



## Youngsters in virtual realities: Cyberbullying in high schools in Sarajevo

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**Abstract:** Bullying through electronic means, specifically mobile phones or the internet, has emerged and is often collectively labelled *cyberbullying*. With youth using digital technologies for educational and recreational purposes, there has been an increase in social problems in the cyberspace, exposing them to different forms of cyber violence

[According to UNICEF](#), in 2018 1 in 3 students between the ages of 13 and 15 worldwide have experienced bullying on a regular basis. Therefore, bullying is a reality for a significant proportion of students around the world. Moreover, when it comes to the digital form of peer violence or cyberbullying (threats via the Internet, social networks, text messages), it was [noted](#) that the frequency increases with age, i.e., a quarter of younger students and a third of older students in primary schools and two-thirds of secondary school students [were exposed](#) to this form of violence. These data in the Southeast Europe (SEE) does not vary much from the global data and it shows that a quarter of younger students and a third of older students in

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In recent years, with the raise in access and usage of the internet, bullying through electronic means, specifically mobile phones or the internet has emerged, often [collectively labelled cyberbullying](#). With youth using digital technologies for educational and recreational purposes, there has been an increase in social problems in cyberspace, exposing them to different forms of cyber violence.

According to [Li](#),

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

When it comes to the prevalence of cyberbullying in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), research [shows](#) that a large number of students are exposed to some type of this violence. When it comes to the digital form of peer violence and bullying, it has been noted that the situation in Sarajevo probably mirrors the situation in both BiH entities and neighbouring countries in the SEE region. As Sarajevo is the capital and biggest city in BiH, it can offer relevant and representative data to collect.

### **A focus on cyberbullying in Sarajevo**

My research conducted on cyberbullying in Sarajevo included the following schools: Second Gymnasium, Third Gymnasium, First Bosniak Gymnasium, Catholic School Center Saint Joseph, High School for Textile, Leather and Design, High School of Metalworking and Railway School Center. The sample consists of 50,6 percent female respondents (85 girls) and 49,4 percent male respondents (83 boys), hence with an equal approach to boys and girls, and both perspectives have been equally taken into account. All students from the third and fourth grades of high school, aged between 16 and 19 years have been considered. According to my findings, children in high schools in Sarajevo spend mainly 5+ hours using information and communication technologies (ICTs) every day.

One of my main aims has been to explore the extent of cyberbullying and how often it happens in high schools. 21 percent of respondents experienced cyberbullying 1 to 5 times in the last three years, 7 percent said they experienced it 5 to 10 times, and 8 percent said they experienced it more than 10 times in the same time frame.

To compare the results, 67 percent of girls reported being cyberbullied and 33 percent of boys, out of 33 people in total responded they have experienced this kind of bullying. Out of 85 girls who participated in the questionnaire, 19 of them reported they experienced cyberbullying 1-5 times in the given timeframe, 1 of them reported being cyberbullied 5-10 times and 2 of them more than 10 times. Out of 83 boys who

participated, 4 reported being cyberbullied 1-5 times, 2 reported 5-10 times and 3 reported 10 times.

As stated above, the majority of high school students have 5 to 10 hours of screen time daily, which they mostly spend using social media or playing games. With this in mind, it is no surprise that this is exactly where cyberbullying most often happens. 150 out of 168 students said that it occurs on social media.

My research highlights that, usually, the victims are girls and other vulnerable groups in class, such as LGBTI children, Roma children, and children with disabilities. In short, everybody who is somehow different from the majority is at the risk of being bullied. The perpetrators are boys and those who are more powerful than the victims, however, the second most common answer was that there is no particular characteristic of either victim or perpetrator. The most common forms of cyberbullying that happened among the children from my sample are exclusion from different chat-rooms and online groups, making fake profiles, posting content online without someone's consent, making fun of, and posting content to ruin someone's reputation or friendship and lastly threatening messages or emails. The incidents are usually reported firstly to peers from school, then to parents, then to pedagogues, then to teachers and lastly to the police. However, what is worrying is a rather high percentage of incidents that go unreported (32 percent total).

Significantly, respondents are aware that cyberbullying has an enormous impact on the victims, especially on their mental health, self-esteem, overall psychological stability, self-harm, self-isolation and increase in fear. Another worrying response is definitely that perpetrators bully other people mostly for fun. Victims experience numerous effects on their physical and mental health just because someone decided to have some fun. This shows the inevitable need for raising awareness among high school students, education and sensitising.

In this regard, 45 percent of the respondents stated that they are educated enough to recognize when cyberbullying is happening to them or someone they know, 54 percent of them know whom to contact when they or someone they know is experiencing cyberbullying and 50 percent of them trust their teachers and pedagogues enough to report the incidents that happened. Thus, it is extremely important to work on improving trust between school staff and students, but also to work with the adults (parents, teachers, PP school services) to make them more aware and sensitised.

### **Looking ahead**

As we peer into the future, it is imperative to focus on safeguarding children's human rights in the face of the growing menace of cyberbullying. First, digital literacy for children must be prioritised, teaching them to recognise cyberbullying and understand their digital rights. Empowering children to protect themselves online is essential.

Second, education of parents about the dangers of the Internet is needed, as insufficient information on the part of parents remains a big problem for a child who is given access to the Internet without additional control over its use.

Third, school staff must be trained to know how to recognise the signs of violence in cases of cyberbullying and act accordingly, without labelling the children because of it and rather giving them attention, support and open conversation. Prevention must include key steps, such as: noticing the violence, immediately and decisively intervening to stop it, calming the situation (by talking to the victim and providing help), talking to the perpetrator, taking additional actions depending on the severity of the violent act, and initiating cooperation with other institutions (police, centres for social work, involvement of parents).

Fourth, governments must enact and enforce strong legal frameworks protecting children's digital rights, addressing prevention, intervention, and penalties for offenders. Fifth, social media and tech companies must take responsibility for safeguarding children's rights on their platforms through effective content moderation and reporting mechanisms. Sixth, cyberbullying knows no borders, and international organisations should advocate for children's rights in the digital realm, encouraging uniform global legislation and cross-border cooperation.

Seventh, recognising the psychological toll of cyberbullying, accessible mental health support services must be ensured for affected children. Eighth, ongoing research and innovation are crucial to stay ahead of evolving cyberbullying trends and develop effective solutions.

In the years to come, we must prioritise this battle, ensuring every child's right to a safe and supportive digital environment. By comprehensively addressing cyberbullying, we protect their dignity and well-being in the digital age.