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JUVENILE OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE

The authors are focused on the issue of digital violence among juveniles: factors, main characteristics, and responses to it. The paper is primarily based on the latest research results of judicial practice (of the Higher Court in Belgrade and the Higher Prosecution Office in Belgrade – Special Department for High-Tech Crime), data gathered by questionnaires filled out by juveniles from one secondary school in Belgrade, and other available studies on the topic. Some recommendations regarding the social response to digital violence among juveniles were made, having in mind General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Keywords: juvenile offenders/victims, digital violence, social media/networks

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1. Introduction

The general development of education, the availability of science and culture, and the development of humanity, in general, had two significant moments: the first one is Gutenberg's invention of printing machines, and the second one is like the Big Bang - the development of digitalization. The advantage of digitizing the achievements of knowledge, science, and art is indisputable: availability of real, but also macro and micro spaces and processes; direct transmission of all information and events (even at the moment when they happen), and meeting people from far away and communicating with those whose language we do not know, but with whom we talk through digital translators. Undoubtedly, social media have enormous benefits for the development of everyone, especially for children as it is also emphasized in General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

Yet this new, digital world doesn't offer just benefits and advantages. The rules and regulations governing the digital world are still modest in relation to such a complex structure. In addition to useful content, even crime has "moved" to the digital environment, finding various opportunities to flourish. It is not always easy to determine whether the information in social media hides "devils in disguise" —false people and organizations, whether fake news is being presented, and whether malicious influences are exerted on consumers for the purpose of abuse. Statistics show that even skilled individuals and professional organizations can become victims of digital (high-tech) crime (73 Important Cybercrime Statistics, 2023). The following data (from July 2022) could be used as an illustration of the vast exposure to victimization: 63.1% of the world's population uses the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2023)¹ and more than half of Internet users (59%) are on social networks (Petrosyan, 2022). According to UNICEF data: one-third of Internet users are children (UNICEF, 2017), and as they grow older, their time online increases (Popadić et al., 2016: 58; Kuzmanović et al., 2019: 14).

A comparison between the proportion of young people and the proportion of the whole adult population engaged in online activities across the EU in 2021 shows that the largest difference between these two groups was recorded for participating in social networks (Eurostat, 2022). The data of the European survey "EU kids online 2020" is of great concern as they indicate that Serbia is among

¹ Serbia is a country with a higher number of Internet users than the average (above 70%). Alphabetical List of Countries - Internet Indicators - ISO3316 (internetworldstats.com), accessed on 15. 1. 2023.

the leading in the number of children under the age of 13 on social networks. Namely, the daily use of social networking sites among 12- to 14-year-olds varies between 10% (Finland) and 86% (Serbia and Russia). Also, the number of 15- to 16-year-olds who use social networking sites daily varies between 21% in Finland and 93% -in the Czech Republic and Serbia (Smahel et. al., 2020: 30).

Are children in the digital world like Alice in Wonderland? Once they enter that world of wonders, can they control further events, and resist all lures and challenges? Are they really free to choose? Can they refuse what they don't want? Can they be safe or free to get out when they want to, without consequences? The child's specific status makes her/him very vulnerable and exposed to various risks and victimization (or even criminalization) in the digital world. It is a huge task to protect children in the digital environment, to prevent the possibility of their victimization, and to help rehabilitate those who have already become victims. It is also necessary to prevent children from becoming bullies (or perpetrators of other offenses, e.g. offenses against the security of computer data) through digital media, as they offer great opportunities for those who would like to harm others in a swift, repetitive, impersonal way, from a very comfortable position.

The aim of this paper is to determine some of the phenomena related to the criminal aspect of the activities of juveniles on various social networks, to determine some of the risks, as well as the factors of child protection on the Internet and thus give guidance to the development of prevention programs. The starting point was the experience in criminal cases of the Higher Court in Belgrade (cases in which minors were victimized or committed criminal offenses²), whether criminal offenses were already defined as high-tech crime or digital media were among the means for committing criminal offenses. The experience of the Deputy Higher Public Prosecutor Mr. Aleksandar Momčilović (Department for the High Tech Crime of the Higher Public Prosecution Office in Belgrade) was of great importance.

2. Juvenile offenders and victims through digital media

Bullying of children and young people through digital/social media is very common within their peer communication. It is reflected most often in insulting

2 A juvenile offender is a person who at the time of commission of the criminal offence has attained fourteen years of age and has not attained eighteen years of age (Article 3, Paragraph 1 of the Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Law Protection of Juveniles, Official Gazette RS, No. 85/2005).

and disparagement of one of the peers³. Although bullies “troll” more of their peers, they will more often take these actions continuously towards those who are most vulnerable and susceptible to the position of “victim”. As a rule (in fear of becoming targets of such abuse themselves), the bully is joined by others in the group, and the abuse takes the form of a public lynch. Very often, from violence on social networks, they switch to a “traditional” form of violence (psychological, physical, or sexual violence in the “real world”).

In the practice of the Higher Court in Belgrade, it could be noticed in cases prosecuted for crimes whose qualifications do not indicate the abuse through digital media (e.g. light/serious bodily injury, attempted murder, etc.) that the criminal offense was preceded by digital abuse of the victim. This is also the case with crimes such as endangering security, stalking, sexual harassment... behind which digital bullying is often hidden. There have also been cases in which a juvenile, after prolonged exposure to abuse through digital media/social networks, committed a criminal offense against the person (also a minor) who harassed, insulted, belittled him, or asked others in the group to “block” him in personal communication, or in front of everyone in the group - to exclude him from the group. Some researchers have determined the reverse sequence of events – “traditional” forms of violence were preceded by digital violence (Popadić, Kuzmanović, 2013: 8), but rarely – digital violence is the only form of violence (Modecki, 2014 according to Aleksić Hil, Kalanj, 2018: 63). Undoubtedly, there is a strong link between two forms of violence, supplementing or inducing each other.

In addition to these phenomena, cases of classic crimes in the field of high-tech crime have been recorded. Two cases are particularly interesting.

Case 1:

A seventeen-year-old boy, in company with an adult, committed the criminal offense of Computer Fraud under Article 301, paragraph 1, of the Criminal Code (hereinafter: CC)⁴. In a period of about 20 days, he obtained data on payment cards from the USA, obtaining them through an SQL exploit program that searches for unprotected databases of online customers, and then used them for payment when buying mobile phones, computers, and computer equipment, worth

3 More about children and hate speech on social networks: Pavlović (2022); Kubiček, Marković (2022).

4 Criminal Code, Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, Nos. 85/05 (Corrigendum), 107/05 (Corrigendum), 72/09, 111/09, 121/12, 104/13, 108/14, 94/16 and 35/19.

more than 215,000 dinars. The minor designed the program himself and carried out computer fraud, registering under an assumed name.

Case 2:

A young adult, a first-year student of the Faculty of Mathematics, was tried before the Higher Court in Belgrade for the criminal offense of Creating, Obtaining, and Providing another Person with Means for Committing Criminal Offenses against the Security of Computer Data (Article 304a, paragraph 1 of the CC). It was established that the young adult committed the offense even before the age of eighteen. He (in the second grade of high school) made and sold computer programs for the purpose of committing criminal offenses against the security of computer data, by creating on his PC computer programs - “cryptors” that serve to hide a computer virus from antivirus programs, so that it would not be detected and deleted, i.e., to provide computer viruses and other malicious programs with an additional layer of protection, allowing the destruction, alteration, and theft of other people’s data. The programs are intended for the commission of criminal offenses of Computer Sabotage (Article 299 of the CC), Creating and Introducing of Computer Viruses (Article 300 of the CC) and Unauthorised Access to Computer, Computer Network or Electronic Data Processing (Article 302 of the CC). He sold these programs through hacker forums “Darkode” and “Exploit.im”.

Minors appeared before the juvenile council of the Higher Court in Belgrade for the purpose of committing the criminal offense of Showing, Procuring and Possessing Pornographic Material and Minor Person Pornography (Article 185 of the CC)⁵. In some cases, it was about recording voluntary sexual relations with a minor (most often a girl) and posting such videos on the Internet, but there was also recording and distributing violent sexual intercourse, and the proceedings were also conducted for the criminal offenses of Rape (Article 194 of the CC), Sexual Intercourse with a Child (Article 180 of the CC) or Prohibited Sexual Acts (Article 182 of the CC) with a minor as a victim. The above-mentioned is in accordance with UNICEF data showing that about 80% of children in 25 countries report feeling in danger of sexual abuse or exploitation online. Indeed, the most alarming is the threat of online sexual exploitation and abuse of children, as it has never been easier for child sex offenders to contact their potential victims, share imagery, and encourage others to commit offenses (UNICEF, 2022).

5 More about this offense: Škulić, 2022.

3. Minor victims of digital violence and crimes related to digital media

Mr. Aleksandar Momčilović, Deputy Higher Public Prosecutor (Department for the High Tech Crime of the Higher Public Prosecution Office in Belgrade), informed the authors that although the Special Department for the High-Tech Crime does not have the exact number of minor victims, in almost all criminal offenses of Showing, Procuring and Possessing Pornographic Material and Minor Person Pornography (Article 185 of the CC) and Abuse of Computer Networks or other Technical Means of Communication for Committing Criminal Offenses against Sexual Freedom of the Minor (Article 185b of the CC)⁶ the number of registered minor victims was between five and ten victims. The number of victims is likely significantly higher, but they were either undetected or the parents (and minor victims) were unwilling to participate in the criminal proceedings, denying their children had anything to do with the cases in question.

Table 1 provides data for the last five years on the number of cases of criminal charges for the aforementioned criminal offenses, filed in the Register of Known (Adult) Perpetrators (Special Department for High-Tech Crime).

Table 1: *Criminal charges (Art. 185 and Art. 185b of the CC: 2017 - 2021*

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Art. 185	29	28	24	40	107
Art 185 b	4	4	-	-	-

According to Mr. Momčilović, these data represent only 10% of the aforementioned criminal offenses committed by unknown adult perpetrators.

Based on his experience, but also on the direct experience of the co-author - Juvenile Justice Counsellor of the Higher Court in Belgrade (who is directly involved in the preparation and support of juvenile victims and witnesses) it can be concluded that minor victims of these crimes are most often children vulnerable due to belonging to marginalized groups, children in residential accommodation in social protection institutions, but also children who, due to family and other circumstances, exhibit inappropriate behaviour, whether it is in the form of social isolation, behavioural problems, running away from home, alcohol and drug abuse or sexual and promiscuous behaviour. Most of them are girls⁷.

⁶ More about this offense: Jovašević, 2022.

⁷ UNICEF survey shows the same. More in: UNICEF (2021) *Ending Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, p. 13. See also: Csepregi, Kovács (2022).

Juvenile victims of criminal offenses committed using digital media, in addition to the aforementioned, take part in the proceedings conducted against adult perpetrators (and minors, too) such as: Rape (Article 178 of the CC), Sexual Intercourse with a Child (Article 180 of the CC), Endangerment of Safety (Article 138 of the CC), Sexual Harassment (Article 182a of the CC), Stalking (Article 138a of the CC), Coercion (Article 135 of the CC), Blackmail (Article 215 of the CC).

Minors often become victims of these crimes, mostly girls who do not come solely from the category of vulnerable groups. The following cases are good examples.

Case 3:

A 16-year-old girl accepts a Facebook friendship with a NN person. He was in a group with a friend of hers from a former elementary school. The usual correspondence lasts for several weeks. He says he's a year older than her. He lives in a town in western Serbia. He writes about school problems, his family, his friends, and the music he listens to. They exchanged photos. The young man liked her photos. He also tells her that he likes her. They start a virtual emotional relationship.

They exchanged photos in the swimsuits. He tells her that she is very handsome in a swimsuit and that he would like to see her naked. After a little persuasion, she photographed herself naked and sent a picture to him. He sends her a video of his genitals and masturbation. After that, she hasn't called him back for a few days. She said she was frightened and ashamed of their communication.

A classmate from the current class informs her that NN contacted her and asked for her (victim's) phone number. He said that if she didn't hear from him, he would send some of her photos to everyone in the group on Facebook.

Frightened, the girl reports the event. He tells her that no one can leave him unpunished. He orders her to come to his city to make love. She rejects him. He sends a video in which he vividly linked her nude photo to a video of a girl masturbating. He threatens to send her parents a video if she doesn't come to his town.

She's freaked out. She doesn't go to school for a few days, supposedly because of a headache. He begs NN not to do that and that he will be paid to delete the recording.

He gives her a bank-account number (it will later be determined that it is his own brother's account), and she pays him 24,000 dinars (the 200 euros she received for her birthday). After two weeks, he asks either to come or to pay him

again. The girl says she doesn't have money and will pay him when she collects it. He sends a nude photo of her to a friend and again threatens to send the arranged footage to her parents.

The juvenile goes to the police, reports NN, and asks the police not to insist that her parents be involved.

A swift response from the police, the high-tech crime department, revealed a 44-year-old man who had impersonated Facebook profiles as a 17-year-old boy. The criminal proceedings conducted for the criminal offenses of Coercion (Article 135 of the CC) and Blackmail (Article 215 of the CC), included the deletion of his account, as well as all contents he possessed.

Case 4:

A 26-year-old young man is on a new trial for the criminal offense of Endangering Security (Article 138 paragraph 1 of the CC), and Sexual Harassment (Article 182 paragraph 2 of the CC). He was previously sentenced to one year in prison for the same offense (waiting for the execution). A minor and her sister (also a minor), and three minor girlfriends were victims.

By impersonating his name and introducing himself as an 18-year-old boy through one of the multiple accounts he opened on Instagram, he approached a 16-year-old girl and asked if she could support him to boost the popularity of his profile. She advised him to change his profile photo first. After that, he tells her that it's important to him in order to keep his girlfriend. He sends photos of him and his alleged girlfriend. Benign communication lasts for some time. As the young man was extremely pushy and wrote continuously, day and night, an incredibly large number of messages, the girl blocked his account.

He contacted her from a new account, stating that he lived near her (provided her exact address), that he had already been "imprisoned" for raping a 12-year-old girl, and that he intended to do the same to her. A number of gruesome and vulgar threats followed, accompanied by detailed information about the school she attends, where she goes out, and whom she hangs out with.

At the same time, threats were made against her minor sister and her close friends (also minors).

After the girls told everything to their parents, the case was reported to the police. The defendant was taken into custody. All minors were questioned from a separate room, except for the sister who reached the age of 18. They all wanted to see what the defendant looked like, so they could recognize him if he was around them because they were seriously afraid of him.

It was determined that the defendant was suffering from paranoid psychosis. He was sentenced to compulsory psychiatric treatment and confinement in a medical institution and two years and four months in prison.

In both of these cases, people who met minors online were in virtual disguise. It was misrepresentation with the intentional aim of abusing another (minor) person.

How dangerous the occurrence of misrepresentation on social networks is, the so-called “catfishing” in some cases even with the help of serious visual scams such as “deepfake” can be seen in the recent past, when the victims became the mayors of Vienna, Berlin, and Madrid. Mayors, backed by teams of serious experts, negotiated and scheduled public talks, which were supposed to take place in front of television cameras, with a virtual person who identified himself as Vitali Klitschko, mayor of Kiev (Breaking Latest News, 2022, June 25).

One can only guess how many minors are threatened by this phenomenon.

4. Secondary school students as bullies and victims on social networks: research results

Based on the practice of the Higher Court and the Special Department (of the Higher Public Prosecution Office) for the High-Tech Crime in Belgrade and the observed (risky) behaviours of children on social networks, a survey was made to check whether these behaviours are common in the general population of underage adolescents. Students of the second, third, and fourth grades of one high school in Belgrade were surveyed (87 students).

Table 2 shows the structure of the sample by sex and age.

Table 2: *Sample structure by sex and age*

Age	15 years	16 years	17 years	18 years	Total
Girls	8	13	23	9	53
Boys	2	13	16	3	34
Total	10	26	39	12	87

The survey was conducted in May 2022, and some of the students reached the age of 18. Although they reached adulthood, their completed questionnaires are processed, because, essentially, their attitude towards the topic has not changed significantly compared to the period before adulthood.

4.1. The most commonly used social networks and applications for networking

The survey tried to determine on which platforms students most often make contacts with others, i.e. on which digital social networks they have “their own group” (Table 3). It is clear that there was no answer indicating the non-use of some platform for networking. The same results derived from other surveys (Popadić et al., 2016; Macanović, Stojanović, 2022: 112), while some show that even children aged 10 to 14 have their own profile on social networks (72,9% of primary school students (Kostić, Ranaldi, 2022: 90)).

It should be worth emphasizing that Serbia is among the leading countries in Europe in the number of children on social networks: the daily use of social networking sites among 12- to 14-year-olds varies between 10% (Finland) and 86% in Serbia. The number of 15- to 16-year-olds who use social networking sites daily is higher - in Serbia: 93%, in Finland: 21% (Smahel et al., 2020: 30).

Table 3: *The most commonly used social networks and applications*

Network/ Application	Girls 53 (100, 00%)	Boys 34 (100%)	Total 87 (100%)
Instagram	36 (29 - only this network) 67,92%	28 (23 - only this network) 82,35%	64 (73,56%)
WhatsApp	13 (only this network) 24,07%	6 (3 only this network) 17,65%	19 (21,84%)
TikTok	6 (5 only this network) 1,31%	3 (1 only this network) 8,82%	9 (10,43%)
Snapchat	3 (only this network) 5,66%	1 (2,94%)	4 (4,60%)
Viber		1 (only this network) (2,94%)	1 (1,15%)
Facebook	1 (1,89%)		1 (1,15%)
Twitter		1 (2,94%)	1 (1,15%)
Twitch		1 (2,94%)	1 (1,15%)
Discord	1 (1,89%)		1 (1,15%)
Pinterest	1 (1,89%)		1 (1,15%)
YouDude		1 (only this network) (2,94%)	1 (1,15%)

The most commonly used social network is Instagram, which is the most popular social network among younger children in Serbia (Kostić, Ranaldi, 2022: 93). Through this platform, 73,56% of total respondents realize their social net-

working (67,92% of girls and 82,35% of boys). WhatsApp (with a total of 21.84%) is followed by TikTok with 10.43% and Snapchat with 4.60%, while other networks/applications are used very sporadically.

The answers related to the social group on the platform are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Number of social groups, group size and knowledge of group members

	Number of social groups	Number of group members*	Do they know each other in the group?*		
			All members are known	Most of them are known	Most of them are unknown
Girls 53	Number of social groups	14 (28%) up to 5 members 15 (30%) 6-10 2 (4%) 11-20 19 (38%) more than 20	40 (80% of 50 girls who are in group/s)	10 (20%)	–
Boys 34	Number of social groups	12(38,71%) up to 5 members 9(29,03%) 6-10 10(32,26%) more then 20	21 (67,74% of 31 boys who are in group/s)	10 (32,2%)	–

* comparisons are possible only in relation to those who are in one or more groups (50 girls and 31 boys).

Three girls (5,66% of all girls surveyed) and three young men (8.82% of all boys surveyed) crossed out group-related questions with the comment that they were “not in the group”.

The largest number of respondents communicate within three to six groups on social networks (16 girls, i.e. 30,19%, and 18 young men, i.e. 52,94%). Specifically, girls expressed a preference to have one (14 of them, i.e. 26,41%) or two (12, i.e. 22,64%) groups on digital networks (totalling 49,05%), while young men were inclined to have communication within more than seven groups (10 of them, i.e. 29,41%).

The percentage of those who are most often in very small groups (up to 5 members) was 28% of girls, and 38.71% of boys; in group/s counted more than 20 members was 38% of girls, i.e. 19 girls and 32.26%, i.e. 10 young men.

Although none of the respondents stated that he/she “doesn’t know the majority of the members” of the group or groups, many of them (ten girls, i.e. 20% and ten boys, i.e. 32,26%) do not know all members of the group, thus exposing themselves to risky communication and victimization.

4.2. Intragroup communication

Table 5 and Table 6 present answers to two important questions concerning the willingness to openly exchange personal experiences, attitudes, and thoughts in the group. On the one hand, this is a very important issue of freedom and respect for the rights and needs of all members of the group (certainly if communication is not violent and discriminatory for some). On the other hand, from a safety perspective, especially considering that 20% of girls and 32,26% of young men do not know all members of their groups and that they are often in large groups (38% of girls and 32,26% of young men), exposure to abuse on the social networks is increasing. It is interesting to point out that in the oldest age group, when the Internet is used most often generally, girls spend more time on the Internet than boys (Popadić et al., 2016: 58), thus making themselves more vulnerable and susceptible to risks and abuse.

Table 5: *Are you willing to share personal experiences on social networks?*

	Often	Sometimes	Never
Girls	9 (16,98%)	36 (67,92%)	8 (15,09%)
Boys	0	24 (70,59%)	10 (29,41%)

Nearly 30% of young men and 15% of girls never share experiences from their personal lives. About 17% of girls often share personal experiences with other members of a digital group. The largest number of both girls and boys (about 70%) occasionally share online experiences from their personal lives.

Table 6: *Are you willing to openly express your attitudes and reflections on social networks?*

	Often	Sometimes	Never
Girls	8 (15,09%)	24 (42,28%)	21 (39,62%)
Boys	6 (17,65%)	15 (44,12%)	13 (38,23%)

When it comes to attitudes and reflections, the distribution of answers is more fragmented. From the point of view of freedom of speech, it is concerning that almost 40% of both girls and young men never express their attitudes and thoughts. This can be the result of the heterogeneity of groups, the high fragmentation of the society in which we live, the desire to avoid conflicts, the lack of communication skills, and personal insecurity and fear of possible consequences.

But, this state of affairs, observed only for itself, still does not speak of safe behaviour on the Internet.

The answers to questions related to digital communication with strangers are presented in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7: *How often do you communicate with people you don't know personally?*

	Often	Sometimes	Never
Girls	5 (9,43%)	21 (39,62%)	27(50,94%)
Boys	7 (20,59%)	16(47,06%)	11(32,35%)

When it comes to communicating with strangers, young men have shown significant openness to girls: 20,59% of them often communicate with strangers, and 47,06% do so occasionally. More than half of girls say they never communicate on social networks with people they don't know personally. However, about 10% of girls communicate frequently with people they don't know, and nearly 40% do that occasionally.

There is a similar distribution of answers to the question of whether respondents easily accept acquaintances of their acquaintances and communicate with them about personal matters.

Table 8: *Do you easily accept acquaintances of your acquaintances and communicate with them about personal matters?*

	Often	Sometimes	Never
Girls	5 (9,43%)	22 (41,51%)	26(49,06)
Boys	6 (17,65%)	17 (50,00%)	11(32,35%)

4.3. Encounters with strangers, self-protection, and response to inconveniences

Risky behaviours, from the point of view of possible victimization, even by criminal offense, are certainly most pronounced in the fact that people, especially young people, and children, arrange encounters with strangers they have met on the Internet. In Tables 9 and 10, answers to questions related to the occurrence of direct dating with people known through social networks are presented.

Table 9: *Have you arranged an encounter with any of the unknown persons without the presence of people close to you?*

	Yes	No
Girls	24 (45,28%)	29
Boys	13 (38,25%)	21

Table 10: *How often does it happen?*

	Often	Sometimes	Never
Girls	0	24	29
Boys	3	10	21

A large number of young people occasionally had direct encounters with people they do not know personally, but whom they know virtually, through social networks (45,28% of surveyed girls and 38,25% of young men (one quarter of whom often made such contacts, and the rest of them - occasionally).

The largest number of respondents (when choosing a place to see a “virtual friend”) did not emphasize the aspect of personal safety, which does not have to be objective. It is possible that the cause is the discomfort to accept, at first, and then communicating personal fears and caution in planning and realizing such encounters. Most of the girls and young men point out that they jointly agree on the choice of place and time with a virtual acquaintance, taking into account when both are free, that the place is “halfway” or that it is close to them, and “that it is not boring”. Mostly, the place of encounter is familiar to them (café, park, etc.) or it is a cultural, entertainment, or sports facility, and meetings are arranged at the time of the concert, matches... A few girls have shown that when choosing a place to meet, they choose a place close to their home, where there are a lot of people, and some of them plan to meet in such a way that they are in close proximity to members of their peer group, pointing to the importance of personal safety.

To the question “Did you have any inconveniences, and if so, which?” 23 girls answered positively. Only two girls gave an incomplete answer to the question about inconveniences. In one case, “a friend of a friend was too pushy.” In the second, the girl “experienced tremendous discomfort, and her self-confidence for some things was shattered.” They did not specify in more detail what kind of harassment happened.

The girls who experienced some kind of harassment did not report it, but they talked about it with their friends.

The young men had no inconveniences from such encounters.

Table 11: *Experienced inconveniences when meeting a virtual acquaintance*

	Yes	No
Girls (24 realized such encounters)	23 (95,83%)	1
Boys (13 realized such encounters)	0	13

All respondents (both girls and boys) state that if they were harassed by a “virtual acquaintance”, they would talk about it with parents, friends, girlfriend/boyfriend, and psychologist. No one mentioned the National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet, and no one has even heard about it⁸. E. Beković (from the Centre) said that there were 6304 reports on digital violence (since the foundation of the Centre in February 2017), assuming that the number of (unreported) cases must be much larger. Also, she told that the most frequent are cases of hate speech, and bullying by peers, as well as the fact that parents must be more educated and engaged in securing the safety of their own children on the Internet⁹.

4.4 Prevalence of digital violence and response to it

Nearly 40% of girls surveyed say they have been harassed and subjected to violence on social networks or via text messages, e-mails, etc. Young men in almost twice as small numbers (20,59%) said they had such experiences (Table 12). Girls were more often cyber harassed than boys, which is in line with most studies (Fridh et al., 2015).

Table 12: *Victims of harassment/violence on social networks, via sms, e-mails...*

	Yes	No
Girls	21 (39,62 %)	32
Boys	7 (20,59 %)	27

Boys were most often harassed and exposed to violence on digital networks by peers, and girls by persons they knew, but who did not belong to their peer group (neighbours, relatives, friends of their friends...). The five girls said they suffered violence from different people (peers, acquaintances, and unknown persons). Table 13 provides data on persons who harassed minors.

8 National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet was established in 2017, February 27 (based on the Regulation on the safety and protection of children in the use of information and communication technologies, Official Gazette of the RS, No. 61/16).

9 TV Prva, Morning: Child Safety on the Internet (guest: Emina Beković, National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet) 8. 2. 2023.

Table 13: *Who are the persons who have harassed minors?*

	Peer	Another known person	Unknown person
Girls	8	14	10
Boys	4	1	2

The girls stated that they suffered harassment reflected in the public ridicule of their appearance, their attitudes, friends, and family members, the disclosure of their privacy, posting their pictures and images without permission (which they are ashamed of), belittling and verbal aggression, obscenity, giving pejorative and vulgar nicknames, but also being subjected to open sexual harassment, sending explicit images and videos, threats, and intimidation. They suffered continuous and frequent, even aggressive texting and emailing, and harassment over the phone and social networks. There were also allegations that they experienced “breaking into Instagram and impersonating a close person, then asking very intimate questions.”

The young men said they experienced insults and disparagement, as well as psychological and sexual harassment. They did not specify in more detail the ways in which it was done. One of the young men said he was a “victim of a DDoS attack”.

Most of the girls did not report cyberbullying. Only five girls who suffered serious threats and sexual violence on social media reported violence. Neither young man reported harassment in digital networking. Not even the young man who claimed to have been a victim of DDoS and probably suffered material damage as well. Table 13 presents the number of reported instances of digital harassment.

Table 14: *Who has reported digital harassment?*

	Yes	No
Girls	5	16
Boys	0	7

The five girls who reported harassment via social media did so by reporting it to their parents and one of them to the police (sexual harassment by an unknown). The answers for not reporting are: “I can solve the problem on my own (by blocking contact, and making the bully suffer in the same way)”; “I don’t want to upset my family”; “I don’t want to involve the police”; “He’s a close person to me and I wanted to keep it between us”; “I had no one to report to.” “I don’t want to make any more trouble and draw others in”; “I don’t want any further contact with that (unknown) person”.

Most of the respondents stated that if they decided to report violence on social networks, they would do so by talking to their parents, friends, older friends, a psychologist, a pedagogue, a classmate, a teacher, and perhaps if the threats were serious, the police.

The answers to the question “If you know a peer who has been uncomfortable on a social network or otherwise through digital media, what was it about and did that person turn for help?” are also interesting. To this question, seven responded positively:

“My friend had a problem.”

“My friend had a problem, but she didn’t turn to anyone for help.”

“My friend’s profile was hacked, and she was bullied by an ex-boyfriend. She didn’t turn to anyone for help.”

“A close friend was threatened with death by a man, and he reported it to the police.”

“My friend was DDoSed. I helped him.”

“A lot of them were harassed. There were mostly insults or threats, but hardly anyone complains or seeks help because there are ways to block such people and solve the problem” - one of the male respondents said.

4.5 Committing digital harassment

When asked if they themselves were harassing someone, five girls (9,43% of the girls surveyed) said they harassed others digitally.

One girl said she was doing it out of “boredom.” She was reported to the police.

Another stated that she was doing it for fun. She didn’t want to hurt anyone, she just wanted to have fun. One of these girls created a fake profile and engaged in “teasing others”. One stated that “without identification, she grossly joked with a person close to her and then contacted her.” One of the girls allegedly sent inappropriate messages to a friend because she didn’t return her calls.

Four boys (11,76%) said they harassed others via digital media and social networks. None of them were sanctioned. They speak about the reasons for doing that (without specifying how they did it): “Because of the defence”; “Because that guy insulted the waitress”; “I harassed a friend for fun”; “I’ve been contacting my friends from a fake profile out of boredom and fun.”

Nine respondents said they knew about their peers who also committed digital harassment. They knew that some of their peers had serious quarrels and problems on social networks, some misrepresented themselves as if they were a

girlfriend of the friend they contacted and harassed, some posted inappropriate content and provocative photos and thus abused others, but they also knew that some of their peers/friends made programs that could harm others. None of them was sanctioned.

4.6. Analysis of Survey Results

The results of this survey are in line with others (mentioned above). Each student from the sample is involved in digital communication (on one or several social networks and/or using applications like Viber and WhatsApp) for networking. Almost 40% of girls surveyed and about 20% of boys were exposed to various forms of bullying through digital networking. Most often, the violence took place publicly, in front of all members of the group (in some cases, even outside the group).

Girls were most often subjected to insults, belittling, threats, and sexual harassment. The young men were also subjected to digital violence, which consisted of destroying part or the entire digital media/device. When it comes to girls, bullies were most often people they knew, but they were also harassed in significant numbers by peers and strangers. Young men were mostly harassed by peers or unknown persons. The young men did not report violence, while about one-quarter of the harassed girls reported the violence to their parents or friends. Only one girl, subjected to sexual harassment and threats, reported the violence to the police.

As reasons for not reporting violence, they pointed out that they can cope with the problem; they do not want to involve other people in the problem as if including others means their “connection” with the bully, whom they can simply ignore.

If they decide to report it, they would choose parents, friends, especially the elderly, teachers, psychologists, or pedagogues (schools), and eventually - the police.

About 10 % of respondents said they themselves harassed others, mostly in order to belittle them or to continue the conflict they have already had with the victim. Some considered it even a joke and fun, doing that out of boredom. They stated that some of their peers were victims of digital violence, even of very serious forms (threats to life, sexual harassment, destruction of a digital device, etc.).

The largest number of respondents communicate within three to six groups on digital networks. (30,19% of girls, 52,94% of boys). Nearly a third of young men communicate in more than seven groups, while girls are more likely to com-

municate in one or two groups (totalling about 50%). The number of those who were most often in very small groups, up to 5 members, was 28% of the girls and 38,71% of the boys. The number of those who were most often in the group/groups with more than 20 members was 38% of girls and 32,26% of boys).

Particularly alarming data indicating possible risks and victimization include the following: a significant number of respondents (20% of girls and 32,26% of boys) “do not know all members of the group”; 45,28% of girls occasionally had real encounters with people they do not know personally, but virtually, i.e. from social networks; 38,25% of surveyed boys had real and direct encounters with people they do not know personally, and almost one-quarter of them do so often, the rest only occasionally; out of a total of 24 girls who realized an immediate encounter with a virtual acquaintance, 23 of them stated that they experienced inconveniences during the encounter (they didn’t want to talk about what it was). Only two of the girls replied that they had received “blatant advances” and “something that shattered their self-esteem”. They talked about inconveniences just with their friends. Only a few girls have stated that they choose to be close to their home when meeting virtual acquaintances, or crowded places, and some girls said that they plan to meet in close proximity to members of their peer group, pointing to the importance of personal safety.

Presented data indicate a potential risk of victimization, especially considering the fact that about 70% of young people occasionally present experiences from their personal lives, thus revealing a lot in front of potential digital bullies and even “predators”, who often gladly use infiltration into large groups.

5. Concluding Remarks

As our and other (aforementioned) surveys show, along with benefits and progress, the digital age (and especially digital networking) has brought many risks and harms, opening up space for specific forms of criminalization and victimization. It can be concluded that a significant part of the social life of children and young people has moved to the digital world. So, they are particularly vulnerable to the risks that digital communication carries, given the time they spend in the digital world, inexperience, gullibility, and insufficient education about “digital culture”, risky behaviours, and consequences.

“Digital socializing” not only dominates as a form of socializing but also significantly affects the further development of children and young people. It is certainly not unexpected, given the development of technologies and the general lack of time for direct socializing, both due to the constant increase in obligations

of parents and children themselves, and because of the large part of the time that they spend (passively) using various digital media for the transmission of images, sound, and text.

The nearly three-year presence of the COVID-19 virus and epidemiological measures, which included online teaching, has further accelerated the shift of everyday and direct social communication, involving the shift from most physical contacts to digital platforms. This type of communication, when it becomes dominant, significantly impoverishes the emotional, social, and even moral development of children and young people. Cognitive development in such circumstances is also questionable. At first sight child/young person has a large amount of information, even a good structure for their connection and cause-and-effect relationships, but cognitive operations are often unthinkable without the use of modern technologies.

In the digital world, everything seems more simplified and lasts shorter than in the real world. In the real world, we see a lot more. In understanding an event or behaviour, we perceive in great detail, consciously or unconsciously, and then select sequences that will contribute to recognizing, knowing, and understanding the experienced, thus directing and guiding our behaviour. The presentation on digital platforms is “what someone else wanted us to see.” We do the same ourselves. We post our most beautiful footage and photos on the networks, we show ourselves how we want others to see us. Not all communications are and need not be like this. But there is a huge space for misrepresentation, manipulation, and misuse of digital media.

The answers obtained through our survey and the examples and experiences from criminal cases of the Higher Court and the Higher Public Prosecution Office in Belgrade indicate that young people (and also the children under the age of 15, who were not part of the survey sample), in order to protect their safety, the right to development and the right to freedom, must have better preparation and education in the sphere of digital social networking.

The proper attitude of the child in a digital environment is the basis for protection from possible abuses that lurk in the virtual world. The “good servant, evil master” approach is also very applicable to digital platforms. Loneliness, alienation, and consequently some developmental problems, which arise when real, immediate physical gatherings of children and young people are replaced by virtual ones, were not the topic of this paper, but we must not forget them. Digital communication must be only a small part of interactions between people, especially within the children’s world. The preparation and education of parents for

the care and upbringing of children must include a clear attitude towards the presence of digitalization in the child's life and development.

Modern education must include the education of children in order to intensively but safely use the achievements of digitized knowledge and the benefits of unlimited digital communication. Teaching them to distinguish between the real and the virtual, to recognize dangerous situations, to know whom to turn to for help, and how they can protect themselves. Teaching them not to replace the real everyday world and socializing with virtual ones. Adequate training and education must also be directed to parents, teachers, educators, and everyone else who cares for children, which is the focus of regulations and recommendations such as the Regulations on the safety and protection of children in the use of information and communication technologies of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

Protecting children on digital platforms also includes some aspects that require them to be part of a completely separate work, but they should be mentioned. Children/juvenile offenders and victims of criminal offenses in the Republic of Serbia have a special status from the aspect of legal regulations and application of modern digital media, whether it is data management through electronic registers, hearing through audio-video techniques, or the digital presentation/exposure of data on an event in which the child is an actor or passive participant by the media (or even their parents or other persons close to them). Respecting these legal guidelines and sanctioning their violation in everyday practice should be the subject of a special survey.

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