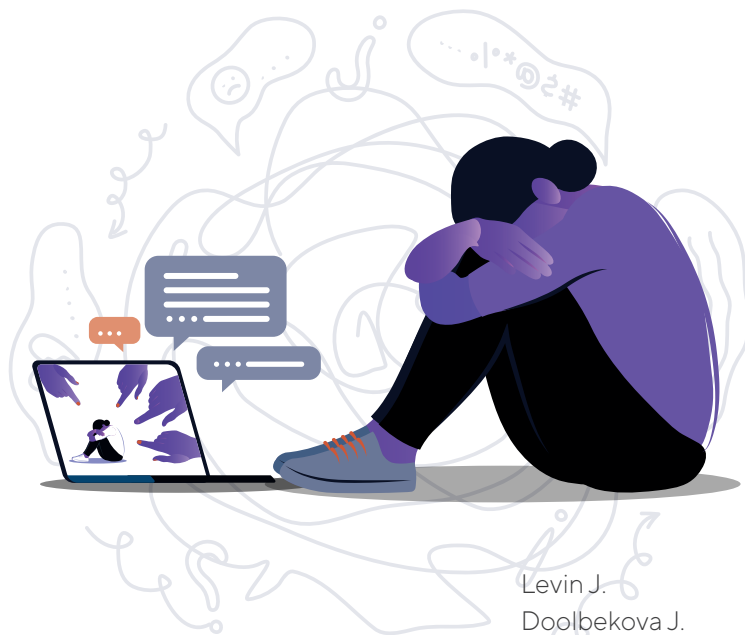


THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE AGGRESSION AMONG TEENAGERS AND YOUTH IN KYRGYZSTAN

Policy Brief | 2026



Levin J.
Doolbekova J.
Osmonova A.
Zholchubekova A.

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// INTRODUCTION

Although the serious consequences of bullying and cyberbullying for young people's education and health are recognised worldwide (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2021), the development of effective countermeasures in Kyrgyzstan faces a major obstacle: the lack of representative national data.

At the same time, the rapid growth in internet users, particularly among adolescents and young people (where coverage reaches 90%), alongside the wide-ranging opportunities it offers, also creates new risks, making the issue of online safety extremely pressing. The study was conducted in 2025 by the Taalim-Forum public foundation in partnership with the University of Hamburg (Germany), with the support of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). Preliminary results indicate a widespread prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying among adolescents and young people, which requires action to be taken by the Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The survey covered 2,096 respondents (64% girls and 36% boys) aged between 12 and 25 from 128 educational institutions across seven regions of the country and the cities of Bishkek and Osh. The methodology involved quantitative research through an online survey in Kyrgyz and Russian. The questionnaire was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Hamburg and the Academic Council of the Republican Institute for Teacher Training under the Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic.

This analytical note presents the main findings and recommendations for protecting young people and creating a safe digital environment.

// SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The study highlights an alarming reality: while the digital space has become an integral part of young people's lives, it has also emerged as a high-risk environment. The scale of the problem is reflected in the finding that nearly one in two respondents reported having witnessed instances of cyberbullying, while 15–18% indicated that they had experienced it regularly. The findings also point to a strong interconnection between online and offline bullying: conflicts that originate offline often extend into the online environment and vice versa, creating a continuous circle of pressure for victims.

The nature of the threats is distinctly gendered. Girls are significantly more likely to be victims of visual and sexualised aggression, while boys are targeted for attacks on national, social or political grounds. A worrying sign of the normalisation of hostile behaviour is that one in four respondents has participated in disseminating aggressive content at least once.

Solving this problem requires a comprehensive approach and systematic countermeasures that combine regulation, education, and public initiatives, with due consideration for the gender- and age-specific characteristics of young people.

Key recommendations based on the study's findings

Improve the regulatory framework and inter-agency coordination and integration of cyberbullying prevention programmes, and develop tools for identifying cyber-hate. Focus on preventive work and the promotion of digital literacy in educational institutions; develop the skills of teachers and psychologists in early detection and mediation; consider establishing a national psychological support service with incident monitoring tools. Develop cooperation with the IT sector to localise moderation and develop algorithms for recognising hate speech in the Kyrgyz language. Promote a culture of respect online through peer-to-peer programmes and the involvement of positive role models.

// DETAILED RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents an analysis of data revealing how online and offline aggression intertwine to create a single environment of risks for teenagers and young people, as well as the motivations behind their involvement as both victims and perpetrators.

THE INTERCONNECTED ECOSYSTEM OF AGGRESSION

1. The digital reality of young people



 **2 and 4 hours**

Research indicates that immersion in the digital environment is becoming the norm for teenagers and young people. Over 84% of respondents spend between 2 and 4 hours online every day, which aligns with global trends. The most widely used platforms are WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram. Notable gender differences have been observed: girls are more likely to engage with visual and communication-oriented platforms (Instagram and WhatsApp), whereas boys tend to prefer YouTube and gaming environments. Instagram and TikTok were identified by respondents as platforms where public hostility is most prevalent. Immersion in the digital environment carries significant risks, as evidenced by their personal experiences of encountering cyberbullying.

2. The extent and nature of victimisation: gender and age-related characteristics

Almost one in two respondents had encountered cyberbullying in the past year, whilst 15–18% experienced it regularly.

The nature of the threats exhibits distinct gender-specific patterns:

- ◆ Girls are significantly more likely to face attacks related to their appearance: 33.3% of them received occasional or regular threats, compared to 21.1% of boys. Regular hate was reported by 17.1% of girls and only 9.3% of boys.
- ◆ The widest gender gap was observed regarding attitudes towards girls/women: 21.3% of girls and 8.6% of boys received regular threats.
- ◆ Girls were more likely to face sexualised attacks or gender-based comments: regularly 11.3% (girls) and 7.8% (boys).
- ◆ Boys are more likely to face attacks based on nationality, social status or political views.

Vulnerability also increases with age: whilst around half of 12–14-year-olds have not experienced cyberbullying, only a quarter of 20–25-year-olds can say the same. The higher rates of victimisation among urban young people are likely linked to their increased online activity and digital visibility. The threats that teenagers and

young adults face online are rarely isolated; they are often a direct continuation or reflection of aggression from their physical environment.

3. The 'offline-online' continuum: an inseparable link

Aggression in the physical world remains widespread: verbal abuse (34.7%), spreading rumours (33.7%) and physical violence (16.3%) are common occurrences. A key finding of the study is that there is a close correlation between offline and online victimisation. Bullying that begins at school continues in the digital space, and vice versa.

Gender patterns are also evident in these findings:

- ◆ Boys are more likely to report experiences of physical violence and extortion.
- ◆ Girls are more likely to face social exclusion, verbal abuse and the spread of rumours.
- ◆ A key finding is that sexual harassment affects both groups (13.5% of boys and 9.7% of girls), challenging common assumptions about the typical victim profile and underscoring the need for gender-inclusive protective measures.

Recognising that adolescents and young people may be both targets and, at times, participants in cycles of aggression is essential for designing effective interventions.

4. Participation in online aggression: from reaction to 'normalisation'

The data shows that aggressive behaviour online is not marginal: one in four respondents (25.1%) has posted offensive content at least once. Boys demonstrate a slightly higher level of involvement in aggressive behaviour: 27.3% have participated in online hate at least once, compared to 23.8% of girls.

Analysis of motives:

- ◆ Reactive and defensive reasons (self-defence, responding to an insult, retaliation) are predominant (~20%).
- ◆ Emotional factors (anger, venting) are also significant (~15%).
- ◆ Social motives (entertainment, peer pressure) are less common.

This shows that cyberaggression often arises not as an individual problem, but as an element of the digital social environment, characterised by poor emotional regulation and norms of group behaviour among adolescents and young people.

// CONCLUSIONS

The analysis indicates that the current regulatory framework in Kyrgyzstan only partially addresses the issue of cyberbullying and does not provide a comprehensive mechanism for protecting children and adolescents in the digital environment. Legislative initiatives in the field of cybersecurity primarily focus on data protection, the resilience of information infrastructure and the regulation of digital services, while the social risks associated with online interaction remain insufficiently addressed within the legal framework. National legislation lacks a clear legal definition of cyberbullying, and existing provisions on liability for online insults and defamation apply mainly to isolated incidents and do not account for the systemic nature of online harassment. As a result, state policy tends to focus primarily on content control and restriction, whereas preventive measures and the regulation of behavioural aspects of online aggression remain underdeveloped.

As part of digitalisation efforts in education, students are learning to use digital tools and the basics of media literacy; however, preventive measures and response mechanisms remain fragmented. At the same time, international evidence suggests that comprehensive, school-based prevention programmes are among the most effective approaches to addressing cyberbullying. In this context, greater attention should be given to strengthening the capacity of professionals fostering digital culture and ensuring children's safety in the online environment. This includes enhancing the competencies of teachers and school psychologists, establishing systematic procedures for identifying and responding to cases of cyberbullying, and providing professional support to both those affected (victims) and those engaging in aggressive behaviour (perpetrators).

Effective implementation requires consolidated joint efforts by the state, educational institutions, civil society and the business sector, which will create an environment in which the youth of Kyrgyzstan can develop safely and free from all forms of aggression.

// RECOMMENDATIONS



STRATEGY I. POLICY AND EDUCATION

Strengthening the regulatory framework. Consider developing a national strategy to protect children from bullying and cyberbullying, ensuring inter-ministerial coordination between key government bodies (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Digital Development), as well as a system of indicators to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of its implementation. Initiate the development and introduction of a Digital Culture Code in educational institutions, including procedures for identification, response protocols and preventative measures aimed at reducing cyberbullying.

Integration into the educational process. Introduce compulsory modules on media literacy, digital culture, emotional intelligence and cyberbullying into the school curriculum, starting from lower secondary levels. Develop and disseminate practical guidance materials for teachers and school psychologists on working with victims and perpetrators in the digital environment.

Establishment of a national monitoring system. Develop and implement a national platform for confidential reporting of cyberaggression and bullying cases, integrated with psychological support and referral services.

Encouraging applied research. Support ongoing monitoring of the issue with in-depth analysis of regional and age-specific factors, as well as studying the long-term consequences of cyber victimisation.



STRATEGY II. SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Enhancing the skills of teachers and school psychologists. Provide regular professional development opportunities for teachers and school psychologists on identifying early signs of bullying and cyberbullying, as well as on applying restorative and mediation-based approaches in working with students involved in conflict situations.

Engaging the parent community. Organise awareness-raising seminars and develop online resources for parents on digital parenting, identifying signs of cyberbullying, and teaching methods for fostering open communication with children; Promote family-based digital culture programmes (e.g., “Strong Family”) aimed at strengthening safe and supportive home environments.

Developing targeted support programmes. Design and implement programmes tailored to the needs of the young people vulnerable to specific forms of online aggression, including those facing sexualised aggression, and subjected to attacks on ethnic grounds, with the involvement of civil society organisations, relevant agencies and experts.

Promoting peer-to-peer approaches. Establish and support networks of youth ‘digital culture ambassadors’ in schools and universities, who can promote respectful online behaviour and provide initial support to their peers.

Creating a safe psychological environment. Introduce regular classroom sessions focused on socio-emotional, and establish confidential counselling spaces where students can seek professional support in a safe and accessible manner.



STRATEGY III. SOCIETY AND TECHNOLOGY

Large-scale awareness campaigns. Implement regular nationwide awareness campaigns on social media (e.g. under the hashtag #RespectOnline), engaging influencers and public figures to promote respectful online behaviour, reduce stigma, and discourage online aggression.

Partnerships with IT platforms. Strengthen collaboration with major digital platforms (e.g. Meta and TikTok) to support the localisation of content moderation and the development of tools for detecting harmful content, including hate speech, in the Kyrgyz language.



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service



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This study was conducted as part of the project 'Together Against Online Hate: Prevention Strategies and Impact on Young People' with the support of the DAAD Programme (German Academic Exchange Service)

University of Hamburg

Faculty of Education

Project Lead: Julia Levin

Email: julia.levin@uni-hamburg.de

Website: <https://www.ew.uni-hamburg.de/ueber-die-fakultaet/personen/levin-j.html>

<https://www.ew.uni-hamburg.de/einrichtungen/ew1/paedagogische-psychologie-neu/projekte/digitaler-hass.html>



Taalim-Forum, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

**Research Team: Doolbekova J.,
Zholchubekova A., Osmonova A.**

Email: taalimforum@gmail.com

Website: <https://taalimforum.kg/>

<https://taalimforum.kg/education-quality-access/digital-hate-project-ru>

