

Verbal and Psychological Violence Among Minor Internet Users

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Abstract. *The chapter contains a discussion of the results of the authors' research on Internet threats and the safety of children and youth of primary and junior high schools on the Internet, with a particular emphasis on situations presenting signs of cyberbullying.*

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0054.4777

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0054.4777>

Keywords: internet, information society, child, minor, school

Introduction

The flow of information and services between national borders was initiated by the development of the Internet and other communication technologies. Advanced technologies related to the Internet and mobile phones, allowing minors to benefit from access to various information, have become part of their daily lives. The Internet makes it possible, through its extraterritoriality, to search for information anywhere in the world. However, it is also a powerful and dangerous tool used to commit crimes. It can be compared to an open door to the world, where one can freely make use of an unlimited supply of information. Internet goods are associated with entertainment in the form of games and music, exchanging information via e-mail, connecting friends via instant messaging, and visiting resources of cultural and scientific interest and scientific resources. It is a modern 'playground' not only for children and young people but also for adults.

Internet interactivity involves the ability of parties to communicate and interact with each other. The relationship that takes place via the Internet is a dialogue between the user and others based on the exchange of information. Thanks to interactivity, people can feel a virtual closeness and bond with other users. Social networking sites, discussion groups and weblogs provide the opportunity to be active in the world of new media. Users have a sense of personal contact with other people. They can easily exchange insights, data and photos and share them online.

'It gives young people the opportunity to communicate and acquire all kinds of information. It has a great influence on the development of psycho-physical functions such as reflexes, coordination of movements, the ability to focus attention, and it develops knowledge and interests'¹

¹ S. Kozak, *Patologie komunikowania w Internecie. Zagrożenia i skutki dla dzieci i młodzieży*, Warsaw, 2011, p. 156.

The Internet contains content that is useful for children and parents, but also provides content that exposes minors and their parents to probable dangers. Increasingly, it is the youngest Internet users — children — who are the victims of Internet crime, often having access to illegal content.

Surfing the web is a source of entertainment and pleasure. However, it is sometimes difficult to know when a positive activity becomes dangerous. It is therefore important to be aware of the dangers lurking on the Internet. Just as in the real world, criminals are also looking for ways to use technology in the virtual space to break the law and cause harm. The dangers of the Internet include:

- bullying and harassment. It is associated with encountering defamatory and degrading content in emails or chat rooms;
- sexual relations. Surfing the Internet is associated with making new acquaintances and sometimes tempts the youngest to fulfil proposals outside the virtual space. Sexual deviants, using forums and chat rooms and gaining the trust of the youngest users, try to bring about a meeting in the real world to satisfy a deviant urge;
- invasion of privacy. These are attempts to extract personal data from the youngest users in the form of their age, name, home address, telephone number, school they attend in order to use this data to commit other crimes;
- alcohol and drugs. One of the main drawbacks of the Internet is the insufficient supervision of its content; thus, it is easy to find information encouraging the production and use of drugs, illegal alcohol consumption, methods of preparing explosives, etc.

Among the most serious risks for the youngest users are the following:

- cyberbullying,
- making virtual friends and dangerous contacts,
- sexting,
- grooming.

The lack of awareness of the damage that cyberbullying can cause is huge. A defining feature of cyberbullying is the repeated sending of e-mails or text messages containing embarrassing, and vulgar, hurtful, often blackmailing or intimidating content that causes stress and emotional tension.² Many researchers in the field of cyberbullying are of the opinion that the psychosocial effects of online violence are more destructive for children and adolescents than 'traditional' violence (in direct interpersonal relationships — face to face). Specialists raise the issue of the so-called 'snowball effect', in which victims of victimisation experience humiliation not only as a result of the content sent by the aggressor but also by outsiders viewing, disseminating and commenting on the content — both in virtual space and in face-to-face contacts.³

The analysis of research that has been carried out on pupils affected by cyberbullying shows that these pupils have lower academic performance, have problems concentrating, are nervous, and are accompanied by feelings of loneliness, inferiority, confusion, or being threatened. The intensity and persistence of the aggressors'

² S. Bębas, M.Z. Jędrzejko, K. Kasprzek, A. Szwedzik, A. Taper (Eds), *Cyfrowe dzieci, zjawisko, uwarunkowania, kluczowe problemy*, Warszawa-Milanówek, 2017, pp. 192–195.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 196–197.

actions can produce effects similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the abused child, which can negatively affect the developing personality, but also cause many mental health problems, including anxiety attacks, depression and somatic disorders.⁴ Vulnerable, psychologically weaker children are particularly exposed.

It should be noted that human interaction has taken on a new dimension, as more and more real-world phenomena are being reflected in cyberspace. Just like computers, smartphones offer unrestricted access to illegal content downloaded from the Internet and the possibility to record material using the built-in video camera or still camera. Young internet users acquiring smartphones are not always aware of the risks they may encounter. Smartphone users exchange a great deal of private and sensitive information with each other, living in the belief that mobile telephony is reliable and secure. Modern technology provides opportunities to generate embarrassing content involving any person, putting them in a problematic situation. There are websites where sabotage can be prepared by simply having personal information in the form of a name and then sending out a ridiculing message electronically to the email inboxes of friends on the portal. Peers are capable of such actions, who, in anger and aggression, post compromising photos, videos, insults using social networking sites, or ridicule a classmate in online forums.

The use of the Internet and mobile telephony with violence and the intention to harm a peer is referred to as cyberbullying and is one of the most serious risks that minors come into contact with. The problem of peer cyberbullying was first recognised in the United States, Canada and the wealthy Western European countries. Electronic aggression started with malicious and offensive text messages, then emails. Today, cyberbullying occurs in almost all forms of online contact — e-mail, instant messaging, social networking sites, websites, and discussion forums. The Internet provides an opportunity for the problem to grow; the perpetrator of cyberbullying can distribute humiliating content to recipients in unlimited numbers and locations.

In Poland, the problem of peer violence with the use of electronic media gained prominence with the story of Ania, a secondary school student from Gdansk, who committed suicide in 2006 as a result of violence perpetrated by her peers.

Unfortunately, minors' unawareness of the dangers of the Internet can consequently lead to them becoming victims of stalking in the real world or on the Internet, so-called stalking or cyberstalking (one form of cyberbullying), where the perpetrator harasses and abuses the victim by suggesting that he or she wants to do them harm. Cyberstalkers use websites, discussion forums, chat rooms and email to harass their victims. One of the most common forms of harassment is sending unwanted emails, viruses or unsolicited mail — spam.

The negative effects of online aggression also affect their perpetrators. 'The use of cyberbullying often correlates with involvement in other risk behaviours, such as hooliganism, participation in violent groups, use of psychoactive substances or criminality'.⁵

⁴ B. Aouil, K. Czerwiński, D. Wosik-Kawala (Eds), *Internet w psychologii — psychologia w Internecie*, Toruń, 2014.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Currently, Polish law does not guarantee full protection of teenagers from virtual aggression. Particular attention should be paid to the significant variety of activities included in the phenomenon of cyberbullying. The Criminal Code contains regulations concerning some of them, so depending on the violated goods, one can pursue one's rights both in criminal and civil proceedings. It should be remembered that in the case of minors, legal action is taken by parents or legal guardians. Article 304 § 1 of the Code of Criminal Procedure is also important, as it provides that 'upon learning that an offence prosecuted ex officio has been committed, the public is under a public duty to notify the prosecutor or the Police of this fact'.⁶

The authors' research results

Staff from the Police Academy in Szczytno have carried out a study to find out how the safety and security of users of the virtual world is shaping up in the light of the threat of the hacker environment and to find out the current state of cyberbullying threats.

The study involved students from primary and secondary schools in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship. In order to obtain reliable information, the research used one of the most frequently used methods of social research, including pedagogical research, *i.e.* the method of a diagnostic survey, which made it possible to collect information on interpersonal communication on the Internet and to properly define the place of the Internet in the lives of children and adolescents and to indicate safety risks. 'The most commonly used technique in social research is the survey. It is a specific type of written interview, where a categorised questionnaire, also known as a survey, is filled in by the respondent, rather than the researcher'.⁷ The same is true in pedagogical research, where the survey is indispensable 'as a tool for learning about collective characteristics, facts, opinions about events, numerical data'.⁸ Based on the experience of other researchers, it was decided to use the survey technique in our own research.

All stages of the survey were anonymous. The duration of the procedure for one class was approximately 30 minutes. The research was group-based and took place in the classroom during a lesson provided by their teacher. Participation in the survey was conditional on the school principal's permission and the student's consent. More than 2,800 people aged 10–17 took part in the study.

The majority of the respondents indicated a city as their place of residence (51%), while 49% of respondents indicated the countryside as their place of residence.

Among the respondents, boys made up 54%, while girls made up a slightly smaller population of 46%.

In the first stage of the analysis carried out based on the collected data, attention was paid to the purpose of Internet use by children and young people. Respondents

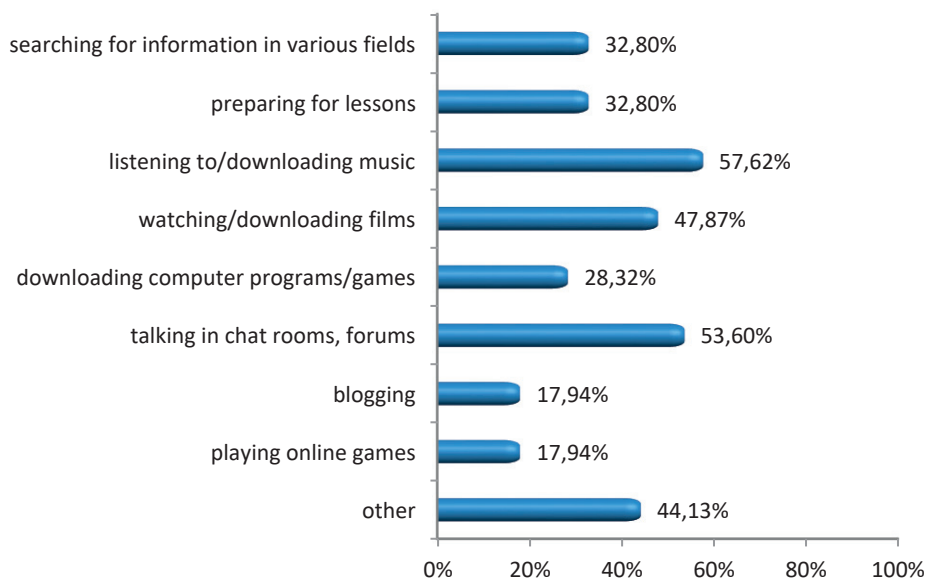
⁶ Act of 6 June 1997 — Code of Criminal Procedure (Journal of Laws of 1997, No. 89, item 555).

⁷ A. Chodubski, *Wstęp do badań politologicznych*, Gdańsk, 2008, p. 143.

⁸ T. Pilch, T. Bauman, *Zasady badań pedagogicznych. Strategie ilościowe i jakościowe*, Warszawa, 2001, p. 97.

were able to mark several answers to this question by choosing from nine possibilities. The results are shown in the figure below:

Chart 1. Purpose of Internet use by children and young people



Source: Own study

Young people and children are most likely to use the Internet to listen to and download music. This answer was chosen by almost 58% of respondents. Less than 42% of respondents use the Internet to prepare for lessons. Preparing for lessons using the Internet can be a kind of supplement to the information provided at school. It also happens that teachers give homework related to finding information on the Internet. On the other hand, finding the solution to a mathematical problem or a summary of a reading on the Internet and limiting oneself to such information will constitute a negative way of preparing for lessons using the Internet.

4.5% of respondents use the Internet to play games. It should be noted that too much use of online gaming can be dangerous in its consequences for both children and adolescents. Minors often do not pay attention to the time they spend playing in front of the computer. Children who spend too much time playing online games may lose their sense of reality and consequently have problems concentrating, become nervous, may confuse the real world with the virtual world, going as far as committing crimes, and may neglect contact with their family or peers.

More than 53% of respondents use the Internet for chatting, which is provided for free by chat rooms and instant messengers. It is therefore possible to chat with peers, but also to encounter adults impersonating children with the intention of tricking them into exchanging private information or pornographic material or, ultimately, meeting for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Other purposes for using the Internet included responses that it is used, for example, to solve different kinds of problems. There may be various reasons for this;

today's young people quite often cannot solve problems on their own. The hope then remains with relatives, parents, older siblings, grandparents. However, even here, minors sometimes do not find support, so they look for positive solutions to their dilemmas on the Internet.

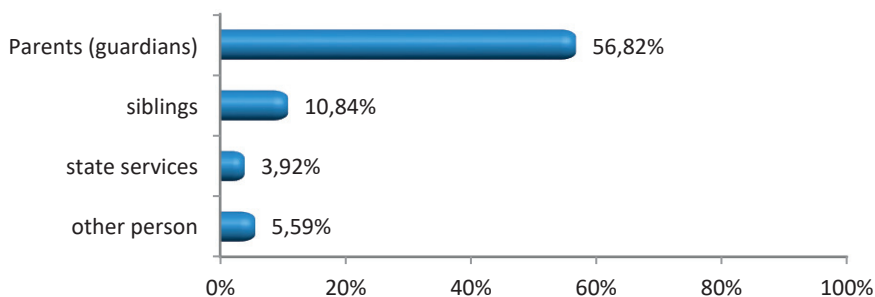
Respondents' answers indicate the universal use of the Internet among children and young people. It is important to remember that the versatility of the Internet carries many risks and can be the basis for various forms of cyberbullying activity, such as:

- publishing ridiculing videos and photos,
- publishing vulgar and insulting comments,
- humiliating, threatening, blackmailing,
- impersonating other people.

These factors can significantly affect the sense of psychological and physical safety of both children and young people.

Interesting information was provided in the answers of the respondents who, when asked the question 'Who controls what you do on the Internet?', answered that their parents were the most frequent checkers of their Internet activities. This was answered by as many as 56.8% of respondents.

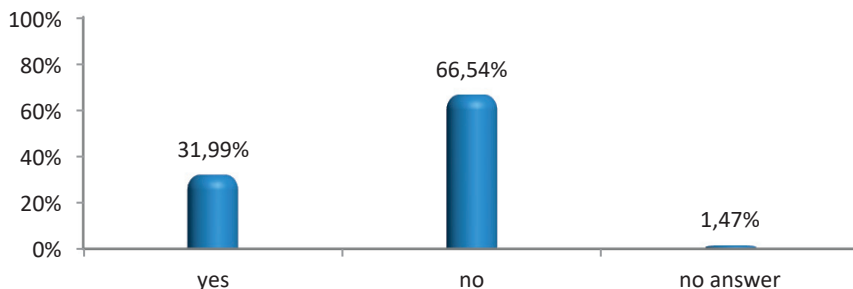
Chart 2. Does anyone control what you do on the Internet



Source: Own study

According to the survey, underage Internet users (more than 66%) declared that they had heard about the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

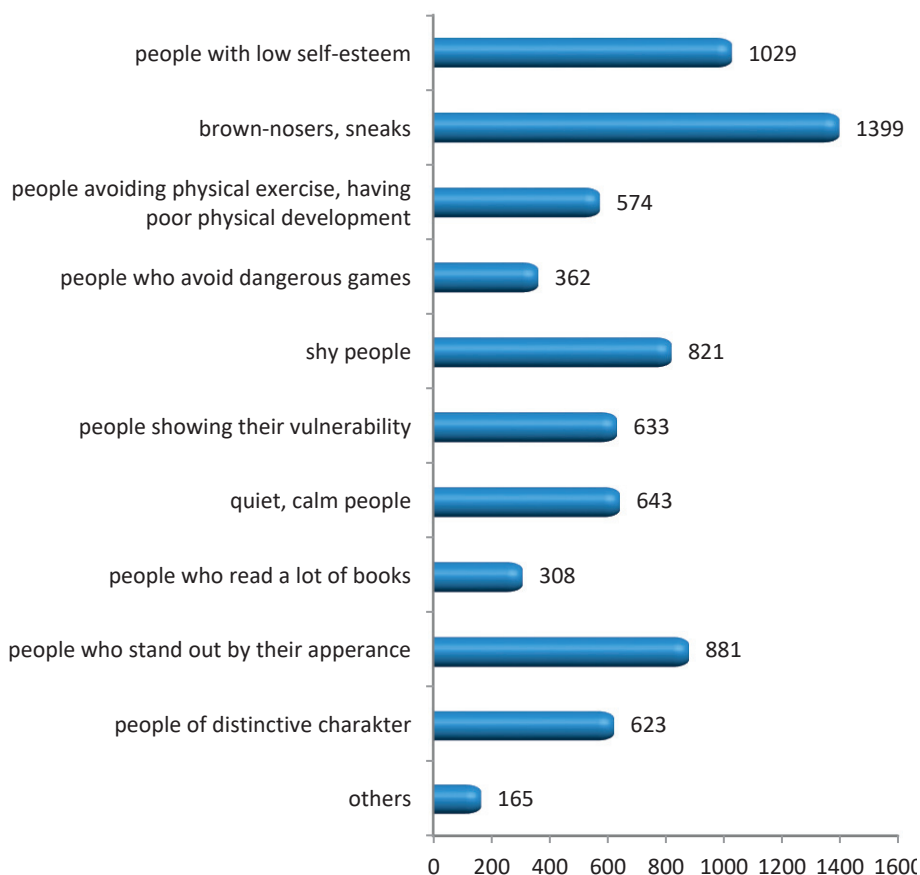
Chart 3. Have you encountered the phenomenon of cyberbullying?



Source: Own study

Research has shown that any user of new media can become a victim of cyberbullying, and most often, among minors, these are people who are disliked in their environment because of their appearance or character, who have bad relationships with peers, parents or teachers, people with low self-esteem and low self-worth, but also, quiet people with a tendency to blame themselves for failures. Violence is an advantage, a demonstration usually of force. It most often occurs in the form of physical violence. In this case, a clear distinction can be made between the perpetrator and the victim. A person becomes a victim because they are aware that the perpetrator has more power; they are doomed to failure in advance. Who most often becomes a victim of cyberbullying according to children and young people is illustrated by the following chart:

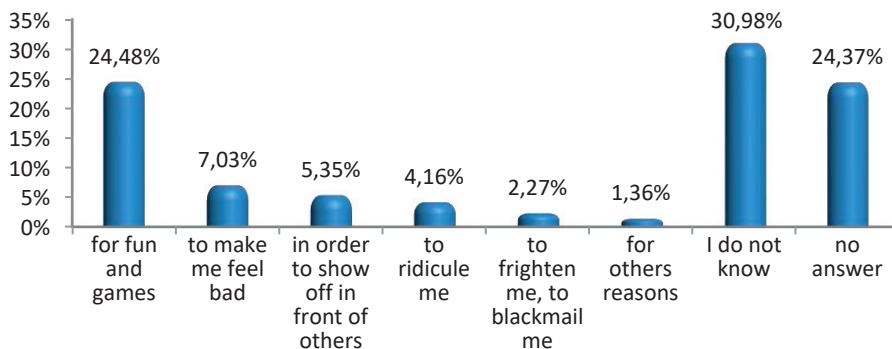
Chart 4. Victims of cyberbullying



Source: Own study

Aggressive behaviour is often triggered by conflicts between children, or to spite someone, or just to have fun, and these elements, according to the respondents, are the most common causes of aggression on the Internet.

Chart 5. Reasons for online aggression

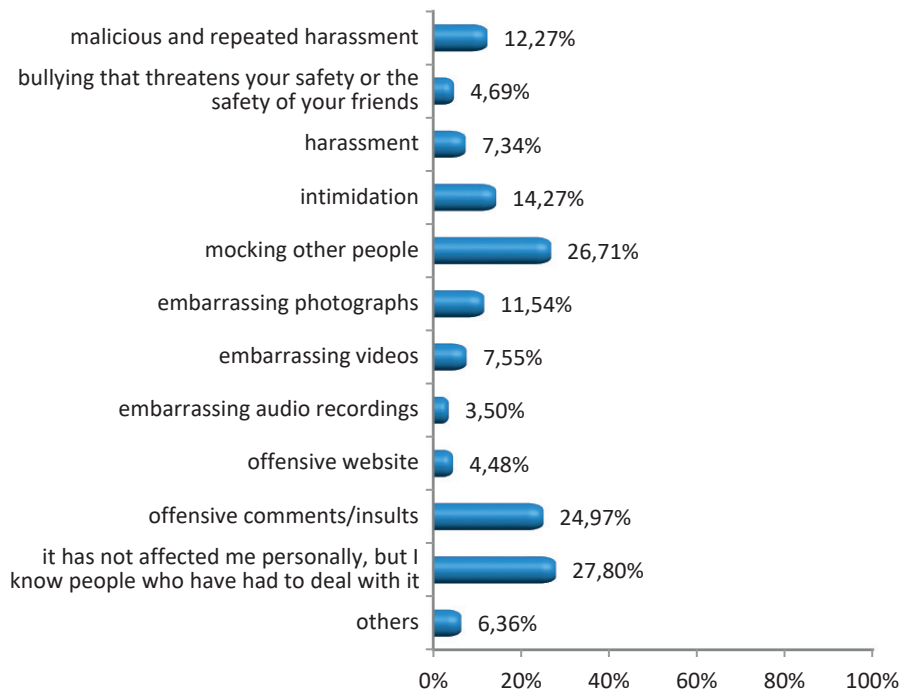


Source: Own study

Further evidence of online threats, including cyberbullying, is confirmed by children and young people in the answers they gave to a question about encountering bad behaviour, for example in the form of name-calling or ridiculing.

27.8% of respondents answered that they have never personally been affected by cyberbullying, but know people who have experienced it. Respondents have encountered various types of triggers and offensive comments, and some have been compromised and ridiculed.

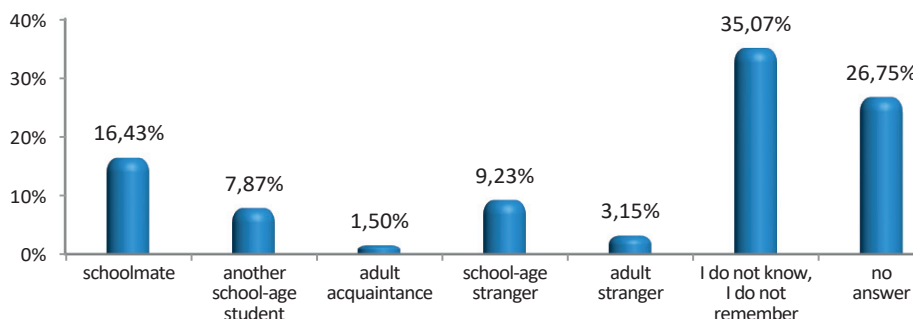
Chart 6. Forms of cyberbullying encountered by minors



Source: Own study

can be seen, children and young people confirmed in the survey the fact of receiving indecent content. It should be noted that it is often peers who tend to encourage such behaviour, seeing it as great fun, as the following illustration shows. As a consequence, aggressive talk can lead to experiencing stress, increased anxiety or even a mental breakdown of the child who cannot cope with the problem, which can ultimately lead to suicide.

Chart 7. Perpetrators of cyberbullying

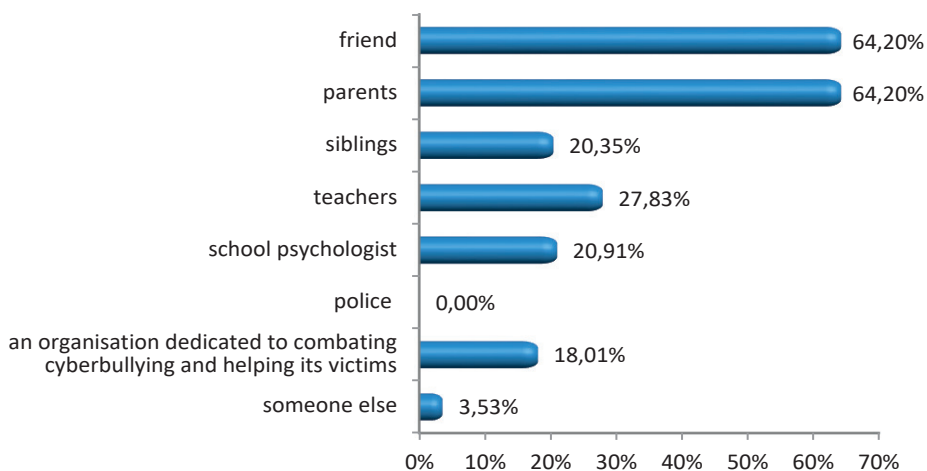


Source: Own study

The Internet is a place of mass information exchange, where children and adolescents often share their problems with friends and, maintaining anonymity, with casual acquaintances. According to the data collected during the survey, minors would first report cyberbullying to their parents, then the problem would be reported to the police, friends, and teachers.

During the survey, 3.5% of the total respondents said that they sought help from someone else, or that they do not need anyone’s help and are solving their problems themselves.

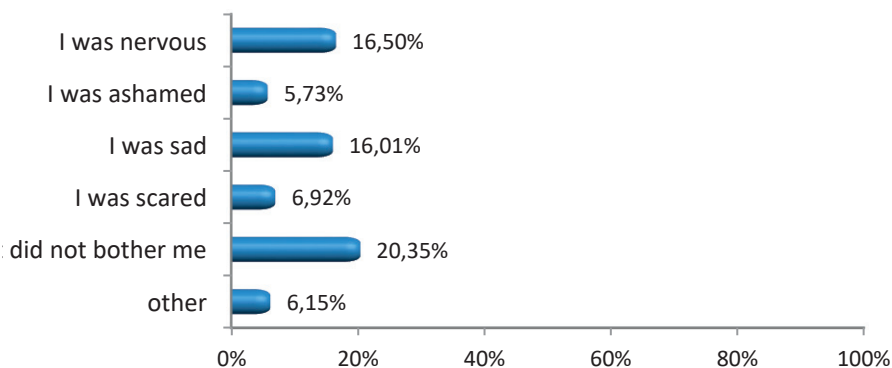
Chart 8. Problem-solving assistance when encountering cyberbullying



Source: Own study

Children and young people's feelings towards encountering cyberbullying are illustrated in the following chart:

Figure Chart 9: Feelings towards cyberbullying



Source: Own study

As can be seen from the data depicted in Fig. 9, respondents are concerned about the phenomenon of cyberbullying. What needs to be emphasised here is the negative impact of electronic aggression on young people who are not yet fully formed. The consequences certainly vary and depend on the type of aggression used and its intensity. They can range from the imperceptible to the very serious and disastrous. Children and young people who are affected by aggressors become depressed, often suffer from anxiety, and their self-esteem and sense of self-worth are lowered. Sometimes, there are difficulties at school and feelings of isolation and loneliness. They also experience declining academic performance, which in turn leads to truancy. From there, it is not far to self-harm, aggression towards others and criminal behaviour. Of course, at the very top of the negative consequences of cyberbullying (albeit occasionally) is acts of suicide when the victim panics.

Conclusions

The research confirms that the Internet is a serious threat to the safety of primary and secondary school pupils and, although not everyone is able to classify the behaviour in question as cyberbullying, it is a common phenomenon in this social group.

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is dynamic and intensely evolving. It is characterised by the variety of tools and forms used to address it, which makes it difficult to limit its occurrence. Even perfect legal regulations will not solve the problem and will not make undesirable behaviour simply disappear from the web, so it is important that the fight against virtual aggression starts with education. It is important to point out that education must not only be limited to the youngest group of new media users, but must also be aimed at their parents, guardians and teachers. A timely response from those closest to the victim can save them from tragedy.

If a minor becomes a victim of cyberbullying, a few basic rules should be followed:

- first, provide support through conversation and appropriate care,
- secure digital evidence by taking screenshots, email records or chat logs,
- if a crime has been committed against a child, notify the police and inform the school,
- request the site administrator to remove harmful material,
- make contact (if possible) with the perpetrator and his/her parents in order to stop the cyberbullying and remove traces of it.

Despite numerous preventive measures, cyberbullying is still a serious threat to young people. It is important to recognise the problem and to implement rules on safe Internet use from an early age.

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Streszczenie. Artykuł zawiera omówienie wyników badań własnych dotyczących zagrożeń internetowych oraz bezpieczeństwa dzieci i młodzieży szkół podstawowych i gimnazjalnych w Internecie, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem sytuacji niosących znamiona cyberprzemocy.

Resumen. Resumen. El artículo presenta los resultados de la investigación del autor sobre las amenazas en línea y la seguridad de los niños y adolescentes de primaria y secundaria en Internet, con especial atención a las situaciones que muestran las características del cibercoso.

Zusammenfassung. Der Artikel erörtert die Ergebnisse der eigenen Forschung des Autors über die Internetbedrohungen und die Sicherheit von Kindern und Jugendlichen der Primar- und Sekundarstufe I im Internet, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Situationen, die die Merkmale von Cybermobbing aufweisen.

Резюме. В статье обсуждаются результаты собственного исследования автора, посвященного онлайн-угрозам и безопасности детей и подростков младшего и среднего школьного возраста в Интернете, с особым вниманием к ситуациям, имеющим признаки кибербуллинга.