotnosti in vzrokih. V študijo je bilo vključenih 856 osnovnošolcev iz Beograda. Rezultati kažejo, da več kot polovica učencev meni, da med njihovimi vrstniki spletno nasilje obstaja. Zavedajo se resnosti problema spletnega nasilja in njegovih posledic, vendar pa obstajajo razlike glede na starost in spol, ko opazujemo različne vidike spletnega nasilja in dejavnike, ki vodijo do njega. Večina učencev prepozna vedenja, ki predstavljajo spletno nasilje, medtem ko so negotovi glede vedenj, ki sama po sebi niso spletno nasilje, vendar lahko v določenem kontekstu zlahka dobijo njegove značilnosti. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je pomemben celosten pristop k preprečevanju spletnega nasilja, njegov cilj pa je ozaveščanje o resnosti tega problema in njegovih posledicah ter razvoj digitalne pismenosti in krepitev usposobljenosti družin in šol za ustrezno in neprekinjeno preventivno delovanje.

Ključne besede: spletno nasilje, stališča učencev, dejavniki tveganja za spletno nasilje, preprečevanje spletnega nasilja

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