

Online stigma-based bullying among school children

Marijana Markovikj, PhD, Macedonian Association for Applied Psychology (MAAP)



Social networks are part of our everyday life, especially for the young generation which has been exposed to this type of communication since their childhood. Social interaction between young people takes place intensively on social networks. This way of communication enables connection with peers, teachers, relatives; this is a positive outcome of social network usage. It is an undeniable fact that the social networks make every day communication easy in many ways – it is easy to listen, to watch and maintain contact with close people who are far away, and to find "lost" friends, to quickly share important information. However, at the same time, it can also lead to the exposure of young people to a content that is not in accordance with their age as well on online violence or cyber bullying. Particular interest in this lesson will be the stigma-based bullying which is a specific kind of bullying based on different types of stigmatizations such as: gender, age, weight, ethnicity etc. In this lesson, we will try to explain how stigma-based online bullying can have an impact on youth’s mental health. This lesson is an attempt to explain the phenomenon of online bullying based on stigma among school children and youngsters.

Introduction
Definition of the concepts

----- STIGMA, ONLINE, BULLYING

There are a number of terms used to describe violent online behavior that is sustained and intended to cause psychological harm to another person. Terms that can often be encountered are the following: **cyberbullying, online bullying, online harassment, harassment online, bullying online**. Common to all terms is that: it is a **type of violence that takes place outside the physical world, in the virtual world**, that it spreads with the help of the **new technology** and that it **can cause a mental health disorder**. According to the APA: “Cyberbullying is verbally threatening or harassing behavior conducted through such electronic technology as cell phones, email, social media, or text messaging.” Bullying as a form of violence according to APA is defined as: “an act of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. Bullying can take the form of physical contact, words, or more subtle actions. The bullied individual typically has trouble defending themselves and does nothing to "cause" the bullying. (Bullying, n.d.)

Digital violence (cyber-bullying) is the use of digital technology (Internet and mobile phones) with the aim of disturbing another person, to humiliate and harm them. It usually implies text or video messages, photos and calls to which another person disturbs, stalks, insults, provokes, threats etc.

The next term that needs to be explained is **stigma/social stigma**. According to the APA stigma is: *Negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency. A stigma implies social disapproval and can lead unfairly to discrimination against and exclusion of the individual.*

Stigma-based bullying can be explained and defined as bullying that is motivated by stigma.



- Key words:
- ✓ Stigma,
 - ✓ Online bullying/cyberbullying,
 - ✓ School children/youth,
 - ✓ Virtual, online, digital space

The main differences and similarities between traditional and online bullying:		
Traditional	Same	Online
Face to Face	Lack of adult monitoring	Anonymous
Mainly occurs at school	Can cause traumatic experience	Can occur at any time/any place
Bully can be identified	It can be long or short term	Can be shared with wide audience
Onlookers can see	Victim can become bully	Victims/cyberbullies cannot be seen
Facial and body reactions can be seen on victim and onlookers		No safe place to hide

Picture 1. An overview of the differences between online and traditional Source: The Cybersmile Foundation (The Cybersmile Foundation, n.d.)

Online versus Traditional
Similarities and Differences between Online Bullying and Traditional Bullying

----- BULLYING

The general conclusion is that online bullying is a more serious threat to mental health than traditional bullying, because it is a relatively new phenomenon for which strategies for managing it have not yet been created. Cyberbullying typically takes the form of sending or posting harmful or false content about a peer, or sharing another teen’s personal or private information, with the goal of causing embarrassment or humiliation. For example, a cyberbully might share an awkward picture of another teen, or a post taken out of context. (The Cybersmile Foundation, n.d.)

Victims are less likely to tell their parents or teachers about a cyber bullying incident because they may fear that they’ll receive a worse punishment, like having their computer or phone taken away. Cyber bullies don’t have face-to-face encounters with their victim, they are less likely to feel guilty for what they do, they do not know how their online words or actions actually affect someone else. This leads to bullies being more aggressive and victims being more vulnerable. <https://onlinesense.org/5-differences-cyber-bullying-traditional-bullying/>

The role of social media in online bullying
How to be safe on social media

-----SOCIAL MEDIA

Platforms for social media as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and others as well as a free messaging apps that work across multiple devices with no limits on media sizes (Telegram, Viber, WhatsApp and others) continue to grow in popularity. Adolescents spend more of their time online navigating in a complex virtual world. Social media enables free and open commenting, which can be a frightening environment for victims of cyberbullying, where threats in the form of aggressive, demotivating or offensive verbal comments or messages, or images or videos, can be shared very easily with others. Out of control of the victims before they have the opportunity to protect themselves and defend themselves. (Greenwood, 2023)



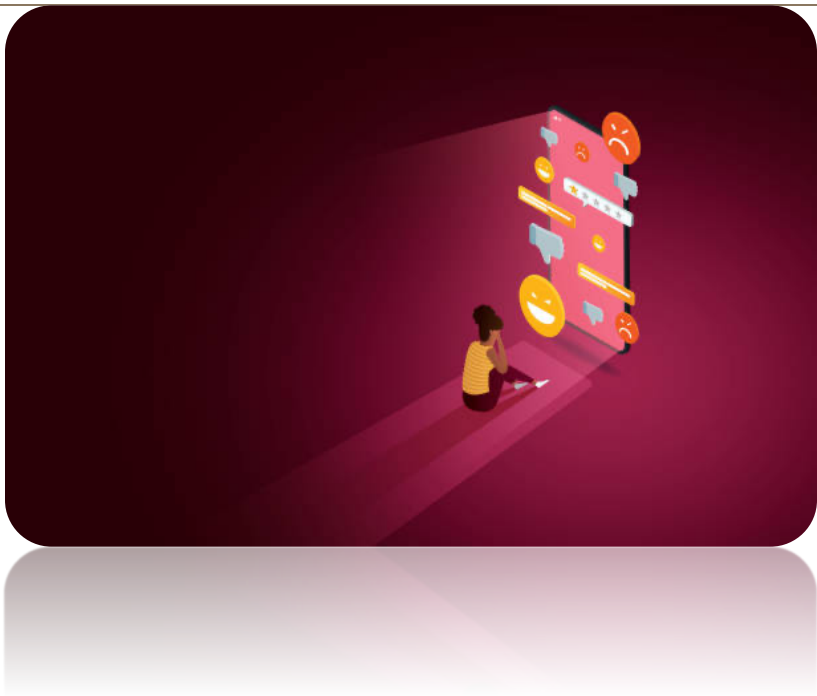
How is stigma related to bullying?
People can be stigmatized on diferent socially devaluated characteristics



----- STIGMA/BULLYING

According to Goffman (1963), when a person is stigmatized, others believe that he or she is not equal as others as a result of a collectively constructed and maintained stigma. Bullying based on stigma or discrimination can be particularly harmful. Bullies may target a child/adolescent because of their weight, religion, disability or other characteristics. (Villines, 2018)

Some evidence suggests that stigma-based bullying is associated with worse outcomes than non-stigma-based bullying. Drawing on two population-based samples (Earnshaw, 2018) Russell (Russell et al., 2012) found that youth who reported stigma-based bullying, including bullying associated with their sexual orientation, race, religion, sex/gender, or disability, were at greater risk of poor mental health (e.g., depression, suicide ideation and attempts), substance use, and low academic achievement than youth reporting non-stigma-based bullying).



Relevant surveys examining the association between stigma-based online bullying and youth mental health
Findings from surveys

----- EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

- Overweight youth experience more bullying than their peers, with overweight girls being at greatest risk of bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2018).
- Young people who spend more time on social networks, have higher social media addiction scores, who spent more hours online, identifying as male are more probably to become perpetrators (Giordano et al. 2021).
- Research by Campbell et al. (2013) found that driving factors in cyberbullying included reduced social and contextual cues and a perceived lack of consequences.
- Mental health effects of cyberbullying on the perpetrator could differ from that imposed on traditional bullies (Greenwood, 2023).
- Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reporting that of those who cyberbullied, 39% dropped out of school, 37% showed delinquent behavior, 32% engaged in frequent substance abuse, and 16% were severely depressed. Other studies suggest that depression rates are lower amongst cyberbullies than traditional bullies.
- Findings from the surveys conducted in Republic of Macedonia Survey conducted by NGO “Youth can” shows that slightly more than one third (35 percent) of males and females, if they suspect a disturbance in their mental health, would turn to a parent, while the lowest percentage of those who declared that they would seek professional help, only 2 percent. (Бошкоска, 2022)
- As many as 42 percent of children in Macedonia register themselves as victims of peer violence, and cyberbullying has escalated in recent years. The most vulnerable groups are children from smaller ethnic communities and those with disabilities (Здравковска, 2022)



Mental health can be influenced by stigma-based bullying

STIGMA IMPACT
ON MENTAL HEALTH

----- ONLINE BULLYING

Theoretical framework of stigma-based bullying identifies that in contrast to non-stigma-based bullying, stigma-based bullying is driven by distinct, stigma-related factors (e.g., social dominance orientation, stereotypes, prejudice). Even without a physical component, cyberbullying has a significant negative impact on teens. It causes distress and can exacerbate symptoms of teen anxiety, teen depression, and teen isolation. Moreover, cyberbullying has led to several highly publicized teen suicides. (Newport Academy [Teen Mental Health & Substance Abuse Treatment Centers], n.d.) It is most often present in young people between the ages of 10 and 19, and the lower age limit is getting lower and lower!

Stigma-based bullying undermines youths’ wellbeing and academic achievement, with lifelong consequences (Juvonen and Graham, 2014, McDougall and Vaillancourt, 2015)

Summary:

- ✓ Online harassment does significant psychological and emotional damage.
- ✓ Adolescents who experience cyberbullying are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal behavior, and physical symptoms triggered by mental health issues.
- ✓ Young people who perpetrate cyberbullying have higher rates of substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviors.

Cyberbullying can cause significant mental health damage. Research shows that adolescents who experience cyberbullying can manifest depression, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal ideas or behavior, as well as psychosomatic symptoms. Teen cyberbullying victims are more likely to be engaged in self-harming or suicidal behavior.

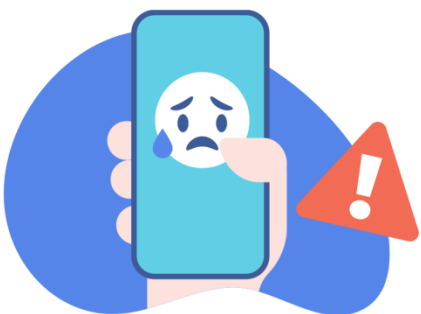
- Cyberbullying victims reported negative mental health effects, primarily feelings of sadness and hopelessness,
- Young people who are exposed to violence manifest a lack of feeling safe in school and difficulties in their ability to learn,
- Victims of cyberbullying have feelings of powerlessness,
- Both the victim and the abuser have feelings of low self-esteem.

In which segments of the internet space can violence occur?

- Cyberbullying can occur on different social media platforms. For example, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat,
- Violence can appear in messages sent through mobile phones as well as on calling and messaging apps like Viber, WhatsUp (it can occur in one to one online communication or in group communication),
- Different forums, online video game playing,
- Also, it can occur in email communication, but rarely.

Methods of cyberbullying:

- Posting comments, pictures or video of children and adolescents with a tendency to hurt someone's feelings,
- Starting rumors and sharing lies about a young person that can have an influence on their reputation,
- Posting stigma-based comments about religion, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity,
- Sending threatening messages or messages tends to cause the young person to harm themselves,
- Sharing private (address, phone number etc.) information making them public.



SYMPTOMS OF CYBERBULLYING:

- ✓ Changes in appetite: Loss of appetite or increase of appetite
- ✓ Psychosomatic symptoms: stomachaches, headaches, or other physical complaints
- ✓ Reduced interest in school, school absentism or poor grades
- ✓ Feeling sad, afraid, moody, anxiety or depressed,
- ✓ Decreased self-esteem,
- ✓ Social isolation,
- ✓ Insomnia or sleeping too much and nightmares can occur too,
- ✓ Nocturnal urination or defecation,
- ✓ Behavioral regression.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A CHILD/TEEN/ADOLESCENT WHO IS OR CAN BE VIOLENT:

- Has a need for dominance and usually they are aggressive,
- These young people are physically stronger than their peers,
- They manifest a lack of empathy,
- Impulsive; do not have tolerance of frustration and are oriented only toward satisfaction of their needs.
- Have problematic school behavior (disrespects school rules and teachers).

THE TEACHER’S ROLE IN PREVENTING BULLYING

Reasons why teachers do not prevent bullying

- ✓ Teachers may simply be unaware of the bullying phenomenon
- ✓ Some teachers consider bullying to be a normative behavior that may help children to acquire social norms
- ✓ In some cases, they do not intervene because they do not feel sympathy for the victim

How teachers can prevent bullying

- ✓ Teaching students about the acceptance and inclusivity about sexual orientation, race, religion, sex/gender
- ✓ Teaching students about media literacy and online safe behaviour: how to recognise types of online bullying as well as how to recognise symptom of exposure on online bullying

What schools should do to prevent peer violence based on stigma, online and offline:

1. To establish a Team for the protection of children from violence. The team for protection against violence should consist of the employees of the institution: principal, professional associates (pedagogue, psychologist, special education teacher, social worker) or class teachers, as well as teachers from the subject teaching; children and parents,
2. Development of a Program for the protection of children from violence

THE SCHOOL’S AND TEACHER’S ROLE IN PREVENTING BULLYING

Sometimes, teachers do not react as they should to prevent bullying. Why this is happening? Here is the list of some reasons:

- Teachers cannot recognize the manifestation of bullying,
- Some teachers think that bullying may help children to behave according to social norms,
- There are cases when they do not feel sympathy for the victim,
- Or, the parents of bullies are threatening the school and teachers.
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How can teachers prevent bullying based on stigma?

- They can teach students about acceptance of differences such as sexual orientation, race, religion, sex/gender, physical and mental disabilities,
- Teaching students about media literacy and online safe behavior: how to recognize types of online bullying as well as how to recognize symptoms of exposure to online bullying.

What schools should do to prevent peer violence based on stigma, online and offline:

1. To establish a team for the protection of children from violence. The team for protection against violence should consist of the employees of the institution: principal, professional associates (pedagogue, psychologist, special education teacher, social worker) or class teachers, as well as teachers from the teaching subject; children and parents,
2. Development of a Program for the protection of children from violence,
3. To organize lectures for children and parents,
4. To establish a psychological counseling center for children, parents and school employees.

Tips: List of ideas and actions for preventive behavior in school:

- Organizing humanitarian actions,
- Establishing confidence building activities during classes as well as during extracurricular activities,
- Creation of posters, flyers, electronic presentations, brochures, manuals by students and teachers for the promotion of mental health,
- Regular involvement of students and teachers in extracurricular events (cleaning the school yard, planting trees, etc.),
- Organizing sports competitions, quizzes etc.
- Establishing a school magazine.

Some good practices from Macedonia

-The students created a Facebook page and an Instagram profile where they can offer help to victims of online violence - peer to peer support (Ивановска-Илиевска, 2022)

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