

Legislation and Media Literacy: mitigating the Effects of *Cyberbullying* on Children¹

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Legislation and Media Literacy: mitigating the effects of cyber violence in childhood

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Abstract: Digital media, deeply embedded in the daily lives of young Brazilians, plays a crucial role in shaping identities, defining social roles, and fostering new forms of sociability. These platforms can positively contribute to the personal and social development of young people by encouraging interaction and the exchange of experiences. However, this same dynamic also creates an environment conducive to the proliferation of phenomena such as cyberbullying, a form of intimidation and psychological violence that occurs in virtual settings. In light of this scenario, this article investigates responses to cyberbullying, particularly among children and adolescents, who are especially vulnerable to such practices. It advances a discussion that integrates digital literacy with the application of current legislation on the topic as a potential approach to enhancing awareness and strengthening young people's capacity to act when facing abusive situations in the digital environment.

Keywords: Bullying; Cyberbullying; Social networks; Sociability; Legislation.

Resumo: As mídias digitais, presentes no cotidiano dos jovens brasileiros, desempenham um papel fundamental na determinação de identidades, na configuração de papéis sociais e na

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promoção de novas formas de sociabilidade. Essas plataformas podem contribuir positivamente para o desenvolvimento pessoal e social dos jovens, favorecendo a interação e a troca de experiências. Contudo, essa mesma dinâmica propicia um ambiente favorável à proliferação de fenômenos como o *ciberbullying*, uma forma de intimidação e violência psicológica, que ocorre no contexto virtual. Diante desse cenário, este artigo tem como objetivo investigar as formas de enfrentar o *ciberbullying*, especialmente entre crianças e adolescentes, que são os mais vulneráveis a esse tipo de prática. O artigo propõe o debate que integra o letramento digital à aplicação da legislação vigente sobre o tema, como um possível caminho para ampliar a conscientização e a capacidade de ação dos jovens diante de situações abusivas no ambiente digital.

Palavras-chave: *Bullying*; *Ciberbullying*; Redes sociais; Sociabilidade; Legislação.

Resumen: Los medios digitales, presentes en la vida cotidiana de los jóvenes brasileños, desempeñan un papel crucial en la formación de identidades, en la configuración de roles sociales y en la promoción de nuevas formas de sociabilidad. Estas plataformas pueden contribuir positivamente al desarrollo personal y social de los jóvenes, favoreciendo la interacción y el intercambio de experiencias. Sin embargo, esta misma dinámica crea un entorno propicio para la proliferación de fenómenos como el ciberacoso, una forma de intimidación y violencia psicológica que ocurre en el contexto virtual. Ante este escenario, este artículo tiene como objetivo investigar las formas de enfrentar el ciberacoso, especialmente entre niños y adolescentes, que son los más vulnerables a este tipo de práctica. El artículo propone un debate que integra la alfabetización digital con la aplicación de la legislación vigente sobre el tema, como una posible vía para aumentar la conciencia y la capacidad de acción de los jóvenes ante situaciones abusivas en el entorno digital.

Palabras clave: Acoso; Ciberacoso; Redes sociales; Sociabilidad; Legislación.

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Introduction

According to the international non-governmental organization (NGO) *Bullying Sin Fronteras* for Latin America and Spain, a study conducted between January 2022 and May 2023 revealed a rise in bullying cases in Brazil, indicating that six out of ten children experience some form of systematic intimidation on a daily basis. The NGO reported 66,500 serious cases of bullying during this period, placing Brazil fourth worldwide, behind only Mexico, the United States, and Spain. The state of São Paulo accounted for 13% of the registered cases, followed by Rio de Janeiro with 9%, Rio Grande do Sul with 7%, Paraná with 6%, and Goiás, Minas Gerais, Santa Catarina, and Pernambuco, each with 5%. Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão, and Pará each represented 4% of the cases.

These data—and the resulting consequences—are alarming, underscoring the urgent need for effective interventions to mitigate this phenomenon. The institution's report further indicates that, globally:

- 85% of cases occur at school;
- 82% of children with disabilities experience bullying at school;
- 74% of children aged 8 to 14 have been victims of bullying at least once;
- Over 90% of incidents are not reported to teachers;
- 60% of aggressors will have at least one criminal incident in adulthood;
- Three million children miss school every month due to bullying;
- Nine out of ten gay students are harassed because of their sexual orientation;
- Approximately 200,000 children and adolescents lose their lives annually as a result of bullying and cyberbullying worldwide (Scilosp, 2023).

According to the institute's director, bullying and cyberbullying are associated with more than 200,000 deaths annually worldwide. In addition to the alarming rise in bullying cases, the increasing number of reported incidents of online harassment and abuse on social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) is also cause for concern.

Therefore, it is necessary to consider strategies to prevent and address this problem among young Brazilians, including ensuring compliance with the legislation that protects children and adolescents. The aim of this study was to analyze the current national legal framework on the subject, the legal provisions applicable to cases of bullying and cyberbullying, the consequences and penalties established under these laws, as well as the international legal instruments to which Brazil is a signatory.

To address this issue, we present the concepts of bullying and cyberbullying as discussed in national and international literature, emphasizing how these phenomena have expanded within digital contexts. Furthermore, we examine the central role that social networks and media play in the lives of young Brazilians, representing a pervasive presence in their social interactions and occupying an increasingly significant portion of their daily lives. This scenario directly contributes to the proliferation of cyberbullying.

In this context, media literacy emerges as a crucial tool for combating such practices. By fostering critical thinking, informed interpretation of digital content, and the ability to identify harmful online behaviors, media literacy equips young people with the skills needed to navigate the digital environment safely and ethically, thereby serving as an effective strategy to reduce the impacts of cyberbullying.

Bullying : Essential Approaches and Insights

According to a definition jointly adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the international NGO Bullying Sin Fronteras, bullying is understood as any form of intimidation or physical, psychological, or sexual aggression against a person of school age (child or adolescent), carried out repeatedly and in a manner that causes harm, fear, and/or sadness to the victim or group of victims.

Silva (2010, p. 22) states that “the term bullying can be used to describe all types of aggressive, cruel, intentional, and systematic behaviors that occur within interpersonal relationships.” However, Olweus and Limber (2010) define bullying as negative, repeated, and intentional behavior by one or more individuals directed at someone who is unable to defend him- or herself, indicating a power imbalance between victim and aggressor. They further distinguish bullying from child maltreatment and domestic violence, emphasizing that it constitutes peer-to-peer abuse and excluding teacher–student relationships from its definition.

According to Olweus (2001, as cited in Berger, 2007), a student is considered to be bullied or victimized when he or she is repeatedly exposed, over time, to negative actions perpetrated by one or more peers. Berger (2007) also conceptualizes bullying as a systematic abuse of power and notes that definitions consistently include three essential elements: repetition, harm, and an imbalance of power. She argues that these three characteristics are widely accepted by scholars around the world.

The research definition intentionally excludes playful scuffles, isolated incidents, or good-natured teasing among friends, but includes indirect forms of aggression, particularly social or relational ones. Not all aggression constitutes bullying, but bullying is always a form of aggression, defined as harmful and hostile behavior (Berger, 2007).

The study of this phenomenon is relevant and justified because, as Silva (2010) indicates, it also represents a public health issue and should be prioritized by professionals working across medical, psychological, and caregiving fields.

Dan Olweus began investigating bullying in his native Sweden in 1973 and published the first academic book on the topic in 1978. Following the suicides of three Norwegian boys who had been victims of bullying in 1982, the Norwegian government commissioned Olweus to address the issue (Berger, 2007). Since then, bullying has been extensively studied worldwide, and a questionnaire developed by the researcher continues to be widely used for this purpose. Bullying manifests in various forms—

commonly physical, verbal, and relational. Each is distinct, yet all may be perpetrated by the same aggressor and directed at the same target (Berger, 2007).

Physical bullying, such as hitting, kicking, or beating, is the most visible form of aggression and is easily recognized by both adults and children of all ages. It is generally the primary target of zero-tolerance policies, which tend to impose swift and serious consequences. However, unless several aggressors attack a victim simultaneously—which is rare on school grounds—it can be difficult to distinguish physical bullying from self-defense, playful roughhousing, or friendly scuffles, none of which warrant severe punishment (Berger, 2007).

Another category of aggression is behavioral bullying, which includes harmful actions such as taking a classmate's belongings, damaging school materials, or deliberately provoking or humiliating peers. Verbal bullying, in turn, consists of repeated derogatory comments, insults, or name-calling. It is more common than physical bullying and becomes increasingly prevalent as children grow older, although its impact can be equally destructive.

Many forms of bullying are classified as relational bullying because they undermine the victim's social relationships with peers. Even preschool-age children, particularly girls, may engage in relational bullying, but this form becomes more frequent and harmful during puberty, when social skills become more sophisticated and peer approval assumes greater importance. Relational bullying occurs when children intentionally exclude a classmate from conversations or activities, walk away when the target approaches, or repeatedly spread humiliating gossip. This form of aggression is also referred to as social bullying, although, in a broader sense, all forms of bullying can involve social dynamics. While children often disapprove of physical aggression, they may themselves engage in social bullying (Berger, 2007).

Bullying also occurs in electronic environments, known as cyberbullying, which has become increasingly common. A well-known case in Canada involved a digital photograph of an overweight girl showering after a gymnastics class that was instantly shared among students' mobile phones and later posted on a website dedicated to obscene comments about her. According to a report by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (2005, cited in Berger, 2007), in such cases, instead of being subjected to insults from only a few people—perhaps thirty in a cafeteria—victims face exposure to a global audience of billions.

Cyberbullying: VIOLENCE in the Digital World

In a systematic literature review, Hutson (2016) seeks to establish a universal definition of cyberbullying based on existing research. Her analysis identifies five defining attributes: (1) the use of electronic contact, (2) an aggressive act, (3) intentionality, (4) repetition or wide dissemination, and (5) harm inflicted on the victim. The most frequently cited antecedents include low self-esteem, heightened levels of depression, and social isolation, while the main consequences involve academic difficulties and affective disorders. Hutson (2016, p. 60) proposes a concise definition that can assist healthcare providers in educating patients and families about cyberbullying and can also guide research aimed at developing effective interventions.

She ultimately recommends the consistent use of the operational definition of cyberbullying as “intentional and repeated harm inflicted through aggressive actions using computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hutson, 2016, p. 69).

Accordingly, the use of computers, cell phones, and other digital technologies is what distinguishes cyberbullying from traditional forms of bullying. Several authors argue that greater engagement with these devices correlates with increased rates of cyberbullying (Hutson, 2016; Moretti & Herkovits, 2021; Rodeghiero, 2012). Therefore, without social media and other virtual environments, cyberbullying would not occur.

Social media platforms and communication channels such as WhatsApp function as spaces of sociability where visibility is the norm. Within these environments, the desire to be seen becomes imperative, shaping the very process through which individuals understand themselves. As Sibilia (2015) explains, within visibility regimes structured by digital networks, not being seen equates to not existing.

These regimes of visibility also relate to the surveillance dynamics discussed by Foucault (2009), for whom surveillance restricts autonomy and operates as a form of control that can constitute violence. In the Panopticon model, prisoners are unable to see the guard who observes them, generating constant uncertainty about when they are being watched. Over time, this induces self-regulation, as individuals assume that any action may be scrutinized and punished.

In contemporary society, mediated by digital technologies, surveillance is predominantly voluntary; individuals place themselves under continuous observation. However, this voluntary nature does not diminish the potential for violence inherent in such dynamics. Surveillance generates power relations, and when subjects expose themselves to it, they transfer power to observers—the public. Any deviation from

socially imposed expectations can lead to severe sanctions, such as public shaming or cancellation, underscoring the disciplinary and coercive dimensions of digital surveillance.

When individuals submit to surveillance voluntarily, as in the case of celebrities or influencers, the observer wields significant power in evaluating their conduct. This imbalance becomes more severe when surveillance targets someone who did not choose to expose themselves. In such cases, individuals lose control over their own privacy and may be subject to judgment and punishment without consent.

Cyberbullying is particularly serious in comparison with traditional bullying because the exposure is public, persistent, and accessible to a far larger audience. The permanence of digital content amplifies its harmful impact, as it can be repeatedly accessed by anyone at any time.

Cyberbullying vs. Freedom of Expression: An Analysis in Light of the Federal Constitution

Brazilian legislation provides specific safeguards for children and adolescents, notably the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA) (Brazil, 1990) and the Federal Constitution (Brazil, 1988). Article 227 of the Constitution assigns parents or legal guardians primary responsibility for the protection of minors, while also imposing this duty—on an absolute priority basis—upon society and the State. Within this normative framework, individuals who engage in cyberbullying act in direct contravention of the law, disregarding the legal, psychological, and social consequences associated with online violence.

A common argument invoked by cyberbullies is the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression. While the Federal Constitution protects free expression of thought, this right is neither absolute nor unlimited, as it must coexist with other fundamental rights set forth in the same legal document (Lourinho, 2017). When such rights collide—as in behaviors constituting cyberbullying—there is a clear abuse of rights, since “the exercise of freedom of expression cannot occur in a way that harms other people or causes social damage” (Faustino, 2019, p. 168). Consequently, practices of online aggression are incompatible with the legitimate exercise of free expression.

In the civil domain, the legal system provides mechanisms to address abuses of constitutional rights, including those perpetrated in digital environments. Such abuses may give rise to civil liability for individuals who exceed the lawful limits of their right to free expression. According to Rodrigues (2003, p. 45), abuse of rights occurs “when the

agent, acting within the prerogatives granted by the legal system, fails to consider the social purpose of the subjective right and, by using it recklessly, causes harm to another.”

Civil liability may therefore result in an order to compensate the victim for moral and/or material damages. As Rizzardo (2019, p. 47) explains, damage may affect both tangible assets and intangible interests—including dignity, honor, reputation, privacy, bodily integrity, and personal tranquility—all of which are essential to human development and coexistence. These interests must be legally protected, and their violation constitutes an infringement of the rule of law.

The establishment of civil liability requires proof of causation, defined as “a relationship, or link, between the damage and the causer, which makes it possible to impute it to an individual” (Rizzardo, 2019, p. 47). In other words, there must be demonstrable, unlawful damage attributable to the perpetrator, which consequently gives rise to a duty to indemnify.

Criminal offenses may also trigger civil liability when they result in moral or material harm, such as in crimes against honor (Rizzardo, 2019) or offenses motivated by hate or intolerance, including discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation. Additionally, violations of privacy, private life, honor, and image are expressly protected under Article 5, X of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees compensation for both moral and patrimonial damages (Brazil, 1988).

When the unlawful act is committed by a minor, civil liability is attributed to the parents or legal guardians. Pursuant to Article 932 of the Civil Code (Brazil, 2002), they hold objective responsibility for the actions of their minor children, ensuring the victim’s right to seek compensation from their assets regardless of parental fault (Garcia, 2016).

Violation of Fundamental Rights in *Cyberbullying*: the legal protection of children and adolescents

The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* constitutes the foundational document that historically established the principles underpinning contemporary understandings of human rights (Piovesan, 2009). These rights have the vocation to “affirm human dignity and prevent human suffering” (Piovesan, 2009, p. 108). As Piovesan (2009, p. 108) explains, “the ethics of human rights works with the language of reciprocity. It is that ethics that sees in the other a being deserving of equal consideration and profound respect, endowed with the right to develop their potential freely and fully.”

As a democratic state governed by the rule of law, Brazil has incorporated human rights as an entrenched constitutional clause in its 1988 Federal Constitution. Article 1 establishes the principle of human dignity as one of the supreme values of democracy, recognizing it as an inherent right of all individuals. The Constitution affirms that every person must be treated with respect, equality, and justice, and ensures that no one may be subjected to humiliation or offensive treatment (Brazil, 1988).

Specifically concerning children and adolescents, Brazil is a signatory to two international treaties that guarantee and legitimize protection and quality of life as fundamental principles for this population: the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) and the *International Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescent* (Costa & Bigras, 2007). The constitutional legislator recognized children and adolescents as rights-bearing subjects, emphasizing their comprehensive protection in Article 227 of the Constitution:

Article 227. It is the duty of the family, society, and the State to ensure, with absolute priority, the right to life, health, food, education, leisure, professional training, culture, dignity, respect, freedom, and family and community life for children, adolescents, and young people, as well as to protect them from all forms of neglect, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty, and oppression (Brazil, 1988, emphasis added).

This provision makes clear that the continuous and prioritized pursuit of the best interests of children and adolescents constitutes a constitutionally enshrined principle (Pereira & Melo, 2003). Consequently, cyberbullying practices are incompatible with the constitutional guarantees afforded to minors (Brazil, 1988). Brazilian sub-constitutional legislation reinforces this protective framework, particularly through the Statute of Children and Adolescents (ECA), which consolidates the provisions of the international treaties ratified by Brazil and specifies the legal parameters concerning the best interests of the child (Pereira & Melo, 2003).

The ECA affirms, in Article 1, the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents and reiterates, in Article 3, the constitutional mandate for the priority treatment of their interests. Article 7 guarantees conditions for healthy and harmonious development (Brazil, 1990). According to Santos (2011, p. 51), cyberbullying violates this provision, as it:

“[...] consists of a threat or violation of the right to healthy and harmonious development of children and adolescents, as stipulated in Article 7 of the ECA. Naturally, this abhorrent practice affects the development of psychosomatic illnesses, compromising healthy and harmonious development. There are even records of suicides resulting from bullying.”

When cyberbullying occurs and the perpetrator is identified, the ECA allows for the application of socio-educational measures under Article 112, ranging from warnings to obligations to repair damage, community service, supervised release, placement in semi-liberty, or, in more serious cases, detention in an educational institution (Brazil, 1990). The appropriate measure depends on the specific circumstances of the case, the nature and severity of the offense, and the harm caused to the victim. The Statute also protects victims by authorizing judges or the Guardianship Council, under Article 98, to impose protective measures whenever there is a violation or threat to protected rights (Brazil, 1990).

Given the need to safeguard victims' rights and mitigate the harm caused by cyberbullying, the prompt removal of offensive or unlawful content from digital platforms is essential. The enactment of the *Brazilian Internet Bill of Rights* (Law No. 12.965/2014) advanced the regulation of civil liability online by establishing mechanisms for content removal. The law generally requires a court order for the removal of offensive content but also incorporates a *Notice and Takedown* procedure allowing rights holders to request removal directly from service providers (Brazil, 2014).

In June 2025, the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court declared Article 19 of the Internet Bill of Rights partially unconstitutional, holding that the requirement of a prior judicial order undermined the protection of fundamental rights and the dignity of vulnerable groups. This decision expanded digital platforms' duty of care and prompted the National Congress to enact more comprehensive legislation for digital governance. Consequently, Bill No. 2,628/2022 was approved, resulting in the *Digital Statute of Children and Adolescents* (Law No. 15,211/2025) (Brazil, 2025), sanctioned by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The statute establishes rules for the protection and prevention of digital offenses against minors under 18, covering platforms, applications, social networks, and electronic games.

The new law requires technology companies to adopt preventive measures that restrict minors' access to inappropriate content—including pornography, violence, harassment, incitement to suicide, and gambling. It mandates reliable age verification mechanisms, the linking of accounts belonging to minors under 16 to their legal guardians, and the provision of robust parental supervision tools. Platforms must immediately remove content involving abuse, enticement, or exploitation and notify competent authorities. Sanctions include warnings, fines, suspension, and prohibition of operations, with fines reaching up to 10% of revenue or R\$ 50 million. The Digital Statute seeks to harmonize the comprehensive

protection of children and adolescents, guaranteed by the Constitution (Brazil, 1988) and the ECA (Brazil, 1990), with the promotion of freedom and technological innovation, emphasizing coordinated action among the State, families, civil society, and private companies to foster a safer digital environment.

Cyberbullying and the criminalization of the conduct in Brazil

With the increasing severity of bullying and cyberbullying in Brazil, Law No. 13,185/2015—known as the *Bullying Law*—was enacted to establish the National Program to Combat Systematic Intimidation. In addition to defining bullying and cyberbullying, the law emphasized the implementation of awareness campaigns in schools, clubs, and community associations, as well as the need to provide support for victims. Subsequently, Law No. 13,663/2018 introduced amendments to Law No. 9,394/1996, requiring schools to promote awareness, prevention, and intervention measures against all forms of violence and to foster a culture of peace (Pereira, Fernandes & Dell'Aglio, 2022).

Despite the gravity of these behaviors, neither of these statutes criminalized bullying or cyberbullying. The legislator prioritized preventive and educational approaches, focusing on restorative practices and public policies rather than punitive expansion. According to Souza and Freitas (2024, p. 9), this strategy sought to “avoid the excessive expansion of criminal protection, since systematic intimidation already has protection in other provisions throughout the Penal Code, such as crimes against honor and individual freedom.”

Since 2010, multiple bills have proposed criminalizing systematic intimidation—whether offline or online—drawing on comparative studies from jurisdictions such as the United States. However, only in January 2024 did Brazil formally criminalize bullying and cyberbullying through Law No. 14,811/2024 (Conjur, 2024). This law amended Article 146 of the Penal Code (Brazil, 1940), establishing the following criminal offense:

Art. 146-A. *To systematically intimidate, individually or in a group, through physical or psychological violence, one or more persons, intentionally and repeatedly, without evident motivation, by means of acts of intimidation, humiliation, or discrimination, or through verbal, moral, sexual, social, psychological, physical, material, or virtual actions.*

Penalty – A fine shall be imposed if the conduct does not constitute a more serious crime.

Systematic online intimidation (cyberbullying)

Sole paragraph. If the conduct is carried out through a computer network, social media, applications, online games, or any digital means, or transmitted in real time:

Penalty – Imprisonment from two to four years and a fine, if the conduct does not constitute a more serious crime.

Souza and Freitas (2024, p. 10) explain:

“Article 146-A of the Penal Code is a crime against individual liberty. This conclusion is easily drawn from the verb ‘to intimidate’ (which is not synonymous with ‘to threaten’), used as the core of the criminal offense. Although the conduct may be carried out through insults, physical violence, sexual abuse, and other forms of action, the primary objective is always to restrain the victim, preventing them from fully exercising their potential. The intimidated victim then fears socialization or personal interaction.”

The legislator, therefore, imposed only a fine for the basic form of bullying, considering that more serious conduct—such as physical aggression—would be punished under other offenses, such as bodily harm, which would absorb Article 146-A due to the principle of specialty (Souza & Freitas, 2024). Humiliating jokes or intimidation that do not amount to crimes against honor, however, fall under Article 146-A.

Several scholars (Souza & Freitas, 2024; Sandroni & Fernandes, 2024) argue that the differentiated penalty structure—where cyberbullying receives harsher punishment due to its amplified reach—may render the criminalization of offline bullying ineffective. When the conduct does not constitute a more serious crime, the penalty is merely a fine, which could compromise enforcement. As Sandroni and Fernandes (2024) note, “even if the intention was to protect individual freedom, considering the significant traumas resulting from the conduct called bullying, unfortunately, it seems that the legislator's initiative may have been in vain.”

Literacy : the conscious use of the *internet*.

The importance of access to the digital world is undeniable. While digital technologies offer considerable benefits for daily life, they also create environments in which risks such as cyberbullying proliferate. In this context, beyond legislative reforms, digital literacy emerges as a crucial tool for preventing online violence.

The concept gained prominence after the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament recognized, in 2006, the need for all citizens to develop eight key competences for lifelong learning, including competencies in science, technology, and digital environments (Ribeiro & Telles, 2021). Digital literacy, therefore, “constitutes a set of necessary actions, capable of being assimilated and improved, in order to achieve a certain digital competence” (Ribeiro & Telles, 2021, p. 123).

Key components include teaching practices that promote awareness of personal data protection, privacy, and safe online behavior. Learners must understand the implications of sharing personal or third-party information in digital environments and avoid actions that may lead to data breaches (Ribeiro & Telles, 2021).

Another core dimension is the protection of physical and psychological well-being. Misuse of digital spaces can contribute to anxiety, depression, or exposure to online violence, including cyberbullying (Ribeiro & Telles, 2021). Digital literacy should therefore emphasize self-protection, empathy, and etiquette in online interactions.

Although cyberbullies often perceive themselves as technologically skilled, many harmful acts—such as sending offensive messages—require little technical knowledge. Nonetheless, cyberbullies tend to spend more time online than the average adolescent, frequently accessing the internet during school hours (Rondina, Moura & Carvalho, 2016). This pattern correlates with growing concerns regarding youth mental health.

In response, some American schools have implemented strict smartphone bans. Mountain Middle School in Durango, Colorado, prohibited smartphones in 2012 during a period of heightened mental health concerns. Principal Shane Voss reported transformative effects, noting that students became more socially engaged: “when he enters a school where there is no such ban, ‘it’s kind of like a zombie apocalypse [...] The atmosphere is very different’” (Haidt, 2024, p. 295).

This debate has reached Brazil, where a rising number of schools are adopting similar restrictions. As Becker (2024) notes, citing *O Globo*, while parents acknowledge the educational value of technology, many also believe that such benefits do not justify students “spending breaks with their heads bent over and their eyes glued to a screen.”

However, even as smartphone restrictions gain traction, digital literacy remains essential. Effective netiquette training—teaching proper etiquette for online environments—requires collaboration between schools and families. Parents play a central role by transmitting social values, monitoring online interactions, and maintaining open communication. Rondina, Moura, and Carvalho (2016, p. 34) observe that “parents with greater involvement and knowledge of their children’s online activities reduce the risk of them engaging in dangerous online behavior.”

Given that children enter the digital world at increasingly younger ages, coordinated efforts between families and schools are indispensable. Digital education must ensure that online interactions are responsible, ethical, safe, and inclusive, strengthening online citizenship and enabling learners to critically analyze digital content (Aguaded, 2016). Such

competencies contribute to personal autonomy, social engagement, and overall quality of life (Sorensen et al., 2012).

Ultimately, adolescents must be equipped to recognize online risks and act preventively. Digital literacy enables the formation of citizens capable of making ethical, conscious, and responsible decisions in digital environments, thereby contributing to the construction of a citizen-centered digital society (Santos et al., 2023).

Final considerations

As demonstrated, Brazil possesses a robust legislative framework aimed at safeguarding children and adolescents and has recently expanded this protection by criminalizing systematic intimidation, whether offline or online. Nevertheless, significant challenges persist in ensuring that victims and their families experience genuine protection and relief from the recurrent violence and psychological harm associated with cyberbullying. Contemporary youth remain continuously connected to the internet through a wide array of devices—including computers, smartphones, and tablets—enabling digital aggression to occur with heightened intensity, continuity, and severity. In many cases, the difficulty of identifying the perpetrator further compounds the victim's emotional distress. Despite recent legislative advances, society has yet to develop effective mechanisms capable of offering timely responses to prevent, curb, and adequately sanction cyberbullying.

Addressing cyberbullying therefore requires measures that extend beyond the legal domain and demand a collective societal commitment to implementing digital literacy initiatives. Such programs should encompass the identification of abusive online behaviors, the promotion of respectful digital interactions, and the cultivation of empathy—elements that can significantly mitigate the impact of cyberbullying. These actions must be integrated into both formal and informal educational environments, engaging schools, families, and broader community networks. Only through a comprehensive, multisectoral, and coordinated approach will it be possible to construct safer and more inclusive digital environments for young people. This integrated strategy is essential to align actions and expectations across society, fostering a culture of respect and responsibility capable of effectively reducing the harmful consequences of cyberbullying.

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