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Hate speech

Foreign minors, hate speech and cyberbullying

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In just a few years, internet use has grown impressively. Such a phenomenon was already taking place before, but the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to a large extent. **Alongside the many positive aspects, digital technologies also carry dangers and risks with them, especially for minors**.

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going online can dismantle the traditional protections most societies try to place around children, exposing them to unacceptable content, unacceptable behaviour and potentially dangerous contacts with the outside world.

- Children in a Digital World. Unicef

In this context, **foreign minors make up a particularly vulnerable group**, both as potential victims of serious crimes, such as human trafficking or sexual abuse, and as potential victims of cyberbullying.

Bullying, as much in real life as through digital means, often targets minorities. Moreover, the employment of a register that explicitly equates the migratory phenomenon to a problem, which is often the case with media figures and politicians, puts these youths in an unfavorable socio-cultural context. It also exposes them to hate speech and turns them into potential victims of bullying, both online and offline.

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Cyberbullying

In order to analyse the phenomenon of "cyberbullying" one needs to be cognizant that it has **specific characteristics**, which are peculiar to a behaviour engaged in through the new means of communication: digital tools, chats, and social media.

The Cyberbullying Research Center offers a **simple and concise definition** of this phenomenon.

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Intentional and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.

- Cyberbullying Research Center

A typical feature of cyberbullying is repetitiveness.

Unlike traditional bullying, **a peculiar characteristic of cyberbullying is repetitiveness**. Whereas a boy or girl undergoing acts of bullying at school can still find moments of tranquillity at home or in other contexts, cyberbullying torments its victims regardless of where they are and through a number of different channels. The victim thus finds herself in the difficult position of not being able to find a safe space.

A much more detailed, legal definition has nevertheless been provided by an Italian law in 2017.

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(…) "cyberbullying" means any form of pressure, aggression, harassment, blackmail, offense, vilification, identity theft, any alteration, unlawful acquisition, manipulation and unlawful processing of personal information, carried out through digital means, as well as the distribution of online contents about any family members of the minor, whose intentional and predominant purpose is to isolate a minor or a group of minors by carrying out serious abuses, harmful attacks, or ridicule.

- Law 71/2017

In this case **the law takes up a number of already regulated offenses**. **The novelty is the means of communications and how they can multiply the damages caused by individual cases of bullying**. Furthermore, as emphasised by the Ombudsman for Children, **the lack of a direct confrontation with the victim tends to deresponsibilise the aggressors** who, in many cases, do not even realise that they are committing actual crimes. The impact on those suffering such offenses is real.
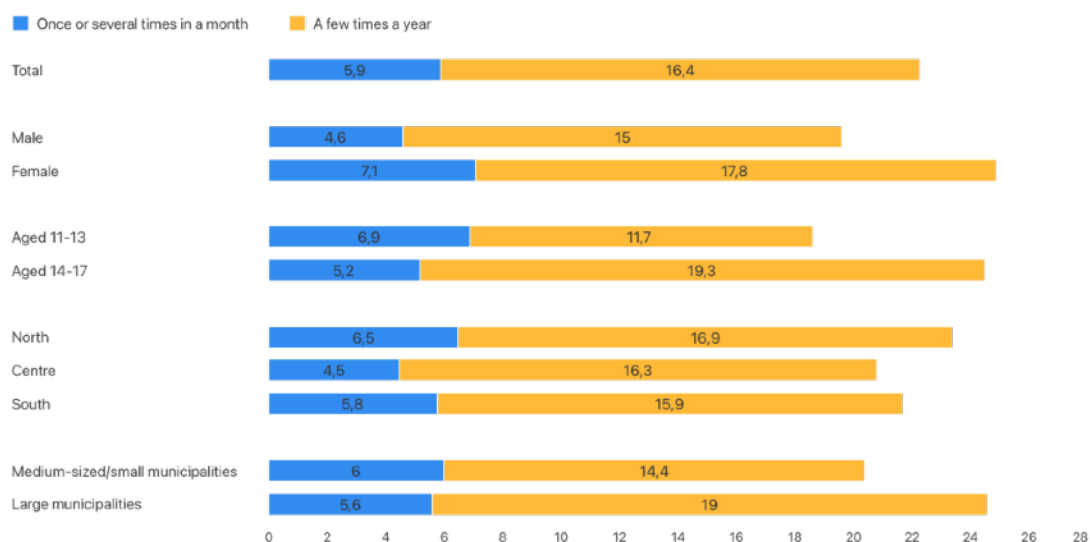
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Even if cyber-violence is cyber, that is, operated through digital technology, the repercussion of it are not virtual, but real.

- Migrant Children and Cyber-violence. The Problem of Hate Speech in Italy and Poland

Among teens, 5.9% experienced bullying once or several times a month

Percentage of teens ages 11 to 17 who have suffered from offensive, disrespectful or violent behaviour through the internet or their cell phones (2014)

	Once or several times in a month	A few times a year
Total	5,9	16,4
Male	4,6	15
Female	7,1	17,8
Aged 11-13	6,9	11,7
Aged 14-17	5,2	19,3
North	6,5	16,9
Centre	4,5	16,3
South	5,8	15,9
Medium-sized/small municipalities	6	14,4
Large municipalities	5,6	19

MUST KNOW: The share of Italian students targeted by bullying is made equivalent to 100. In relation to this figure, we can confront the incidence among students of other nationalities.

FONTE: openpolis - Con i Bambini based on data by Istat

According to the most recent data (2014) released by the national institute of statistics (Istat), **girls fall victim to bullying more often than boys**. As for age, older teens seem to be more often affected than younger ones. On the other hand, **repetitive episodes of cyberbullying seem to be more frequent among teens aged 13 or less**.

In order to address this phenomenon it is thus crucial to pay a lot of attention to the education of teenagers, who need to be guided in learning how to use digital tools, to develop the ability to avoid the threats that they pose. According to an international investigation conducted by Unicef, **a lot of young people learned how to use the internet on their own**.

42%

of the people aged 13 to 24 who were interviewed by Unicef stated they autonomously learned how to use the internet.

Bullying and foreign minors

Episodes of bullying are very common among young people in Italy as much as in other European countries. According to data released by Istat, in 2015 **42.2% of Italian minors had experienced at least one episode of bullying in the month prior to the survey**.
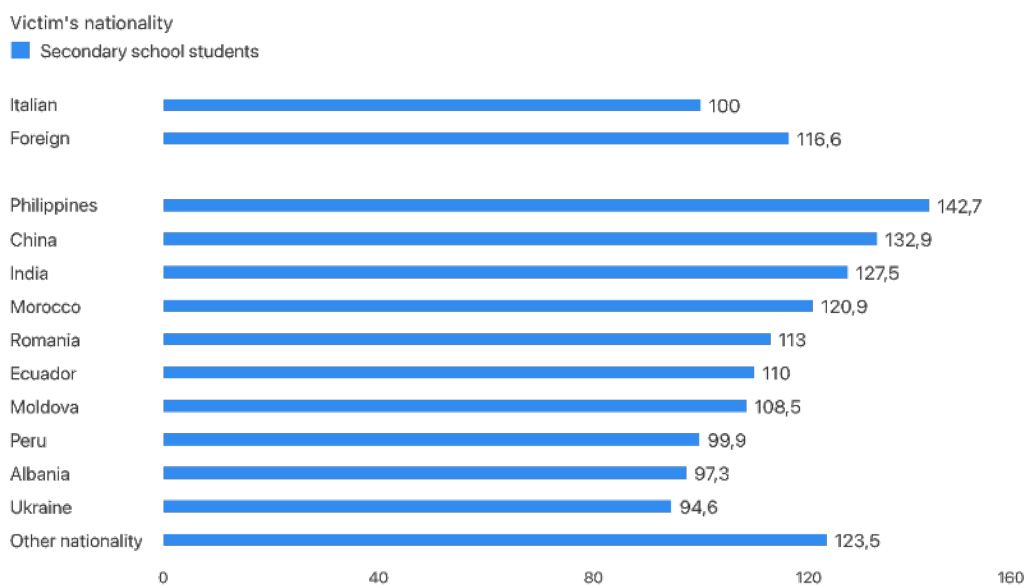
This is a very revealing figure, which is **even higher for foreign students, reaching up to almost 50%**. As mentioned, foreign minors are more exposed to discrimination, hate speech and thus episodes of bullying and cyberbullying.

49.5%

secondary school kids with foreign nationality have experienced at least one episode of bullying in the month prior to the survey (2015).

Foreign students are more often victims of bullying compared to Italians

The higher the number, the larger the share of students with foreign nationality who experienced episodes of bullying, compared to their Italian peers

Victim's nationality
■ Secondary school students

Nationality	Value
Italian	100
Foreign	116,6
Philippines	142,7
China	132,9
India	127,5
Morocco	120,9
Romania	113
Ecuador	110
Moldova	108,5
Peru	99,9
Albania	97,3
Ukraine	94,6
Other nationality	123,5

MUST KNOW: Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying for the indirect nature of digital communication. First of all, there is no face-to-face contact between victim and aggressor. Secondly, a single offense can be repeated even millions of times, thereby causing severe damage to the victim's psychology and self-esteem.

FONTE: openpolis - Con i Bambini based on data by Istat

Some nationalities seem to be particularly exposed to this type of behaviour, like the Philippines, China, and India.

The data thus shows that bullying and cyberbullying harps on preexisting vulnerabilities, on minorities who are already discriminated against, and therefore also on foreign minors.

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Unlike natives, migrant boys and girls have to deal with a double level of integration, offline and online, and struggle every day to be accepted in the real as well as in the virtual world

- Migrant Children and Cyber-violence. The Problem of Hate Speech in Italy and Poland

It is thus necessary to reflect both on cyberbullying as a whole and on discrimination and hate speech against foreigners. That is why we asked a few questions to attorney Anna Prandina, member of the scientific committee of the Italian association of cyberbullying and sexting.

According to your experience, what is the relationship between bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting? And in what way do you try to counter them?

Our association was created and operates with the intention of countering the spread of these kinds of phenomena, which are often intertwined - so much so that it is often hard to perceive a clear border line between them. Such actions, carried out by the subjects themselves or others, are often put in place without a prior evaluation of the possible consequences, which are often extremely serious.

Whereas the connection between bullying and cyberbullying (the way we understand this latter, as a digital expression of the former), sexting is a different matter. We must remember that sexting isn't as such a criminal offense or an activity that can constitute an act of cyberbullying. However in many cases it can become a prodromal fact. It is not uncommon that, after boys and girls send intimate images or videos, other people disseminate the material in order to damage or even just ridicule them. This can have enormous consequences for the person involved, whose intimacy is thereby violated.

What role does digital literacy play, in your opinion, in countering phenomena such as cyberbullying?

In order to counter the phenomena we are talking about, I would say it is necessary to promote digital literacy through sensitisation and education campaigns aimed towards

students, teachers, and parents. A lot could and should be done about the latter, in particular. As a matter of fact, families are often not aware of which and how many dangers loom over their children and how complicated and widespread cyberbullying is.

To this end, our association is promoting nationwide educational encounters aimed towards parents as well as, obviously, educators and, in a different form, towards minors. These meetings aim to offer information and advice that can help achieve psychological and relational wellbeing, as well as increase awareness by getting to know the tools (including the legal ones) available to deal with the different situations that can emerge.

Do you think there is a relationship between hate speech in general and cyberbullying in particular?

Hate speech is normally directed, often through means of communication, towards individuals or whole segments of the population. We can thus say that it is a multi-offensive act.

In contemporary societies, diversity is something we should cherish, not a reason to discriminate.

Indeed, aside from infringing the rights and interests of the individual victim, these expressions also aim to offend specific groups. This means that they also cause the infringement of general interests, especially in a social context like the contemporary one, where diversity is a value that we should preserve, rather than a reason to discriminate against someone.

Hate speech isn't just about children - in that case it can be a form of cyberbullying - but also about adults. When directed against people belonging to a school or a specific group of younger people, it can certainly be considered as a component of the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying. However, the consequences can also harm other subjects that belong to the minority or population segment (often groups such as women, homosexuals, migrants, differently abled people,…) that the victim belongs to.

According to the data, foreign kids are more often victims of bullying. Do you believe this entails that there is a connection with hate speech against foreigners both online and offline?

It would be simplistic to assert that there is a casual nexus between bullying and cyberbullying against foreign minors on the one hand and online hate speech against immigrants on the other. We can certainly identify a climate of hostility and fear against what is perceived as "other".

For over a decade now, in Italy, but also in Europe in general, immigration has been one of the most fiercely discussed topics in the political debate and online. Often, when talking about this phenomenon, fear and suspicion against foreigners are fuelled, also by emphasising the supposed conflict and competition in the access to the labour market and to social security resources.

That is why an emotional kind of literacy can help prevent and counter these feelings among younger people and certainly also mitigate the episodes of bullying and cyberbullying linked to these matters. I will add that when we talk about hate speech, as much as when we approach different but closely related phenomena such as fake news or denialism, it isn't always easy to set the boundary between criminal liability and freedom of expression which, according to some, should be considered legit even in extreme forms.

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