

Aspects of bullying in cyberspace for youth

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Abstract:

Our research aims to deepen the understanding of the evolution of traditional bullying into cyberbullying among youth. We compile and analyze various perspectives on bullying from fields such as medicine, economics, education, security, statistics, and developmental theory. Our findings highlight that both traditional bullying and its modern counterpart, cyberbullying or electronic bullying, have become phenomena on a global scale. The inherently interdisciplinary nature of bullying complicates the development of regulations and policy interventions. The complexity of the bullying phenomenon requires dedicated attention. We employ conceptual analysis within a developmental framework as our methodology. Our work contributes a standardized conceptual framework for addressing bullying, focusing on the increasingly prevalent issue of cyberbullying within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens.

Keywords: cyberbullying, bullying, youth, development, security

1. Introduction

The 2030 Education Agenda, also recognized as the Incheon Declaration for Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All (2016), is a worldwide initiative set forth to realize Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) as part of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). The Incheon Declaration acknowledges the essential role of education in securing full employment and eradicating poverty. This innovative global education strategy prioritizes access, equity, and inclusion, as well as the quality and outcomes of learning under lifelong learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a new era of digital education, transforming the landscape of learning and teaching across the globe. As the pandemic necessitated the maintenance of physical distancing, e-learning emerged as a vital solution to continue educational activities. As we embark on the strategic cycle for 2021-2027, the evolution of education along this digital pathway is gaining momentum. The role of education has become increasingly critical, especially in the wake of a rapidly advancing digital transformation.

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According to the European Commission (2023), this shift underscores the importance of adapting educational systems to meet current challenges and harness the opportunities presented by digital technologies. This development signals a profound change in how educational content is delivered, accessed, and engaged with, highlighting the need for innovative approaches to ensure inclusive and equitable education. As we navigate through this transformative period, integrating digital tools and methodologies in education is paramount for preparing students and educators for the future, making education a cornerstone of societal advancement and personal development in the digital age.

As the digital age unfolds, it brings with it not only new opportunities but also a host of new threats and challenges, particularly for young people navigating the expansive realms of cyberspace. The widespread integration of technology into daily life has unveiled a variety of security risks and threats previously uncharted. Among these, cyberbullying stands out as a significant concern, characterized by bullying behavior that leverages digital technology as its medium. As defined by UNESCO (2023, xxiv), cyberbullying transforms traditional bullying dynamics by utilizing the digital landscape to perpetrate harassment and abuse.

This digital form of bullying is exacerbated by the ubiquitous access to smartphones, tablets, and other devices, allowing perpetrators to extend their reach beyond physical spaces into the virtual ones where young individuals spend a considerable portion of their time (UNESCO, 2023a, p155).

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The anonymity and disconnect screens provide can embolden individuals to engage in harmful behaviors without the immediate consequences that might deter such actions in face-to-face interactions. As a result, cyberbullying has become an everyday reality within the educational sphere, challenging educators, parents, and policymakers to devise effective strategies for combating this phenomenon.

The implications of cyberbullying are profound, affecting not only the mental and emotional well-being of young individuals but also impacting their educational journey. Victims often experience a decline in academic performance and loss of interest in school, and in severe cases, it can lead to absenteeism or dropping out entirely. Thus, the emergence of cyberbullying necessitates a multi-faceted approach to prevention and intervention that includes educational initiatives to raise awareness among students, teachers, and parents, developing robust reporting and support systems within schools, and implementing legal measures to protect victims and deter potential bullies.

In this context, the digital transformation of education presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While it has facilitated the spread of cyberbullying, it also offers the tools and platforms needed to fight back against it. Digital literacy programs focusing on online safety, empathy, and respectful communication can play a critical role in preventing cyberbullying. Moreover, leveraging technology to create supportive online communities and providing resources for those affected by cyberbullying can offer solace and assistance to victims. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, the fight against cyberbullying remains a pivotal aspect of ensuring a safe and inclusive educational environment for all students.

The phenomenon of bullying was significantly highlighted in 2017 when the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) provided data demonstrating its global scale, revealing that nearly one-third of young teenagers across the world had recently been subjected to bullying. (UIS.UNESCO, 2018). In response to this alarming revelation, UNESCO incorporated bullying as a critical issue within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This inclusion was manifested by introducing the thematic indicator *"4.a.2 - Percentage of students experiencing bullying in the last 12 months."* This indicator supports the target *"4.a. Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability, and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all."* This strategic integration underscores the commitment to addressing and mitigating the impact of bullying within educational settings, highlighting its importance as a barrier to creating a conducive learning environment.

Considering that digital education is the new education paradigm, our research question is:

What are the main aspects of bullying in cyberspace for youth?

2. Concepts and approaches to address cyberbullying

According to the medical physicist, Bullying manifests as aggressive conduct where an individual deliberately and persistently targets, pesters, or terrorizes another. This behavior can manifest physically, verbally, or through more insidious means. It characteristically features a power disparity between the individuals involved, typically among children. The targeted individual is often seen as susceptible and struggles to defend themselves despite not engaging in any behavior to warrant such aggression. The repercussions of bullying extend beyond immediate distress, posing significant risks to the psychological and emotional development of both the victim and the perpetrator (Andreescu, 2022)

Until now, most research on bullying has predominantly concentrated on behaviors observed within conventional social settings, such as schools (Baumann et al., 2023). This focus has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of bullying among children and adolescents in environments where they spend significant portions of their day. However, this concentration on traditional contexts may overlook the evolving nature of bullying in the digital age and other non-traditional environments. As society transitions into virtual spaces and the boundaries between different social contexts become increasingly blurred, there's a growing necessity to expand research efforts beyond the schoolyard. This includes examining cyberbullying in online platforms, workplace bullying among adults, and other forms of harassment that occur outside the conventional settings previously studied. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of bullying across diverse environments can lead to more effective interventions and strategies to combat this issue across all stages of life and in various social contexts.

Andreescu (2022) posits that cyberbullying shares similarities with electronic bullying in terms of cultivating bullying behaviors or actions through the use of digital technologies. Similarly, Kowalski and Limber (2012) characterize cyberbullying as a form of aggression deliberately and recurrently executed through electronic mediums like emails, chats, or text messages aimed at causing harm to individuals who are not in a position to defend themselves easily.

Within the context of the 2030 Agenda Development framework, cyberbullying is recognized as an aspect of violence, specifically pertaining to insecurity. Furthermore, a novel approach to addressing cyberbullying has been formulated within the competencies outlined by the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (European Commission et al., 2022). Within this framework, under the category of Basic Digital Skills, the dimension of Safety explicitly includes, as its third

type of action, the necessity for skills aimed at safeguarding health and well-being. This encompasses the ability to circumvent health risks and threats to physical and psychological well-being arising from digital technologies. It also involves protecting oneself and others from potential hazards in digital spaces, such as cyberbullying, and recognizing the use of digital technologies for promoting social well-being and inclusion (European Commission et al., 2022).

Cyberbullying transcends the realm of personal safety, posing a significant threat to individual well-being, as cautioned by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2023a). This form of digital aggression carries profound implications, not only affecting the mental and emotional health of individuals but also exerting a substantial impact on societal and economic frameworks. The repercussions of cyberbullying extend beyond the immediate distress experienced by victims, contributing to broader social issues such as increased healthcare costs, loss of productivity, and challenges to educational attainment. Furthermore, the pervasive nature of cyberbullying highlights the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address its root causes and mitigate its wide-ranging effects. By acknowledging the multi-dimensional impact of cyberbullying, stakeholders can better understand the importance of fostering a safe and supportive digital environment that promotes the well-being of all users.

3. Public Policies and Regulation against cyberbullying across Globe

The most recent Global Education Monitoring Report for 2023, titled "Technology in Education: A Tool on Whose Terms?" reveals a significant legislative gap in the global fight against cyberbullying. It finds that less than 20% of countries worldwide have established laws specifically designed to prevent and address cyberbullying, particularly with an educational focus. Interestingly, 38% of these legislative actions were initiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the increased reliance on digital platforms for education and the subsequent rise in online harassment risks. Furthermore, approximately 40% of countries have developed a policy, strategy, or plan to tackle cyberbullying. Europe and Northern America lead in this respect, with 61% of countries in these regions having such policies in place.

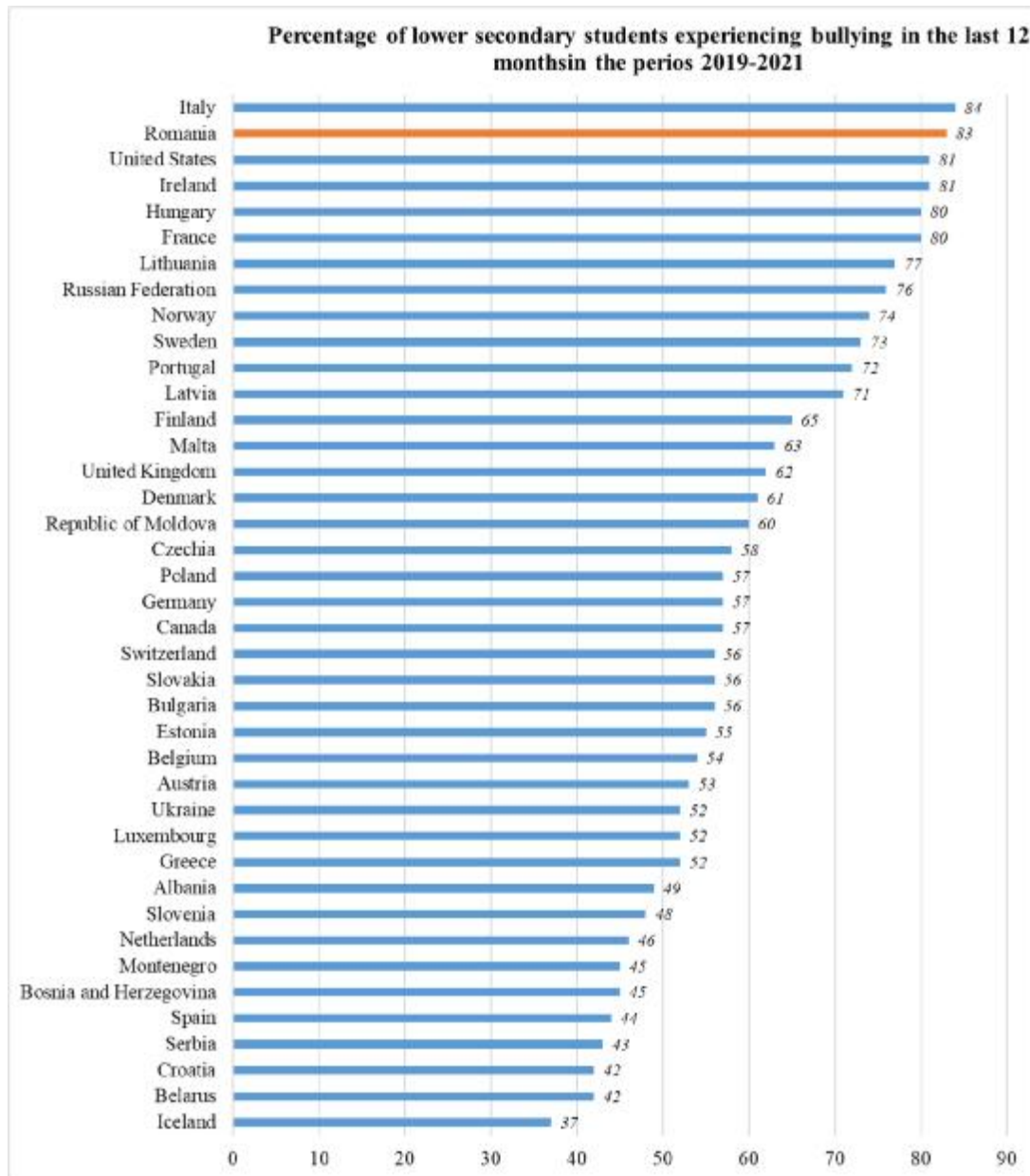
Despite these efforts, a major challenge persists: most countries do not recognize cyberbullying and online abuse as separate offences. Instead, these behaviors are often covered under broader existing laws. This lack of specific definition may hinder the effectiveness of interventions and protections for victims, underscoring the need for a more targeted legal framework. The UNESCO report (2023a) underscores the importance of evolving legislative and policy frameworks to specifically address the nuances of cyberbullying, reflecting the changing landscape of digital interaction and the unique challenges it presents. Such measures are crucial for creating safer

online environments, especially for children and young people, who are increasingly exposed to the risks of cyberbullying in the digital age.

We can mention few countries that regulated the cyberbullying: (1) Australia - Online Safety Act (2021), Indonesia - Personal Data Protection Act (2022), Japan - Act for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Bullying, China - Law on the Protection of Minors (2020), Bangladesh - ICT Act from 2006, amended in 2013 has some indirect references but not specifically for education, India - the Information Technology Act (UNESCO, 2023a). In Japan the regulation addresses online and offline bullying together.

Within the framework of enhancing pre-university educational institutions with technological resources, regulations mandate that educational software utilized in schools must safeguard student data and limit their exposure to websites containing hazardous or unsuitable material (Order no. 3497/2022). Additionally, measures for the prevention and mitigation of cyberbullying among students are outlined in the methodological guidelines established by Order no. 4.343/2020. These guidelines comprehensively address both traditional bullying and cyberbullying within the pre-university educational context. Furthermore, the Legal Provision no. 198/2023 stipulates that educational resource centers and assistance services, available at both county levels and in the capital, are tasked with providing support to staff and students on preventing all forms of school violence, cyberbullying included (Article 120 (6)). At the level of the curriculum, the issues of bullying and cyberbullying are incorporated into various optional academic subjects available for student selection. This regulations framework is mentioned for Romania by UNESCO (2023b).

This development underscores a proactive approach towards integrating digital safety and anti-bullying measures into the educational ecosystem. By institutionalizing these protections and educational components, there is a clear emphasis on creating a safer, more inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and addresses the challenges posed by the digital age. Such measures not only aim to protect students from immediate harm but also educate them on the importance of digital citizenship, empathy, and the responsible use of technology.



Source: Authors representation based on data from SDG 4, Means of implementation 4.a – Education facilities and learning environments. UNESCO Statistics, <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/technology>.

According to a report by UNESCO (2023a, p. 289), cyberbullying has escalated into a widespread issue globally, with a notably higher incidence in countries already grappling with significant levels of traditional bullying. The data indicates that in many middle- and high-income nations, over 10% of primary school students, particularly boys, have been victims of cyberbullying. Extrapolating from this trend, it can be inferred that countries like Romania and Italy might

witness elevated levels of cyberbullying, whereas Poland's figures could align more closely with the global average.

In response to this pressing issue, Romania has proactively established a legal framework aimed at preventing and addressing these forms of digital aggression. However, it's still too early to assess the effectiveness of these measures. A critical challenge in combating cyberbullying lies in the scarcity of comprehensive data, which currently hampers efforts to accurately gauge the extent of the problem.

The significance of tackling cyberbullying necessitates a revision of the existing indicators, such as UNESCO's SDG 4.a., to incorporate metrics specifically designed to measure cyberbullying. This adaptation would enable a more nuanced understanding of bullying's digital dimensions and facilitate targeted interventions. The evolving nature of bullying in the digital realm underscores the urgent need for updated research methodologies, legal frameworks, and educational policies that reflect the complexities of online social interactions among youth. Addressing cyberbullying effectively requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal action, educational reform, and greater awareness to safeguard children in the increasingly digitalized world of learning and socialization.

4. Discussions and Final remarks

Bullying transcends its traditional confines within school environments, emerging as a global issue that significantly affects individuals' abilities to integrate into the labor market in the future. Its impact is profound, not only disrupting the immediate well-being of individuals but also potentially hindering their long-term professional and social development. From a conceptual standpoint, bullying encompasses a wide array of disciplines, highlighting its complex and multifaceted nature. It is a subject of study within medical science, particularly psychology, where the focus is on understanding its effects on mental health and devising strategies for emotional support and recovery. In the realm of economics, bullying is examined in relation to overall well-being, considering its economic implications for individuals and societies, such as reduced productivity and increased healthcare costs.

Educationally, bullying is scrutinized for its impact on skill development and learning outcomes. The hostile environment it creates can significantly impede the educational progress of victims,

affecting their academic performance and, by extension, their career prospects. From a security perspective, the emphasis is placed on protection and prevention, developing policies and practices that safeguard individuals from bullying and address incidents effectively when they occur. Statistical analyses provide quantitative insights into the prevalence, trends, and characteristics of bullying, offering a data-driven foundation for policy-making and intervention design. Development theory, meanwhile, explores the broader implications of bullying on societal progress and cohesion, considering how it reflects and exacerbates existing social inequalities and challenges.

Overall, the interdisciplinary nature of bullying research underscores the need for a holistic approach to address it, involving collaboration across various fields to understand its causes, consequences, and the most effective strategies for prevention and intervention. By tackling bullying from multiple angles, societies can better support affected individuals, promote inclusivity, and create safer, more supportive environments for all. The phenomenon of cyberbullying is witnessing an unprecedented surge, paralleling the rapid advancements in digital technology. Despite the swift pace of technological progress, regulatory frameworks and measurement methodologies are struggling to keep up, leaving a gap in effectively addressing and mitigating the issue.

Cyberbullying's reach is extensive, potentially affecting individuals across all age groups, notably within the realm of adult education, which is increasingly viewed through the lens of lifelong learning. This perspective aligns with the principles set forth in the Incheon Declaration, emphasizing the necessity for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, irrespective of age. As the digital world continues to erase traditional boundaries, the threat of cyberbullying looms larger, not just among younger students but also within adult education settings.

Addressing this challenge requires a shift in mindset and a commitment to ethical action that extends beyond individuals to encompass all stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, parents, and the tech industry. The urgency for rapid and effective responses is critical in creating safe, supportive, and inclusive educational environments. This entails not only implementing stronger regulatory measures and developing sophisticated tools for monitoring and intervention but also fostering a culture of empathy, respect, and digital citizenship. The battle against cyberbullying calls for a collective effort to ensure that the digital space remains a realm of opportunity rather than a landscape of fear. By adopting a more holistic approach that integrates technological, educational, and ethical dimensions, stakeholders can work together to curb the rise of cyberbullying and uphold the values of inclusive and equitable education in the digital age.

An example of how to address this phenomenon in the education environment is the project 2020-1-TR01-KA229-093260 implemented by one high school each country Turkey-coordinator, Poland, Spain, Italy, Lithuania and Romania with the aim of contributing in activities under the umbrella of combating bullying. Our schools have a great responsibility, by ensuring a positive school climate, equal education right for all individuals, ensuring that our students adopt positive approaches by developing the good practices we have experienced with our partners, to create a joint program, to spread it to the local, national and international arena, to strengthen our professional competencies and to create new and gaining sustainable qualifications and improving supportive school life for disadvantaged students. By creating an atmosphere and protecting our values, we will achieve the goals in the EU 2020 strategy plan by using qualified human resources.

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