

SOCIAL PEER VIOLENCE IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT - STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF PREVENTION¹

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In recent years, communication between children and young people has increasingly taken place in the digital environment. A large number of minors have their own profile on social networks, as well as applications for exchanging phone calls and messages (e.g. Viber). As a result, their exposure to violence in the digital environment is increasing. This type of violence is specific, and the lack of direct contact can be encouraging for potential abusers. In addition, in some forms of digital violence, the reaction of the victimized person may be absent, and its absence may encourage further violence or even other forms of violence against him. During the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, classes in schools were conducted online, and a measure of mandatory physical isolation was in force. This has certainly increased the use of social networks and messaging applications by children and young people.

Starting from the assumption that in that period children were more exposed to victimization by peers in the digital environment, from April to June 2021 we conducted two surveys through an anonymous survey among primary school students in the Republic of Serbia aged ten to fourteen. The aim of one research was to gain insight into students' attitudes and attitudes towards verbal peer violence in digital environ-

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ments, and the other was to gain insight into students' attitudes and attitudes towards social peer violence in the same environment. This paper presents the results of another study. The basis for the assumptions from which we started were the researches of other authors, which we refer to in the first part of our paper. Based on the results of the research, we tried to give recommendations for the prevention of social peer violence in digital environments.

KEY WORDS: social peer violence / digital environment / prevention

1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous definitions of bullying. According to the Committee on Education and Skills of Great Britain, it means behavior that is harmful to mental and physical health and includes: insults, provocations, ridicule, giving malicious comments, hitting, pushing, taking property (things), inappropriate texts via messages and emails, sending offensive and degrading photos over the phone or the Internet, gossiping, removing people from the group and spreading false and harmful rumors (Bullying, House of Commons, Education and Skills Committee, The Stationery Office, London, 2007: 8, stated according to Đorić, 2009: 148).

According to authors, a large number of studies on peer violence in European countries and the United States have long concluded that victimization of victims of peer violence has negative consequences on school success and daily functioning, personal experience and academic achievement. In addition, victimization often contributes to anxiety, depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, fear, and helplessness (Donoghuea *et al*, 2014: 41).

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to the study of the phenomenon of cyberbullying, as a behavior undertaken through electronic or digital media (email, mobile phones or social networks). Some authors believe that this type of violence is undertaken by repeating a certain pattern of behavior in an attempt to harm a person (Ortega *et al*, 2012, p. 323, stated according to Navarro, Yubero, Larañaga, 2015: 2). However, we are of the opinion that children of a certain age (aged 10 to 14) are often not even aware of the damage they can inflict on their peers by such behavior, and that is why they easily undertake activities that can be classified as social peer violence.

Some authors believe that cyberbullying is a specific type of social violence perpetrated through digital media (Beran and Li, 2007, stated according to Navarro *et al*, 2015: 16). However, the very nature of cyberbullying is such that it mainly in-

volves verbal or social violence. Although it may seem at first that such behavior does not cause as much damage as physical violence, its consequences can be very serious and long-lasting, especially when it comes to children. Such behavior can greatly impair a minor's self-confidence and negatively affect his or her future personal and professional achievements.

Increased violence in the digital environment is certainly due to its characteristics, which include the possibility of anonymity of the perpetrator, greater public exposure than when the violence is committed live, the inability to be excluded from the cyber environment and the lack of contact in many types of traditional violence. Some adolescents think that by taking on activities that can be classified as cyberbullying, they find themselves with their peers, unaware of the seriousness of the negative consequences of such behavior (Ferara *et al*, 2018: 2).

According to research, people who are victims of conventional violence very often become victims of violence in the digital environment. Likewise, people who are violent in the real (physical environment) very often become violent in the digital environment as well. However, the fact that people who were not previously prone to violence in the real (physical) environment are often violent in the digital environment (Låftman *et al*, 2013: 112)

As stated in the research conducted in Sweden, violence in the digital environment causes the same consequences in adolescents as conventional violence. These include psychosomatic problems of victims of violence, depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, lower levels of self-confidence, lower levels of academic success, substance abuse, propensity to self-harm, as well as suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. The highest levels of psychological stress caused by digital violence have been reported in children, who are often very exposed to this type of violence (Fridh *et al*, 2015: 2).

However, a special problem is the great availability of social networks for children. Thus e.g. the most popular social network Facebook does not take into account the age of the person who opened the user account. According to the company's policies, a person who opens his own account must be at least thirteen years old at the time of its opening, but this is not verified and is not subject to any restrictions or sanctions if a minor reports false information. If it is a younger person of the stated age, whether or not that person will use social networks is decided exclusively by the parents, who can report such a circumstance to Facebook by filling out an electronic form to terminate the minor's user account (Kostić, 2017: 430, Diligenski and Prlja, 2014: 33-34). Nevertheless, due to the great availability of social networks, frequent peer communication both through them and through applications for the exchange of telephone calls and messages, it is increasingly difficult to control the activities of children in the digital environment. It seems that

the school is often powerless to prevent peer violence in digital environments, although there are legal mechanisms for the prevention and sanctioning of behavior that violates the dignity, and sometimes the health and development of minors. A special problem is the fact that today more and more young minors are starting to use social networks and applications for exchanging calls and messages, which is why in our work we started from the assumption that a large number of children aged 10-14 have their own profile on social networks and applications. call and message exchange, and that they are often unaware of the consequences of their behavior in the digital environment.

In order to prevent all types of peer violence, especially the one that takes place in the digital environment, the awareness of both students and teachers should be raised, school rules on combating peer violence should be reviewed and, if necessary, improved, and adequate programs should be implemented. reduction of peer violence (Batori *et al*, 2020: 106).

2. SOCIAL PEER VIOLENCE, DEFINITION AND APPROACH IN THE REGULATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Schools and parents have a great role in teaching children, but the environment which also consist of peer people, contributes to a great extent to the formulation of personality. The desire to accept and belong to a certain group often directs the behaviour of individuals. If certain behavior is unacceptable, it should be prevented from repeating it and the minor should be pointed out the consequences of their own mistakes, because children at a certain level of psychophysical development are not aware of the possibility of their occurrence or their seriousness.

The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System provides for the right to protection from discrimination and violence, abuse and neglect. In addition, it prescribes obligations. Serious violation of obligations under the provisions of the said law also includes the use of mobile phones, electronic devices and other means for purposes that endanger the rights of others (Article 83, paragraph 2, item 7 of the Law on The Fundamentals of the Education System, *The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 88/2017, 27/2018-other law, 10/2019, 27/2018-other law, 6/2020 and 129/2021). As far as the educational institution itself is concerned, physical, mental, social, sexual, digital and any other abuse of student violence is prohibited in it (Article 111, paragraph 1). Unlike previous regulations, the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System prescribes the definition of digital violence and abuse. It refers to the misuse of information and communication technologies that can result in injury to another person and en-

dangerment of dignity by sending messages by e-mail, SMS, MMS, via the website, chatting, joining forums, social networks or other forms of digital communication (Article 111, paragraph 3).

According to national regulations governing education, violence and abuse means any form of once committed or repeated verbal or non-verbal behavior that results in actual or potential endangerment of the health, development and dignity of the child and student or employee.⁴ In addition to the definition of violence, the Rulebook on the Protocol of Actions to be taken by institutions in response to bullying, abuse and neglect recognizes social and digital violence as special types of violence. Social violence is considered to be behavior that excludes children and students from the group of peers and various forms of social activities, separation from others, non-acceptance on the basis of diversity, denial of information, isolation from the community, denial of social needs. Digital violence and abuse means the misuse of information technology, which can result in the injury of another person and endangerment of dignity. It is realized by sending messages by e-mail, SMS, MMS, via a website (web site), chatting, joining forums, social networks and the like. When we talk about social violence in the digital environment, we mean a social combination of these activities, which are reflected in the expulsion of peers from chat groups, denial of responses to their messages within chat groups, social networks and messaging applications. Bearing in mind that social interaction is increasingly taking place in digital environments, social violence is becoming more and more present on social networks and applications for the exchange of calls and messages.

In accordance to the Rulebook on the Protocol of Actions to be taken by institutions in response to bullying, abuse and neglect should be contributed by both education staff and parents, as well as students themselves. The obligation of the school is to acquaint all employees, children, students and parents with their rights, obligations and responsibilities, prescribed by law, the Rulebook on Protocol and other bylaws and general acts. In the case of the class community, according to the Rulebook, the class teacher, educator, teacher and professional associate should contribute to the acquisition of quality knowledge and skills, as well as the formation of values for mutual understanding, respect for diversity, constructive conflict resolution, etc. Therefore, in our research, we started from the assumption that it is necessary to organize lectures for students on the prevention of peer violence, which will be adapted to their age and needs.

Employees in the school institution must not provoke or contribute to violence, abuse and neglect (eg disrespect for the person and rights of the child and

⁴ The Rulebook on the Protocol of Actions to be taken by institutions in response to bullying, abuse and neglect, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 46/2019 and 104/2020.

students, inconsistency in behavior, biased assessment, etc.). It is this teacher behavior or attitude that can contribute to different types of violence by other students. In addition, students are also obliged to respect and honor the personality of other students, provide support to peers, contribute to and participate in prevention activities, and their behavior does not provoke, contribute to, or participate in violence or abuse. The rulebook prescribes the manner in which the school reacts to the different levels of violence that are undertaken against students, and the measures that are taken depend on the degree of threat to the rights and interests of students.

However, a particular problem may be how to respond to social violence in the digital environment. This type of violence often goes unnoticed, because students, even though they have been exposed to such violence, do not report it, because they believe that they will be able to overcome the problem on their own. However, we believe that this type of violence, as well as any other, should be openly discussed. If others are aware of the consequences it can have on the individual, they may refrain from such behavior.

3. BASIC RESEARCH DATA

Starting from the assumption that students focused on the use of digital technologies and communication via mobile phones, especially after the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the assumption that they are often unaware of the consequences of their actions and therefore need additional education in the prevention of peer violence, during 2021, we conducted a two-part survey. The first part of the research was conducted to find out the attitudes of students towards verbal peer violence in the digital environment, and the second part, which was also specific, referred to non-verbal peer violence in the digital environment.⁵ Having in mind the most frequent type of peer violence that is carried out in that environment in a non-verbal way, the subject of the research was primarily social violence. Our research is conducted among primary school students, aged 10 to 14, bearing in mind that a large number of students have been using social networks and applications for exchanging phone calls and messages since the age of 10. Research was of the survey type, and the questions were limited to social peer violence in the digital environment. In order to get as honest answer, our survey was anonymous.

⁵ The results of the first part of the research on the attitudes and attitudes of primary school students towards verbal peer violence in digital education were published in Kostić, J. (2021), Stavovi i odnos učenika prema verbalnom vršnjačkom nasilju u digitalnom okruženju, *Sociološki pregled*, vol. LVI, no. 4, pp. 1696–1718, doi: 10.5937/socpreg55-34445.

3.1. Research sample

About 500 primary school students from the territory of the city of Belgrade, Smederevo, Kragujevac and Novi Becej participated in the research. The research was based on the assumption that children from the fourth grade start using mobile phones and applications for exchanging phone calls and messages, as well as that children aged 10 to 14 are mostly unconscious as a consequence of their actions.

3.2. Research period

The research was conducted in the period from April to June 2021, together with the research on students' attitudes towards verbal peer violence in the digital environment. This was preceded by the last cycle of online classes. Given the limited possibility of physical contact with peers, we thought that to that extent there may have been a greater possibility of social violence in digital environments, because at that time students' communication via telephone and social networks was increased. That is why we were especially interested in the attitude of students towards this type of violence.

3.3. Research aim

The aim of our research was to obtain data, ie to gain insight into the attitude and attitude of primary school students in the territory of the Republic of Serbia towards social peer violence in the digital environment. As well as when it comes to researching students' attitudes and attitudes towards verbal peer violence in the digital environment, we sought to find out the feelings of people who have experienced this type of violence, their attitudes towards other peers who have experienced it, attitudes about the need for training. attitude about how much they benefited from the conducted trainings in the field of prevention of this type of peer violence. Based on the results of the research, we tried to give recommendations for its prevention.

3.4. Hypotheses

The research assumes that a large number of children aged 10 to 14 have a profile on social networks and applications for exchanging phone calls and messages, as well as that they do not understand the consequences of this type of violence, so they do not take the problem seriously. One of the assumptions is that children

need additional education to prevent social violence in the digital environment in order to know how to react in certain situations and to influence the prevention of behavior of their peers who exclude individuals from groups on social networks or applications for exchange of telephone calls and messages.

3.5. Research results and analysis

The results of the research show that the largest number of children aged ten to fourteen have their own profile on social networks (72.9%), while 27.1% of respondents do not have a profile on them. This supports the initial assumption that a large number of children of that age have a profile on social networks. The highest percentage of respondents 64.1% have a profile on the social network Instagram, followed by Tik Tok 53.2% and Facebook 21%. The smallest number of respondents, 5.5%, have a profile on the social network Twitter. Of the total number of respondents, only 5.2% do not have a profile on applications for the exchange of telephone calls and messages. The largest number of respondents, 88.7%, have a profile on the Viber application, followed by 49.7% on Votstap, and 3.2% on Telegram.⁶

According to the answers of the respondents, the largest number of them, 73.5%, never expelled a friend from the group on the application for understood messages, a total of 22.6% did so as the group administrator, while a smaller number 3.9% stated that they do not use applications for messaging.

Excluding 70.6% of students who stated that they had never expelled a friend from the group within the call and message exchange applications, a total of 5.5% of students who said they did not use the messaging application, in total 18.7% of respondents said that they did it because they believe that he or she does not belong there and that they should not be part of that group, 4.2% of respondents said that they did it so that they could talk about him or her other members of the group could talk about what the expelled person should not hear, while 3.2% of respondents said that they wanted to humiliate the expelled person in this way. This is exactly what testifies to the danger and possibility of increasing the intensity of social violence. A person who has been expelled from the group may not only feel isolated because of that act, but his peers may tell various untruths or ridicule some of his traits, and because of such isolation he may be unable to defend himself. Later, this type of violence can turn into verbal or even physical violence.

⁶ The same question was used in the research of students' attitudes and attitudes towards verbal peer violence in the digital environment, and the results of which were published in the paper, Kostić, J. Stavovi i odnos učenika prema verbalnom vršnjačkom nasilju u digitalnom okruženju, p. 1702.

In addition, it can be concluded that the motives for expelling peers from the call and message exchange group were still negative. Based on this, it can be concluded that although they are often unaware of the consequences of their own behavior, social violence is not the result of ill-considered actions.

If we ignore the number of 67.1% of respondents who never expelled a friend from the messaging group as an administrator, as well as 5.5% of students who do not use messaging applications, a total of 20% of respondents who did so said that none of the members of the group criticized them for such an action, and 7.4% that they were criticized by other members of the group. It is surprising that a larger number of students do not defend a person against whom a certain type of violence is committed, regardless of the fact that social violence in the digital environment is the work of an individual (group administrator). It is possible that he is a dominant member of a peer group who is most often opposed by other students in a real, school environment.

A total of 68.1% of students stated that they had never expelled a friend from the group for exchanging calls or messages, and 5.5% of students did not use such applications. Of the total number of students who expelled a friend as an administrator within the group for exchanging calls and messages, a total of 19% of students said that it did not affect the attitude of other students towards him, 4.2% said that after In addition, a large number of children or most did not want to hang out with a person who was expelled from the group within the application, while 3.2% of respondents said that even before being expelled from the group, no one wanted to hang out with that student. Therefore, it does not necessarily mean that social violence is always undertaken against students who have already been exposed to this type of method. It is possible that such an activity is undertaken with the aim of further excluding an individual from a peer group.

When it comes to the frequency of expelling students from the application for exchanging calls or messages, a total of 48.7% of students said that it happens, but not so often, 31.6% of respondents said that it does not happen at all, 14.5 % that it happens often, and 5.2% of students that they cannot answer that question because they do not use applications for exchanging calls and messages. group.

Out of the total number of participants in this research, a total of 63.2 respondents stated that they would never be expelled from the group within the application for exchanging messages or calls, 31% stated that they were expelled from that group, and 5.8% that they did not profile within such applications. More students appear to have declared themselves victims of social violence in digital environments than have admitted to committing this type of violence. This can be a consequence of self-blame. However, the question may be asked whether a certain number of students would undertake such an activity if they were not only aware

of the possible consequences of such behavior, but also the fact that it can be characterized as social violence.

If we ignore 59.7% of respondents who said they were not previously expelled from the group in the application for messaging or calls and 5.5% who said they do not have a profile within them, 24.6% of respondents said that the expulsion did not affect the attitude of other students towards him, 5.8% said that such an action had a negative impact on the attitude of other students towards him, who began to avoid it, while 4.2% of students said that the attitude he did not change other students towards him because that attitude was bad even before that.

Of the total number of respondents, excluding 62.8% of surveyed students who stated that no one has excluded them from the application for the exchange of calls and messages and 5.5% who stated that they do not have a profile within such an application, a total of 18, 4% of respondents were completely indifferent to the fact that their peers excluded them from the group within the said application, 5.5% of respondents felt great anxiety and discomfort, 4.8% of respondents thought about it for a long time, and 3.2% it felt less valuable than other peers. Based on that, it can be concluded that different individuals of the same age react in different ways to social peer violence, so it is possible that they may have different consequences as a type of long-term reaction to this type of violence. That is why preventive measures must be taken by individuals to prevent such behavior. This is exactly what the education that should be conducted regularly at the level of the educational institution can help.

Despite different answers and attitudes towards other people's and one's own victimization, a total of 44.2% of respondents believe that there is more violence on social networks and messaging applications than live, 36.8% believe that violence is equally present on social networks and schools, and 19% that it is more represented in school, during direct socializing. Regardless of the fact that young people are spending more and more time in the digital environment, it can be concluded that they are still aware of the growing exposure to peer violence on social networks. This is a signal that continuously the necessary measures are being taken to prevent them from becoming victims themselves or from undertaking activities that can be characterized as social violence.

Having in mind the different attitudes of the respondents towards social violence in the digital environment, we were interested in how they evaluate the previous trainings related to education on peer violence on social networks. A total of 39.4% of respondents said that the trainings were very useful, 11.9% of respondents that they were completely useless, and 39.4% that they were very useful, but that they should be adapted to their needs and age. This suggests that the approach to the prevention of peer violence should be more comprehensive. The extent to which social violence in digital environments is present in schools should be ex-

amined first, and then a strategy for its prevention should be developed at the level of each institution. This does not have to be part of a specific assessment or strategy, but it should certainly be emphasized that peer violence in the digital environment requires special, specific and continuous approach.

4. CONCLUSION

In our research, we started from the hypothesis that a large number of students aged 10-14 have their own user profile on social networks and applications for exchanging phone calls and messages. The results of the research confirm that assumption. Most children of this age not only have their own user account on them, but also have several user accounts on various social networks (e.g. Instagram, Tik Tok or Facebook). This also increases their exposure to peer violence on social networks, as well as the possibility of victimizing others. Social violence in the digital environment is also present, and the exclusion of peers from the group within telephone and messaging applications increases the possibility of their further victimization, as they are often excluded from them in order to talk negatively with other peers. Although primary school children are often unconscious of the consequences of social violence against other peers, they always have a motive for doing so. According to the answers we received during the research, these motives are not harmless at all. Peers are mostly socially isolated in the digital environment in order to humiliate themselves in front of others or to say negative things about them to other people in the peer group. This is exactly what can encourage further violence, as well as other forms of violence against a person who has been exposed to this type of victimization. Students react very differently to social violence in the digital environment. It seems that a very small number of peers are defending the person against whom such activity was undertaken. The reason for this may be twofold. The first is the lack of awareness that such behavior is a form of violence that can have very serious consequences for some peers, and the second reason is the desire to be part of a group and to please the will of peers who have taken an activity that can be characterized as social violence. are often someone who imposes their will.

According to the results of the research, students believe that violence is more present in digital environment than in school. The reason for that is the fact that children spend more and more time using computers and mobile phones, and less socializing live. The physical isolation caused by the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus additionally contributed to all that.

Lack of understanding of the problem of social peer violence in the digital environment can also be caused by a lack of awareness of its harmfulness. It is possible

that some of the juveniles are not even aware that such behavior can be characterized as violence, so they would refrain from these activities if they knew that they could be labeled as bullies. Although, in our opinion, it is not possible to completely prevent social peer violence in the digital environment, we believe that the education of minors would significantly contribute to its prevention. According to the results of our research, the respondents rated the trainings they attended in the previous period, regarding digital violence, as very useful. However, they should be more comprehensive and include different forms of violence in both real and digital settings. In addition, in their opinion, they should be as adapted as possible to their age and needs.

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SOCIJALNO VRŠNJAČKO NASILJE U DIGITALNOM OKRUŽENJU – STAVOVI STUDENATA I MOGUĆNOST PREVENCIJE

Poslednjih godina komunikacija dece i mladih se sve više odvija u digitalnom okruženju. Veliki broj maloletnika ima sopstveni korisnički nalog na društvenim mrežama, kao i aplikacijama za razmenu telefonskih poziva i poruka (npr. Viber). To utiče na povećanje izloženosti različitim vrstama nasilja u digitalnom okruženju u kojem nedostatak direktnog kontakta sa žrtvom može biti ohrabrujući za potencijalne nasilnike. Osim toga, u nekim oblicima digitalnog nasilja, reakcija viktimizovane osobe može izostati, a njeno odsustvo može podstaći dalje nasilje ili čak druge oblike nasilja nad njom. Tokom pandemije izazvane virusom COVID-19, nastava u školama se odvijala online, a na snazi je bila i mera obavezne fizičke distance, pa čak u nekim situacijama i izolacije. To je uticalo na povećanje korišćenja društvenih mreža i aplikacija za razmenu telefonskih poziva i poruka od strane dece i omladine.

Polazeći od pretpostavke da su u tom periodu deca bila u većoj meri izložena vršnjačkom nasilju u digitalnom okruženju, od aprila do juna meseca 2021. godine sproveli smo dva istraživanja putem anonimne ankete među učenicima osnovne škole, uzrasta od 10 do 14 godina. Cilj prvog istraživanja bio je uvid u stavove studenata o verbalnom vršnjačkom nasilju u digitalnom okruženju, a drugog uvid u stavove studenata prema socijalnom vršnjačkom nasilju u istom okruženju. U ovom radu predstavljeni su rezultati drugog istraživanja. Svoje pretpostavke zasnovali smo na istraživanjima drugih istraživača koja su sprovedena u prethodnom periodu, a na njih se i pozivamo u našem radu. Na osnovu rezultata istraživanja pokušaćemo da damo preporuke za unapređenje prevencije socijalnog vršnjačkog nasilja u digitalnom okruženju.

KLJUČNE REČI: socijalno vršnjačko nasilje / digitalno okruženje / prevencija