CYBERBULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN ALBANIAN SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

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ABSTRACT: *The rapid expansion of digital technologies has generated new social risks for adolescents, among which cyberbullying has emerged as a significant psychosocial concern. In Albania, increasing reports of online bullying in school contexts highlight the need for systematic investigation and targeted intervention. This study explores cyberbullying among adolescents in Albanian middle and high schools from the perspective of school social workers, focusing on its perceived forms, contributing factors, and impacts on adolescents' well-being. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 school social workers working in public middle and high schools across urban and rural areas of Albania. The data were analyzed via thematic analysis. These findings indicate that cyberbullying is a growing and persistent phenomenon, particularly among adolescents aged 15–16 years. Social workers identified multiple forms of cyberbullying, including online harassment and threats, the non-consensual dissemination of images and personal information, the creation of fake social media profiles, and online social exclusion. The participants reported significant psychological and emotional consequences, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, academic disengagement, and, in severe cases, self-harming behaviors and suicidal ideation. The study highlights the central role of school social workers in prevention and intervention through counseling, school-wide awareness initiatives, and collaboration with teachers, parents, and national*

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reporting platforms. The findings underscore the need for coordinated school-family approaches, strengthened psycho-social services, and the integration of digital citizenship education.

KEYWORDS: *cyberbullying, adolescents, school social worker, Albanian schools, psycho-social services*

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant global concern, affecting individuals across all age groups, with adolescents being particularly vulnerable. The widespread use of social media and digital communication platforms has increased exposure to online harassment, threats, and psychological aggression, extending bullying beyond traditional school environments and posing serious risks to adolescents' mental and emotional well-being.

Cyberbullying is commonly defined as a form of bullying that occurs through electronic technologies, including social media platforms, messaging applications, and other online environments (Smith et al. 2008). It typically involves intentional and repeated harm inflicted through digital communication, often characterized by anonymity and a wide audience reach. These features distinguish cyberbullying from traditional forms of bullying and increase its potential impact on adolescents' psychological and emotional well-being (Kowalski et al. 2014).

In Albania, the growing prevalence of cyberbullying in school settings is raising increasing concern among educational professionals, particularly those involved in psycho-social support services (Ismaili et al. 2026). School social workers play a key role in identifying, managing, and preventing cyberbullying incidents; however, their perspectives remain underexplored in the literature.

This paper presents an examination of cyberbullying among adolescents in Albanian middle and high schools from the perspective of school social workers. Specifically, it explores the forms of cyberbullying encountered, the perceived sociocultural factors contributing to these behaviors, and the psychological and emotional consequences for adolescents.

By focusing on the experiences of school social workers, this research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges involved in recognizing and responding to cyberbullying, as well as the strategies used to support affected adolescents. The findings are intended to inform the development of more effective prevention measures within school systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rapid technological advancements have significantly transformed daily life and continue to shape patterns of social interaction. While digital technologies provide important benefits, including improved access to information, enhanced communication, and expanded educational opportunities, they also introduce new social and psychological risks. One of the most concerning risks is cyberbullying, which has become a pervasive issue among young people, particularly adolescents who are highly active users of social media and digital platforms.

Cyberbullying is commonly defined as the use of digital technologies to send, post, or share harmful content or to engage in aggressive behaviors intended to harm others. Such behaviors may include sending threatening messages, spreading rumors, sharing private information without consent, or publicly humiliating individuals online. Harmful text, images, and videos can be widely disseminated and are often difficult to fully remove once shared (Willard 2007). Menesini and Nocentini (2009) define cyberbullying as intentional and repeated harm inflicted through electronic means, emphasizing that it can occur continuously and extend beyond the physical boundaries of school. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying may occur anonymously, often outside the supervision of adults, and can reach a broad audience, increasing its potential impact (Jorgensen 2020).

Forms of cyberbullying

Research indicates that cyberbullying manifests in multiple forms. *Social exclusion* occurs when individuals are intentionally left out of online groups or activities, which can lead to feelings of isolation and emotional distress (Livazovic–Ham 2019). *Harassment* involves repeatedly sending harmful or offensive messages to a target, often on messaging platforms or social media (Willard 2007). *Cyberstalking* refers to persistent monitoring or threatening behavior directed at an individual through digital means, sometimes accompanied by false accusations or intimidation. *Outing* involves sharing someone's private or sensitive information, including personal images or identity-related information, without consent, often with the intent to embarrass or humiliate. *Trickery* occurs when perpetrators gain a victim's trust to obtain personal information and subsequently share it publicly. The creation of *fake profiles* is another common tactic used to impersonate individuals or spread false information about them (Agustiningsih et al. 2023).

Research across European contexts indicates that cybervictimization among adolescents is widespread and consistently associated with negative psychosocial outcomes. Large multinational surveys such as the *Health Behavior in School-aged Children* (HBSC) study, covering over 279,000 young people across 44 countries, found that approximately 15% of adolescents reported experiencing cyberbullying, with prevalence rates increasing over time and varying by gender and national context (Cosma et al. 2024). National data from Germany similarly indicate a rising trend in cyberbullying among youth aged 11 to 15 years, highlighting its persistence and impact on wellbeing (Fischer–Bilz 2024). Cross-national analyses also show considerable variation in prevalence across European countries, suggesting that cultural, social, and technological factors influence adolescents' exposure to online bullying (OECD 2025).

Meta-analytic evidence further demonstrates a strong association between cyberbullying involvement and adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and reduced psychosocial functioning (Li et al. 2024). In another study conducted in the Slovak Republic with a sample of 1004 pupils, the focus was on cyberbullies, electronic platforms, and the identification of forms of cyberbullying (Niklová–Makúchová 2018). The findings of this study are important as they highlight the diverse ways in which cyberbullying manifests in school contexts, providing a useful framework for identifying similar patterns in other settings. This is particularly relevant for the present study, which seeks to explore how cyberbullying is perceived and addressed by school social workers in Albanian schools. Additional studies have documented the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms and the common forms of victimization experienced by students, including exposure to offensive language and online rumor spreading (Niklová–Makúchová 2018; Fischer–Bilz 2024; Cosma et al. 2024)

Effects of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is associated with a wide range of negative outcomes for adolescents. Research indicates that victims frequently experience increased levels of depression, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, and loneliness (Cowie 2013). In addition to psychological consequences, cyberbullying has been linked to physical symptoms such as sleep disturbances, headaches, and somatic complaints (Li et al. 2024). Victimization may also lead to school avoidance, reduced academic engagement, and, in severe cases, self-harm or suicidal ideation (Kowalski et al. 2014). These findings highlight the significant impact of cyberbullying on adolescents' overall well-being and underscore the importance of preventive and supportive interventions.

Role of school social workers in addressing cyberbullying

School social workers play a central role in addressing bullying and cyberbullying within educational settings due to their expertise in psychosocial assessment, prevention, and intervention. Positioned at the intersection of students' emotional well-being, family dynamics, and school environments, they are key professionals in identifying and responding to cyberbullying incidents. Unlike teachers, whose primary role is instructional, school social workers are specifically trained to address the psychological, social, and behavioral consequences of peer victimization and online aggression (Lai–Ding 2024).

Analyzing school social workers' knowledge and professional perspectives on cyberbullying is particularly important because adolescents often disclose experiences of online victimization to psychosocial staff rather than to teachers or parents. School social workers are frequently responsible for assessing risk, providing emotional support to victims, working with perpetrators to address and modify harmful behaviors, and coordinating interventions with families, school staff, and external agencies. Their understanding of cyberbullying therefore directly influences the effectiveness of school-based prevention and intervention strategies (Ramirez 2013).

Empirical research supports the critical role of school social workers in addressing cyberbullying. Studies conducted in the United States indicate that cyberbullying poses significant psychological risks and may be perceived as more harmful than traditional bullying due to its persistent nature. A national survey found that a large majority of school social workers (93%) emphasized the importance of addressing cyberbullying within school practices (Slovak–Singer 2011).

Teachers also recognize the importance of social workers' expertise in this area. Another study found that teachers identified school social workers' expertise, particularly their knowledge of digital culture and their ability to support students in navigating online challenges (Franco–Miranda 2015).

Together, these findings highlight the importance of school social workers in developing and implementing prevention and intervention strategies. Examining school social workers' perspectives, therefore, provides valuable insight into how cyberbullying is recognized and addressed within schools and informs the development of evidence-based psychosocial responses.

Meanwhile, school plays a central role in preventing and addressing bullying and cyberbullying, as these behaviors are closely connected to the school environment and peer interactions (Smith et al. 2008). As key social institutions, schools are responsible for creating safe and supportive environments in which adolescents feel confident reporting incidents of both online and offline

victimization. The presence of effective school policies, clear reporting procedures, and a culture of openness is essential for facilitating disclosure and enabling early intervention (Marzano–Lizut 2019).

Within the school context, teachers play a critical role in prevention and early identification. Due to their daily contact with students, teachers are often the first to notice behavioral changes such as social withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, or declines in academic performance, which may signal involvement in cyberbullying. Research underscores the importance of equipping teachers with appropriate training to recognize warning signs, respond sensitively to disclosures, and collaborate effectively with psychosocial services, including school social workers and psychologists, when cases are identified (Bruce–Graham 2018).

Parents also represent a crucial component of effective cyberbullying prevention and intervention. The quality of parental communication, emotional availability, and supervision of adolescents' online activities significantly influences young people's vulnerability to cyberbullying. Although many parents perceive their children as safe when using digital devices at home, adolescents may still be exposed to online harassment, peer pressure, and psychological harm. Evidence suggests that limited parental monitoring and weak parent-child communication are associated with an increased risk of adolescents becoming involved in cyberbullying, either as victims or perpetrators (Cowie 2013).

Addressing cyberbullying effectively, therefore, requires close collaboration among schools, teachers, parents, and psychosocial professionals. Open communication and shared responsibility among these actors enhance early detection, coordinated intervention, and the promotion of safer digital behaviors among adolescents (Shehu–Orhani 2015). Within this collaborative framework, school social workers play a coordinating role by linking students, families, teachers, and external support services to ensure a comprehensive and sustainable response to cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying in the Albanian context

Cyberbullying has increasingly emerged as a social and educational concern in Albania; however, systematic research on this phenomenon remains relatively limited compared to that available in many other European countries. While several European states have established comprehensive national monitoring systems and long-term research programs on bullying and cyberbullying (European Commission 2026), empirical evidence in the Albanian context remains fragmented and is largely derived from national surveys, institutional reports, and media analyses (Ismaili et al. 2026).

Existing studies indicate that the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying in Albania is broadly comparable to levels reported in other European countries, although preventive infrastructures, systemic school-based programs, and reporting mechanisms remain less developed. A national study that examined associations between anti-bullying interventions and bullying rates found that higher levels of reported bullying and cyberbullying were linked to increased individual-level intervention activities but lower levels of class-level and whole-school preventive measures, highlighting gaps in systematic prevention approaches (ibid.).

Data from a national survey conducted with the support of the Council of Europe revealed that approximately 19.4% of Albanian students (from grades 4 to 12 in Albania's pre-university education system) were involved in bullying, either as victims, perpetrators, or both, while nearly 15% reported experiencing cyberbullying specifically. Additionally, around 29% of students reported involvement in bullying behaviors at least once or twice a month, indicating that peer aggression remains a persistent concern for schools, parents, teachers, and social services (Dragoti–Ismaili 2017).

In terms of digital access, Albania mirrors broader European trends, with adolescents demonstrating widespread access to smartphones, social media platforms, and internet services. National reports suggest that young people are highly active online, with social networking platforms playing a central role in daily communication. According to a report by the Children's Rights Center of Albania (CRCA), the age group most affected by online violence, cyberbullying, and online hate speech was young adults aged 18–30, followed by adolescents aged 15–17 (Dine–Hazizaj 2023).

A key difference between Albania and many European Union countries lies in the legal and regulatory framework governing online safety and adolescents' internet use. Although Albania has adopted child protection legislation aligned with international human rights standards, specific legal provisions addressing cyberbullying and online harassment among minors remain limited (Dragoti–Ismaili 2017). Shehdula and Karamuço (2025) suggest that criminal law in Albania must take institutional steps to address social media and cyberbullying, starting with the criminalization of insults and threats made online. Meanwhile, several EU Member States have introduced legal instruments for explicitly addressing cyberbullying; for example, Italy's *Law No. 71/2017* defines cyberbullying and mandates preventive measures across educational settings (Italian Republic 2017), and similar provisions exist in Austria and France. In France, *Law No. 299/2022* aims to prevent school bullying and ensure support for victims (French Republic 2022). Moreover, the *European Commission's Action Plan Against Cyberbullying* calls on Member States to strengthen national policies and reporting mechanisms

to protect minors online, indicating an emerging coordinated legal response within the EU (European Commission 2022).

Overall, the Albanian context of cyberbullying shares several similarities with other European settings, including high levels of adolescent internet use, common forms of online aggression, and comparable prevalence patterns. At the same time, important differences remain in terms of research coverage, preventive infrastructures, legal enforcement, and institutional capacity. Understanding these context-specificities is essential for interpreting the findings of the present study and for informing prevention and intervention strategies that are responsive to Albania's social, educational, and regulatory environment.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying in the school context from the perspective of school social workers. Qualitative inquiry was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and professionals' insights regarding complex social phenomena such as cyberbullying. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share detailed accounts of their professional experiences while providing the flexibility to explore emerging themes. This methodological approach facilitated the identification of key issues related to forms of cyberbullying, contributing factors, case management practice, and broader concerns regarding cyberbullying among adolescents in schools.

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how school social workers understand and respond to cyberbullying within school settings. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable when the aim is to explore meanings, interpretations, and professional insights related to socially embedded phenomena (Hammersley 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, as they offer both structure and flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences while ensuring that core research topics are addressed consistently.

The primary objective of this study was to explore school social workers' perspectives on the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of cyberbullying on adolescents, as well as the strategies used to manage and prevent such cases within schools.

Sample

The study sample consisted of 15 school social workers employed in public middle and high schools across Albania. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of professionals with direct experience relevant to the research topic.

School social workers working with adolescents were specially targeted because previous research indicates that cyberbullying is most prevalent during early and middle adolescence (Wang et al. 2009).

The inclusion criteria were: (a) employment as a school social worker in a public middle or high school; (b) a minimum of two years of professional experience; (c) direct experience in managing or supporting adolescents involved in cyberbullying cases; and (d) willingness to participate.

All invited participants facilitated timely data collection and ensured access to a sample with relevant professional expertise.

Demographic characteristics of the sample

Data were collected from public middle and high schools located in both urban and rural areas of Albania. In Albania, the pre-university education system comprises primary education (ages 6–11), lower secondary education (approximately 11–15), and upper secondary education (15–18). Schools are supported by psychosocial services, typically including a psychologist and a social worker, who are responsible for promoting student wellbeing and addressing social and emotional concerns.

The sample included 13 female and 2 male school social workers aged between 27 and 45 years. Participants had 3 to 12 years of professional experience and worked in both middle and high school settings (7 from high schools and 8 from middle schools). All participants reported prior experience in managing cyberbullying cases.

Table 1. *Demographic data of the research sample*

No.	Gender	Age	Years of experience as school social worker	Years of experience with cyberbullying cases	Type of school	Location
1	Female	31	5	5	High school	Urban
2	Female	29	5	5	Middle school	Rural
3	Female	32	6	6	Middle school	Rural
4	Female	35	10	10	High school	Rural
5	Female	40	10	10	High school	Urban
6	Female	38	10	10	High school	Urban
7	Female	37	10	10	High school	Urban
8	Female	39	10	10	High school	Urban
9	Female	31	5	5	Middle school	Rural
10	Male	27	3	3	Middle school	Rural
11	Female	45	12	12	Middle school	Rural
12	Female	27	3	3	High school	Urban
13	Male	29	4	4	High school	Urban
14	Female	38	10	10	High school	Urban
15	Female	33	6	6	Middle school	Urban

Source: Table created by the authors based on the demographic data of interviewers.

Table 1 provides a more detailed explanation of the sample's demographic characteristics. This diversity enabled the inclusion of perspectives across different school levels and socio-geographical contexts.

Data collection

The interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and informed by existing literature on cyberbullying, adolescent well-being, and school-based psychosocial interventions. Key domains included forms of cyberbullying, contributing factors, impacts on adolescents, intervention practices, and challenges faced by professionals. The selected themes reflect key dimensions identified in previous research (Slovak–Singer 2011). This approach ensured alignment between the research questions and participants' lived professional experiences, facilitating the generation of rich and relevant qualitative data (Braun–Clarke 2006). Interviews were developed in an open-ended manner to facilitate in-depth discussion and were reviewed prior to data collection to ensure clarity and relevance.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between March and April 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 25–35 minutes. Interview questions explored the following themes:

- Identification of forms of cyberbullying;
- Contributing social and contextual factors;
- Psychological and emotional impacts on adolescents;
- Intervention strategies used by school social workers; and,
- Challenges and barriers in addressing cyberbullying.

The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate freely while enabling the researcher to probe for clarification when needed.

Data analysis

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun–Clarke (2006). This method was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for exploring patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher conducted both data collection and analysis and had prior training in qualitative research methods. Analysis involved:

1. Familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts;
2. Generation of initial codes;
3. Grouping codes into categories;
4. Development of themes and subthemes;
5. Reviewing and refining themes;
6. Defining and naming themes.

Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data while remaining informed by the study objectives. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to minimize potential bias and ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts.

This analytical approach enabled the identification of key issues related to the impacts of cyberbullying on adolescents and the professional role of school social workers in addressing and preventing such cases.

Ethical issues

The study adhered to established ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the study purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing transcripts and removing identifying information. Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size and focus on public schools may limit the transferability of findings. Second, the study reflects the perspectives of school social workers and does not include the voices of adolescents, meaning findings represent professional interpretations rather than students' lived experiences. Additionally, voluntary participation may introduce self-section bias, as individuals with greater awareness or interest in cyberbullying may have been more likely to participate. Despite these limitations, purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of participants with relevant experience, enhancing the credibility of the findings.

The study nevertheless provides valuable insights into the professional understanding of cyberbullying and suggests implications for policy development, training, and school-based interventions in the Albanian context.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study on the psychological, emotional, physical, and social impacts of cyberbullying among adolescents, as perceived by school social workers. The results are organized according to the main themes and subthemes identified through reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data. These themes reflect participants' professional experiences in addressing cyberbullying within Albanian middle and high schools, including perceptions of its prevalence, forms of cyberbullying, consequences for adolescents, contributing factors, and intervention practices.

Cyberbullying is a growing problem in schools that affects adolescents' mental health, learning, and social relationships. This study explores cyberbullying in Albanian middle and high schools from the perspective of

school social workers. The analysis identified six overarching themes, each comprising several subthemes capturing school social workers' experiences and perspectives regarding the nature of cyberbullying, its underlying causes, its impacts on adolescents, and the strategies used to address and prevent such cases within school contexts. These findings also highlight the role of school-based psychosocial support systems in responding to cyberbullying and supporting affected students.

Theme 1: Prevalence and visibility of cyberbullying

Participants consistently described cyberbullying as a growing and persistent issue among adolescents, closely linked to increased access to digital devices and high levels of engagement with social media platforms. School social workers emphasized that cyberbullying has become embedded in adolescents' daily interactions and frequently extends beyond school boundaries into online environments, making it more visible yet more difficult to monitor. Across interviews, participants identified adolescents aged 15–16 as particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying. This developmental stage was described as a period characterized by identity formation, heightened sensitivity to peer approval, and strong reliance on social media for social connection. Participants noted that the combination of developmental factors and continuous digital exposure increases adolescents' susceptibility to online victimization.

Subtheme 1.1: Cyberbullying as a growing school concern

School social workers reported that cyberbullying has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, reflecting broader trends in digital communication among young people. Participants highlighted that online interactions often mirror or amplify conflicts originating in school settings.

> *Cyberbullying has become more evident in recent years and more widespread in schools.* (Social Worker, 13)

Participants also noted that the persistence of online communication allows harmful interactions to continue outside school hours, contributing to ongoing distress among affected students.

Subtheme 1.2: Age-related vulnerability

Participants frequently identified adolescents aged 15–16 as the group most commonly involved in cyberbullying cases, either as victims or perpetrators. This vulnerability was attributed to developmental processes such as identity exploration, a strong need for peer acceptance, and intensive use of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp.

> *We have encountered many cyberbullying cases, especially among the 15–16 age group.* (Social Worker, 15)

School social workers emphasized that during this stage, online interactions carry significant emotional weight, and negative experiences can have pronounced effects on adolescents' well-being.

Theme 2: Forms of cyberbullying

Participants described cyberbullying as involving multiple forms that are often interconnected and facilitated by digital communication. They emphasized that the online nature of these behaviors increases their reach and persistence, making prevention and intervention more challenging compared to traditional forms of bullying.

Subtheme 2.1: Online harassment and threats

The most frequently reported forms included insults, threats, blackmail, and the exchange of offensive messages through private chats or group conversations. Participants explained that conflicts often begin with verbal aggression online and may escalate over time.

> *They used different forms and methods of blackmail, threats, and screenshots of conversations with photos.* (Social Worker, 10)

> *Based on my experience, most bullying cases start online through insults, threats, and offensive messages.* (Social Worker, 2)

Subtheme 2.2: Non-consensual sharing of images and information

Participants reported frequent incidents involving the circulation of personal images, memes, rumors, or private information without consent. These actions were often accompanied by mocking language, nicknames, or public shaming, intensifying the emotional impact on victims.

> *When information is spread, they often use insults, nicknames, and offensive language to mock others.* (Social Worker, 12)

> *Images are shared without the [consent of the] person [...] who is in that image with the aim to harm him.* (Social Worker, 11)

Subtheme 2.3: Fake profiles and anonymous pages

Another prominent form of cyberbullying involved the creation of fake social media accounts or anonymous pages, used to target peers. Participants noted that anonymity increases the likelihood of harmful behavior and makes it difficult to identify perpetrators or intervene effectively.

> *There are many insults used online because they [perpetrators] think no one will find out who they are.* (Social Worker, 1)

> *There have been cases where anonymous pages were created, allowing anyone to post information or images to hurt a peer.* (Social Worker, 5)

Subtheme 2.4: Social exclusion

Social exclusion emerged as a common strategy, including removing peers from group chats, blocking them, or forming private groups to isolate individuals. Participants described these behaviors as intentional acts aimed at humiliating or marginalizing specific students.

> *I recall a case where a girl was removed from a WhatsApp group [that was] created just to insult her.* (Social Worker, 9)

School social workers emphasized that digital exclusion can reinforce feelings of isolation and negatively affect adolescents' sense of belonging.

Theme 3: Psychological, social, and physical effects

Participants described cyberbullying as having multifaceted impacts on adolescents, affecting their emotional well-being, social functioning, academic engagement, and physical health. School social workers emphasized that the consequences of cyberbullying extend beyond immediate distress, often influencing broader developmental outcomes and daily functioning. Both victims and, in some cases, perpetrators were reported to experience psychological and behavioral difficulties associated with involvement in cyberbullying.

Subtheme 3.1: Emotional and psychological consequences

Analysis of the interviews indicated that school social workers consistently identified a range of emotional and psychological effects associated with cyberbullying. Participants reported that adolescents exposed to cyberbullying frequently experience anxiety, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, emotional distress, and feelings of helplessness. In more severe cases, cyberbullying was associated with self-harm behaviors and suicidal ideation.

> *Victims often suffer from low self-esteem.* (Social Worker, 1)

> *Any form of bullying can have serious consequences; it causes anxiety, depression, and even school avoidance.* (Social Worker, 8)

> *Some bullies even self-harm to avoid trouble with their families or school authorities, and victims have also self-harmed as a result of online bullying.* (Social Worker, 9)

Participants highlighted that the emotional impact can be long-lasting, particularly when online harassment is continuous or publicly visible.

Subtheme 3.2: Academic disengagement

School social workers reported that cyberbullying frequently contributes to declining academic performance, reduced motivation, absenteeism, and increased risk of school dropout. Participants described how emotional distress and fear of peer interactions often lead students to disengage from school activities.

> *These cases can be very serious, sometimes leading students to withdraw, feel uncomfortable coming to school, or even drop out.* (Social Worker, 14)

> *We have several pupils who, due to bullying, whether traditional or online, refuse to come to school and are at risk of dropping out.* (Social Worker, 12)

These findings suggest that cyberbullying can undermine students' educational trajectories by disrupting both attendance and engagement.

Subtheme 3.3: Social withdrawal and physical symptoms

Participants described social withdrawal as a common response among adolescents affected by cyberbullying, including reduced peer interaction, loss of trust, and increased isolation. In addition, school social workers reported a range of psychosomatic symptoms associated with prolonged exposure to cyberbullying, such as sleep disturbance, headaches, and stomachaches. One participant described a case involving a student who experienced physical assault by peers, with the incident recorded and shared online, leading to significant emotional distress and social withdrawal.

> *Despite the efforts, the girl couldn't reintegrate into her class and tended to isolate herself, staying close to just one friend.* (Social Worker, 2)

Participants also noted that some students reported illness or feigned physical symptoms to avoid attending school or encountering peers involved in bullying.

> *Some of the cases involve students claiming to be sick to avoid school.* (Social worker, 4)

> *A pupil might feign illness just to avoid seeing their aggressor.* (Social Worker, 10).

Overall, these findings indicate that although cyberbullying occurs in digital spaces, its effects manifest in tangible psychological and physical outcomes. Participants emphasized the need for holistic interventions that address both emotional well-being and physical health among affected adolescents.

Theme 4: Contributing and risk factors

Participants described cyberbullying as occurring within a broader context of individual, family, and social vulnerabilities that may increase adolescents' susceptibility to involvement, either as victims or perpetrators. School social workers emphasized that adolescents subject to pre-existing adversities, including exposure to domestic violence, emotional neglect, family conflict, intense peer pressure, and mental health difficulties, were often more severely affected by cyberbullying experiences.

Peer dynamics and the desire for social acceptance were also identified as important contributing factors, shaping both the emergence and persistence of cyberbullying behaviors. Participants highlighted that cyberbullying rarely occurs in isolation but is often intertwined with broader relational and environmental influences.

Subtheme 4.1: Family-related vulnerabilities

Family context emerged as a significant factor influencing adolescents' risk of involvement in cyberbullying. Participants identified exposure to domestic violence, emotional neglect, limited parental supervision, poor communication, and family instability as key vulnerabilities. School social workers reported that some adolescents may replicate aggressive behaviors observed within the family environment or may struggle to regulate emotions due to prior traumatic experiences. Participants also noted that limited parental engagement, particularly in monitoring online activities, can increase adolescents' exposure to online risks.

> *Many parents are unaware or uninvolved in monitoring their children's online activity. From our experiences, those exposed to violence at home may become bullies themselves. Teenagers rarely report family violence, often hiding it to protect their families, but their behavior reflects learned aggression.* (Social Worker, 7)

> *Low self-esteem, lack of family communication, emotional neglect, trauma or exposure to violence, can affect their situation [causing them] either to be bullied or becom[e] bullies.* (Social Worker, 5)

Participants also highlighted additional vulnerabilities, including parental divorce – particularly when conflictual – and socioeconomic stressors that limit parental availability.

> *Children from divorced families, especially when the separation is conflict-ridden, are often more vulnerable.* (Social Worker, 12)

> *Children whose parents are overworked or less attentive may spend excessive time online, increasing their exposure to risks.* (Social Worker, 14)

These findings suggest that family environments play an important role in shaping adolescents' coping capacities and online behaviors.

Subtheme 4.2: Influence of social media and digital culture

Participants emphasized that features of digital culture, including exposure to aggressive online content, the normalization of hostile communication, and the influence of online personalities, may contribute to the emergence of cyberbullying behaviors. Social workers reported that adolescents are frequently exposed to violent imagery, toxic online interactions, and social comparison pressures that can reduce empathy and reinforce negative social norms. Participants also noted that online environments sometimes promote public shaming or competitive displays of status, which may normalize or trivialize harmful behavior.

> *From what we've seen in our years of experience, social media plays a massive role in promoting aggressive behavior. Teenagers are constantly exposed to public figures who do not always serve as positive role models.* (Social Worker, 11)

School social workers highlighted that these digital influences interact with peer dynamics, potentially amplifying conflicts and increasing the likelihood of online harassment.

Theme 5: Intervention and prevention strategies

Participants described school social workers as playing a central role in both preventing cyberbullying and supporting adolescents affected by online victimization. Interventions were reported to operate across multiple levels, including individual support, group-based activities, and school-wide initiatives. School social workers emphasized that strategies are tailored to the specific needs of each case, reflecting the complexity of cyberbullying situations.

At the individual level, participants reported working closely with victims to strengthen self-esteem, enhance coping skills, and provide emotional support. empowering them. When working with adolescents who engage in bullying behaviors, social workers described efforts to promote accountability, increase awareness of the consequences of harmful actions, and foster empathy and behavior change.

Group-based approaches were also commonly used, including classroom discussions and psychosocial activities designed to engage students collectively. Participants highlighted that these activities often aim to involve bystanders, promote peer support, and encourage positive social interactions. At the school level, awareness campaigns and preventive initiatives were implemented to foster a supportive environment and encourage help-seeking behaviors among students.

Subtheme 5.1: Individuals and group interventions

School social workers identified individual counseling, group sessions, and classroom-based psychosocial activities as core strategies for addressing cyberbullying. These interventions were described as opportunities to build trust, raise awareness, and support both victims and perpetrators.

Participants emphasized that group activities can help students better understand the impact of their behavior and create spaces where students feel safe seeking support.

> *When I conduct group therapy [sessions] in classrooms, they are effective. Students later come forward for help, and those involved in bullying begin to understand that the person they target needs support.* (Social Worker, 8)

School social workers noted that these interventions contribute to building empathy, improving communication, and strengthening peer relationships.

Subtheme 5.2: School-level and digital reporting mechanisms

Participants highlighted the importance of institutional responses, including collaboration with school staff, external organizations, and digital reporting mechanisms. Several social workers referred to the use of the national platform Isigurt.al, which allows confidential reporting of harmful online content and

supports efforts to remove inappropriate material. Participants reported that this platform provides an additional tool for responding to cyberbullying cases, enabling schools and professionals to take concrete action when incidents occur.

> *We reported the case to Isigurt.al, informed the school, followed the protocols, had the page shut down, and then implemented a recovery plan for the affected adolescent.* (Social Worker, 5)

> *We collaborate with organizations, run awareness events, and report harmful content. Students are informed and engaged through platforms like isigurt.al, where we've successfully closed pages that harmed emotional well-being.* (Social Worker, 1)

Overall, participants emphasized that coordinated responses combining counseling, awareness-raising, and reporting mechanisms are essential for effectively addressing cyberbullying within school communities.

Theme 6: Role of teachers and parents

Participants emphasized that addressing cyberbullying requires coordinated collaboration among school social workers, teachers, safety officers, and families. School social workers described interprofessional collaboration within schools as essential for the timely identification, assessment, and management of cyberbullying cases. This coordinated approach was reported to facilitate information sharing, support early intervention, and strengthen preventive efforts aimed at safeguarding students' well-being.

Teachers were consistently described as frontline actors in adolescents' daily school lives. Participants highlighted that teachers' continuous contact with students places them in a unique position to observe early warning signs of cyberbullying, including changes in behavior, declining academic performance, social exclusion, the spread of rumors, and increased anxiety. School social workers emphasized that teachers often play a crucial role in recognizing concerns and referring students to psychosocial services.

Subtheme 6.1: Teacher collaboration

Teachers were described as key gatekeepers who help identify potential cases of cyberbullying and collaborate closely with psychosocial staff to support

affected students. Participants reported that teachers' engagement and sensitivity to students' emotional needs contribute significantly to early detection and intervention.

> *Teachers who work closely with students play a critical role in their emotional well-being. They are very dedicated and act as bridges between students and the psycho-social services.* (Social Worker, 7)

Participants noted that effective collaboration between teachers and school social workers enhances the school's capacity to respond promptly and comprehensively to cyberbullying incidents.

Subtheme 6.2: Parental involvement as a challenge

While participants recognized parents as essential partners in preventing and addressing cyberbullying, many described parental engagement as a significant challenge. School social workers reported that some parents may underestimate the risks associated with online environments, assume that children are safe when using digital devices at home, or remain unaware of their children's online experiences.

Participants also described instances where parents denied or minimized bullying incidents, particularly when their child was involved as a perpetrator or victim.

> *To tell the truth, we don't have any reported cases from families; no parents have come forward to say that their child is being bullied.* (Social Worker, 2)

School social workers further highlighted that limited communication within families, parental stress, and competing responsibilities may reduce opportunities for adolescents to share concerns. In some cases, children were described as reluctant to disclose difficulties due to fear of being blamed or misunderstood.

> *Family culture also plays a role. If children stay silent at home, they tend to stay silent at school as well, which can harm them.* (Social Worker, 4)

> *We conduct educational sessions to increase parents' awareness.* (Social Worker, 11)

Overall, participants emphasized that strengthening partnerships between schools and families is critical for effective prevention and sustained support for adolescents affected by cyberbullying.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of cyberbullying as a multifaceted phenomenon embedded within adolescents' social, developmental, and digital environments. Participants described cyberbullying as an increasingly visible and persistent issue, reflecting broader trends related to the expansion of digital technologies and adolescents' widespread engagement with social media platforms. School social workers identified multiple forms of cyberbullying, including online harassment, threats, dissemination of images or personal information without consent, the creation of fake profiles, and social exclusion through digital platforms. These patterns are consistent with previous research documenting the evolving and diverse manifestations of cyberbullying across different countries (Agustiningsih et al. 2023).

The study confirms that cyberbullying has significant psychological and emotional consequences for adolescents. Participants reported that involvement in cyberbullying, particularly as a victim, is associated with anxiety, sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and decreased academic engagement. In more severe cases, school social workers reported encountering students experiencing self-harm behaviors and suicidal ideation. These findings align with existing literature highlighting the strong association between cyberbullying and adverse mental health outcomes among young people (Smith et al. 2008; Kowalski et al. 2014; Li et al. 2024).

The findings also highlight the importance of contextual and relational risk factors. School social workers emphasized that adolescents exposed to domestic violence, emotional neglect, family conflict, or limited parental communication may be more vulnerable to involvement in cyberbullying, either as victims or perpetrators. These observations support previous research suggesting that cyberbullying should be understood within broader ecological systems, where family dynamics, peer relationships, and individual vulnerabilities interact to shape behaviors and experiences. The study further suggests that underreporting remains a significant concern, as adolescents may refrain from disclosing cyberbullying due to fear, shame, or lack of trust, which complicates early identification and intervention. In terms of responses, participants described a range of prevention and intervention strategies implemented within

schools, including individual counseling, group-based psychosocial activities, awareness campaigns, and collaboration with teachers and parents. The use of reporting mechanisms such as the national platform isigurt.al illustrates efforts to integrate digital tools into school responses. However, school social workers also reported challenges, particularly related to limited parental engagement and broader social pressures that may hinder effective intervention. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening partnerships between schools and families and promoting shared responsibility in addressing cyberbullying.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights cyberbullying among adolescents as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon with significant social, educational, and psychological implications. The findings indicate that cyberbullying is associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including anxiety, sleep disturbance, social withdrawal, low self-esteem and reduced academic engagement, underscoring its impact on adolescents' overall well-being.

Schools emerged as critical settings for both prevention and response, with teachers playing an important role in early identification and school social workers providing specialized psychosocial support and intervention. The study further emphasizes that the effective management of cyberbullying requires sustained collaboration among schools, families, and broader institutional actors. Participants identified the normalization of harmful online behaviors and limited parental engagement as key challenges that may hinder prevention efforts.

By foregrounding the perspectives of school social workers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how cyberbullying is recognized and addressed within school environments in Albania. The findings underscore the importance of adopting comprehensive, whole-school approaches that combine preventive education, psychosocial support, and coordinated action to foster safer and more supportive digital and social environments for adolescents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings and the perspectives of school social workers, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Introduce anonymous digital reporting tools within schools (QR-code-based reporting forms or school apps), as social workers indicated that fear and stigma prevent students from disclosing cyberbullying incidents. These tools could be monitored directly by school psychosocial staff to ensure timely intervention.
- Develop short, structured intervention modules led by school social workers) e.g., 4–6 session programs targeting emotional regulation and online behavior, rather than general support, to address specific psychological patterns (e.g., withdrawal or anxiety) reported in cyberbullying cases.
- Pilot peer mentor programs in Albanian schools, where trained students act as "digital safety ambassadors," facilitating discussions and identifying early signs of exclusion or online harassment, an approach aligned with participants' emphasis on peer influence.
- Establish mandatory parent-school digital communication protocols (e.g., monthly briefings or WhatsApp/Viber groups moderated by schools), responding directly to the reported gap in parental awareness and involvement in adolescents' online lives.
- Embed cyberbullying–specific scenarios into existing curricula, such as using real-life cases or role-play exercises in civic education classes, instead of general digital literacy content, to reflect the concrete situations described by social workers.

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