SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CYBERBULLYING AMONG PEERS

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to research on cyberbullying among peers and the role of social networks in this phenomenon through a review of relevant literature and a synthesis of findings. Methodologically, this theoretical discussion defines peer relationships, digital media, and cyberbullying while examining their interconnections. Peer relationships are crucial for adolescents' social development, and modern technology is transforming their interactions. Social networks facilitate connections but also increase the risk of cyberbullying, which is often anonymous and prolonged. The rapid spread of content online can cause emotional distress. Therefore, education on the responsible use of the Internet is essential to prevent the negative consequences of online communication.

Keywords: adolescents, social networks, cyberbullying, peer relationships

INTRODUCTION

Peers and friendships play a pivotal role in providing social support, emotional security, and enhancing self-esteem, all of which are critical for identity development. This role becomes particularly pronounced during adolescence. The presence or absence of social interactions among peers significantly impacts cognitive, emotional, and social development and overall well-being throughout life (Gallardo et al., 2016). In contemporary society, digital media, particularly social networks, greatly influence young individuals, shaping their self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Košir (2013) observes that friendships and social status within peer groups are closely linked to broader social networks and peer experiences. Empirical analyses indicate that students frequently form groups based on their sociometric status within the classroom, rejected students tend to cluster together, whereas popular students form separate groups. Research on social networks underscores the complexity of peer interactions and the impact of social status on developing peer relationships.

Social networks, as online platforms, not only facilitate interactions with unfamiliar individuals but also provide users with opportunities for self-expression and network visibility, thereby promoting social connections. Maintaining social ties and communication within an adolescent's social network is significant (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, the use of social networks is also associated with negative consequences, including an increased risk of cyberbullying. Pečjak et al. (2021) define cyberbullying as a relatively recent form of aggression that has emerged alongside technological advancements. This peer victimisation is becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly among adolescents continuously exposed to digital technologies and the internet.

PURPOSE

This article aims to comprehensively analyse cyberbullying among peers and the role of social networks in facilitating this phenomenon through literature review and a synthesis of existing knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theoretical approach to examining cyberbullying among peers and the role of social networks in its occurrence. The objectives of this research are as follows:

- To define key concepts, including peer relationships, digital media, social networks, and cyberbullying.
- To explore the potential correlation between social networks and cyberbullying among peers.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MODERN WORLD

Throughout life, individuals interact with various people, forming different relationships. These relationships can vary in duration and intensity (Kobolt, 2009). In the developmental process of adolescents, the peer environment, alongside the family setting, plays a crucial role in shaping peer relationships (Harris, 2007). Peer relationships are particularly intense during adolescence and hold significant meaning for young individuals. High-quality friendships contribute to better social responses, increased social integration, and more effective conflict resolution. Social rejection and loneliness are strongly interrelated, with adolescents who are less socially accepted experiencing higher levels of loneliness. Conversely, those students who are more popular in their peer groups are the least likely to experience loneliness, as peers prefer their company and form friendships with them (Lončar & Puklek Levpušček, 2018).

The influence of peer relationships evolves with an individual's development, with attention during adolescence shifting from the family environment to the peer group (Gallardo et al., 2016). Adolescents value their peers' opinions during this period, while their parents' opinions become less influential. Adolescents direct their focus toward individuals and situations outside the family, often leading to parents experiencing difficulty accepting their children's growing independence and focusing on their social worlds.

Simultaneously, relationships' forms, frequency, and quality have transformed with the advent of the internet and adolescents' involvement in the virtual world. Tokunaga and Rains (2010) explain that the Internet offers numerous opportunities for information-seeking and education while altering communication and socialisation habits. While some researchers view this shift as hurting social relationships, others argue that the internet has many positive attributes, as it facilitates communication and social interaction with people across the globe, thereby strengthening peer relationships.

Scholars are divided on whether new technologies promote or hinder social connectedness. They influence social inclusion, self-determination, and security, with the emergence of online bullying also posing a concern. On the one hand, some studies suggest that the Internet helps young people who find face-to-face

communication difficult. On the other hand, other studies show that excessive time spent on the computer can lead to loneliness, reduced self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Wyn et al., 2008). Nevertheless, the interactions and relationships that young people cultivate in online environments often reflect their everyday lives and broader societal structures. In many respects, life on the internet differs from real-world interactions. Furthermore, the online environment is often distinct and considerably more dangerous, as online relationships and identities can be hidden (Jontes & Oblak Črnič, 2019).

DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

We live in a society characterised by advanced technology. The societal values, norms, and regulations within this environment significantly influence the lives of young individuals (Burnette et al., 2017). In the context of a technologically developed world, adolescents are provided with opportunities to engage with media that, without parental oversight, impact their worldview and shape their interactions with peers and the broader environment.

Social networks have experienced exponential growth in recent decades, becoming especially popular among adolescents. Young people join social networks primarily for social activities, although expanding internet technologies often increases social isolation (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). On social networks, individuals can create personal profiles, share various connections, and follow the shared content of others. These platforms enable individuals to meet new people and expand networks among those who previously did not know one another (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social networks present new challenges and exciting opportunities, which can also impact the mental health of adolescents (Nesi, 2020).

A social network is a specific type of social media, defined as an online service that allows individuals to create public or private profiles within a limited scope of a system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social networks represent the most popular global communication phenomenon, as humans, by nature, are social beings and communication is inherently attractive to them. The social role of social networks is to maintain existing friendships and acquaintances and establish new connections (Vidak, 2014). Social networks are virtual spaces designed for interpersonal connections. Some of the most well-known social networks include Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tinder, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Reddit. These networks have become an integral part of daily life in the 21st century, as evidenced by the fact

that the number of social network users worldwide has surpassed 3.8 billion (Biglbauer & Lauri Korajlija, 2020). The use of social networks can have positive attributes and offers an array of possibilities (Biglbauer & Lauri Korajlija, 2020), including:

- connecting with friends, colleagues, and family
- meeting new people
- expressing personal thoughts and feelings
- access to various information and valuable content, among others.

Among the positive effects one may also include the enhancement of self-confidence, improved emotional expression, higher levels of self-esteem, and the opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals (Jerončić et al., 2020). However, the mere use of social media is not inherently problematic; issues arise when individuals use these platforms excessively, leading to social problems, declining academic or work performance, adverse health effects due to sleep deprivation, and potential addiction (McNicol & Thorsteinsson, 2017). Despite the positive aspects of social network use, several risks are associated with their use, including addiction, weight gain, loss of social skills, hatred, cyberbullying, violence, harassment, privacy invasion, exposure to pornography, and the potential danger of paedophilia (Nikodem et al., 2015). The impacts of internet use on adolescents manifest in the following ways (Kunić et al., 2016):

- physical health (numerous consequences of excessive internet use)
- positive effects on the development of academic and cognitive skills
- negative impacts, such as the potential onset of depression and aggressive behaviour
- reversed socialisation, where children teach parents media literacy, undermining parental authority
- a distorted perception of reality, initially appearing as a playful identity game but later becoming difficult to distinguish between the virtual and the real world.

CYBERBULLYING AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Peer bullying refers to situations where an adolescent experiences prolonged aggressive or hostile behaviour from another adolescent or a group of adolescents. Contemporary definitions, however, describe peer bullying as intentional and aggressive behaviour aimed at harming the victim. The underlying motivation for such violence is often to achieve a personal goal, such as increasing social

power and popularity within a group (Olweus, 1995). In modern times, the online environment has become a prominent setting for peer bullying, especially with the rise of the internet and the proliferation of social networks (Zobec & Hmelak, 2024). Cyberbullying, or online bullying, is defined as intentional and repeated harassment or intimidation carried out via information technology, including mobile phones, the internet, forums, blogs, and emails. This form of bullying is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging with technological advancements. It is becoming increasingly widespread, particularly among young people constantly exposed to technology and the internet (Pečjak et al., 2021). Cyberbullying involves invasions of privacy, incitement to group hatred, insults, stalking, harassment, and the spread of violent and offensive comments (Bilić et al., 2012).

There are two main types of cyberbullying: indirect cyberbullying (i.e., online bullying via intermediaries) and direct cyberbullying (Bijelić, 2010). Indirect cyberbullying is considered the more harmful form because it allows the perpetrator to act without facing the consequences or assuming responsibility, thereby causing the victim distress due to a sense of powerlessness (Pečjak, 2014). Sanders and Phye (2004) emphasise that this type of bullying has become more prevalent due to social media. Indirect cyberbullying occurs when an aggressor encourages others to harass the victim online. Cyberbullying encompasses psychological violence, including verbal or nonverbal threats, insults, spreading falsehoods, and other forms of behaviour aimed at humiliating or embarrassing the target. According to Košir (2013), the following actions constitute cyberbullying:

- sending offensive messages via SMS, emails, or direct messages on social media
- disclosing confidential information to third parties
- Creating a profile, website, or user account to mock a specific student and inviting others to leave comments on this profile or website
- photographing or recording a student with the intent to humiliate them through the image or video
- stealing passwords to access user accounts
- revealing personal secrets about others
- spreading lies and posting sensitive or damaging content.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant global issue. The development of digital technology and the availability of internet access at any time and from any location present both positive and negative aspects. Of particular concern is the

increasing use of the internet and social media among adolescents, which has led to a rise in peer cyberbullying. Unlike traditional peer bullying, cyberbullies often remain anonymous, allowing them to hide their identities. This anonymity reduces their fear of being caught and provides no immediate feedback to the perpetrators regarding the harm caused to the victim (Bijelić, 2010; Košir, 2013). As a result, individuals are more inclined to engage in behaviours they would not typically consider if interacting face-to-face (Bilić et al., 2012).

While traditional peer bullying typically occurs in schools, cyberbullying can happen at any time, further increasing adolescents' vulnerability. Internet access is easy, and online content is always available and spreads quickly across the virtual world, allowing cyberbullying to persist around the clock (Bilić et al., 2012). Victims of cyberbullying have no safe space, not even in their own homes, while victims of traditional bullying can at least find refuge there. Peer cyberbullying emotionally impacts adolescents more severely than direct physical injuries. It operates through messages, photos posted online, offensive language, and false rumours, which can spread at an alarming speed across the internet (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

DISCUSSION

Understanding peer violence and the approaches to addressing it has significantly evolved over the past decade. To resolve these issues, it is essential to comprehend the social nature of peer violence and the complex, interconnected factors involved. Appropriate interventions must be implemented, providing support tailored to the needs of individuals, their families, and the peer dynamics involved in violent actions (Campbell & Bauman, 2018). With the rapid increase in the popularity of social networks and mobile technologies, the risks associated with peer cyberbullying among adolescents must not be overlooked or underestimated (Košir, 2013). Cyberbullying tends to have more severe consequences than traditional bullying, as it can occur at any time and in any location within the virtual world. Individuals experiencing cyberbullying can be exposed to abuse 24 hours a day, without interruption, leading to more serious negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, or a reduced sense of self-worth, which may persist over time (Bijelić, 2010).

In recent years, the number of adolescents using social networks has increased drastically. While various social media platforms can positively affect relationships and individuals, promoting communication skills, social connections, and technical abilities, they also expose adolescents to risks such

as peer pressure. This can lead to bullying, group formation, privacy concerns, internet addiction, and sleep deprivation (O'Keeffe et al., 2011). Mobile phones have become the primary medium for communication and obtaining information among young people. This has created tension between phone usage, communication, and the sense of connection and inclusion within a social network (Mihailidis, 2014).

When peer relationships shift from cooperative to conflictual, it is recommended that adolescents resolve the issues on their own or through peer mediation, with adult assistance when necessary (Lešnik Mugnaioni et al., 2014). Strategies for reducing and preventing cyberbullying also involve various preventive programs, where educational professionals, parents, and adolescents play crucial roles. It is vital to develop high-quality programs aimed at raising awareness of cyberbullying in order to reduce and prevent its occurrence. Adolescents must be taught that threats and violence toward others constitute abuse, which can cause lasting psychological harm to the victim. One of the most important aspects of preventing and combating cyberbullying is raising awareness among young people about the importance of seeking help from an adult whenever they encounter any form of violence (Bijelić, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Peer relationships play a key role in adolescent development as they influence social inclusion, a sense of belonging, and the development of social skills. Peer influence grows during adolescence, becoming more significant than family influence. Modern technology has altered communication and social interaction while also introducing risks, such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is often hidden, anonymous, and prolonged, which exacerbates the sense of vulnerability in victims. The internet facilitates the rapid spread of content, which can lead to emotional distress. Although digital technology enables connections, excessive use can lead to loneliness and diminished self-esteem.

Based on the findings and insights obtained, we propose that moving forward, it is crucial to focus on the following areas:

- Fostering responsible internet use and ensuring proper oversight of content accessible to minors, to mitigate the risks associated with improper or harmful digital practices.
- Preventing and managing anonymous online aggression, emphasising the development of effective preventive strategies to curtail the proliferation of such behaviours in digital spaces.

- Designing programs to enhance young people's mental health, particularly by fostering their ability to manage stress and increasing their resilience to peer pressure within online environments.

- Raising awareness about the importance of privacy protection in the digital world, which includes educating young individuals about the secure use of digital platforms and the risks involved in sharing personal information.

- Expanding the involvement of youth in educational initiatives that promote digital literacy, with a specific focus on responsible engagement with social media, recognising the signs of cyberbullying, and understanding how to seek help when facing such challenges.

- Increasing the engagement of educators and parents in educational programs that equip them with the tools to navigate digital environments effectively while also supporting adolescents in recognising and addressing cyberbullying.

- Empowering adolescents to identify cyberbullying and foster mutual support among peers, which also involves developing peer support systems that contribute to a safer online space.

- Encouraging adolescents to become positive digital citizens, enabling them to actively contribute to creating an online culture that is supportive, respectful, and safe, where the rights and dignity of others are upheld.

We understand the proposed areas (ideas) as essential for preventing online violence, as they encourage responsible internet use, the development of digital literacy, and an understanding of privacy protection (personal data) among adolescents. By strengthening the mental health and resilience of adolescents, we reduce their vulnerability to online violence, while the involvement of parents, educators, and peers ensures more effective support for adolescents.

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DRUŠTVENE MREŽE I VRŠNJAČKO NASILJE NA INTERNETU

Ovaj članak ima za cilj rasvijetliti vršnjačko nasilje na internetu i ulogu društvenih mreža u tom fenomenu kroz pregled relevantne literature i sintezu nalaza. Metodološki, ova teorijska rasprava definira vršnjačke odnose, digitalne medije i *cyber* nasilje, istražujući njihove međusobne povezanosti. Vršnjački odnosi ključni su za socijalni razvoj adolescenata, a suvremena tehnologija mijenja način njihove interakcije. Društvene mreže omogućuju povezivanje, ali istovremeno povećavaju rizik od *cyber* nasilja, koje je često anonimno i dugotrajno. Brzo širenje sadržaja na internetu može uzrokovati emocionalnu uznemirenost. Stoga je edukacija o odgovornoj upotrebi interneta nužna kako bi se spriječile negativne posljedice *online* komunikacije.

Ključne riječi: adolescenti, društvene mreže, *cyber* nasilje, vršnjački odnosi