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Evolution of violence on social media from a school context in Guayaquil

Evolución de la violencia en las redes sociales desde un contexto escolar en Guayaquil

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Abstract

The intensive use of social media among schoolchildren has increased exposure to digital violence, making it relevant to describe its manifestations and gender differences in educational contexts. Therefore, the overall objective was to characterize the digital violence reported by students and describe its distribution by gender, considering the condition of victimization, the types of violence, and the main mechanisms/channels of occurrence. A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among afternoon students at the Joaquín Gallegos Lara School (south of Guayaquil). A structured survey and a cyber victimization instrument were applied. The condition in relation to digital violence showed that 58% of the population was not a victim, 18% were cyber observers, 11% were direct victims (1 occasion), and 13% were direct victims (2 occasions). By gender, "other" predominated among women (38.3%), followed by family violence (25.0%) and sexual violence (23.3%); among men, harassment in the academic setting stood out (22.6%), followed by sexual harassment (19.3%) and "other" (19.3%). The most frequent event was aggressive comments about the person or their body (65% total; 45% women; 20% men). In the "other" category regarding the channel of occurrence, private messages predominated (women: 71.6%; men: 54.8%). In conclusion, the findings show a significant presence of digital violence in the school context and gender-differentiated patterns, with a predominance of attacks focused on the person or their body and the use of private channels, which supports the need for preventive actions and digital education in the educational community.

Keywords: violence on social media, cyberbullying, criminal social context.

Resumen

El uso intensivo de redes sociales en la población escolar ha incrementado la exposición a violencia digital, por lo que es pertinente describir sus manifestaciones y diferencias según género en contextos educativos. Es por ello que, el objetivo general fue caracterizar la violencia digital reportada por estudiantes y describir su distribución por género, considerando la condición de victimización, los tipos de violencia y los principales mecanismos/canales de ocurrencia. Se realizó un estudio descriptivo transversal en estudiantes de la jornada vespertina del Colegio Joaquín Gallegos Lara (sur de Guayaquil). Se aplicó una encuesta estructurada y un instrumento de cibervictimización. La condición frente a la violencia digital mostró que el 58% de la población no fue víctima, el 18% ciberobservadores, 11% víctimas directas (1 ocasión) y 13% víctimas directas (2 ocasiones). Por género, en mujeres predominó "otros" (38,3%), seguido de violencia familiar (25,0%) y sexual (23,3%); en hombres destacó acoso en el ámbito académico (22,6%), seguido de sexual (19,3%) y "otros" (19,3%). El evento más frecuente fue comentarios agresivos hacia la persona o el cuerpo (65% total; 45% mujeres; 20% hombres). En la categoría "otros" sobre el canal de ocurrencia, predominaron los mensajes privados (mujeres: 71,6%; hombres: 54,8%). En conclusión, los hallazgos evidencian una presencia relevante de violencia digital en el contexto escolar y patrones diferenciados por género, con predominio de agresiones centradas en la persona o su cuerpo y uso de canales privados, lo que respalda la necesidad de acciones preventivas y de educación digital en la comunidad educativa.

Palabras clave: violencia en redes sociales, ciberacoso, contexto social delincuencial.

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Introduction

As defined by Rojas and Rodríguez (2022), violence manifests through structures of force or threats to apply such force, directed by one or more individuals acting collectively under a proposed action plan. These actions may be deliberate and take various expressive forms, including physical, psychological, gender-based, sexual, economic, or institutional violence.

From a personal perspective, the evolution of information technology and telecommunications has progressed significantly since the advent and development of technological media. These platforms enable free user interactions and provide unrestricted access to all types of users, including those who disseminate false information, giving rise to the well-known phenomenon of fake accounts. Prominent social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, and particularly WhatsApp, exhibit such characteristics.

As Serrano and Serrano (2023) note, social networks facilitate virtual connectivity, allowing individuals to interact without physical presence, thereby enabling cultural exchange, transcending borders, fostering connections, and incorporating ideas that can help combat and reduce harassment.

Crime and violence are widely recognized as obstacles to sustainable development and economic progress. According to the United Nations (2024), Latin America and the Caribbean exhibit the highest levels of violence globally, accounting for approximately 60% of incidence rates.

Within South America, a ranking of countries with the greatest violence impact reflects high criminality rates, as reported by El Universo (2025). The relevant data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Insecurity index by country*

No.	Country	Insecurity index
1	Colombia	79.21
2	Mexico	78.42
3	Russia	75.65
4	Venezuela	64.09
5	Peru	58.15
6	Nicaragua	56.48
7	Ecuador	55.54
8	Honduras	50,76
9	Brazil	50.07
10	El Salvador	48.51
11	Ukraine	48.42
12	Panama	48.24
13	Haiti	45.05

14	Guatemala	43.38

In Ecuador, 2023 was recorded as the bloodiest year in its recent history, with homicide rates surpassing those of historically violent countries such as Honduras, Mexico, and Colombia. This escalation paralleled the activities of criminal groups exploiting civilians to advance their internal conflicts, as noted by Dudley et al. (2024).

According to the Ministerio del Interior (2023), insecurity levels, particularly in Guayaquil, have reached alarming proportions over the past three years, with the city identified as an epicenter of violence. Regional criminal organizations have triggered bloody battles for control of key municipal positions and community governance, creating captive pools of recruits, victims, and drug consumers. This dynamic has profoundly affected not only residents' daily lives but also household structures and family dynamics.

This study originated from observations of incidents within this educational context and from the continuous attention given to cases reported to the Student Counseling Department (DECE), where students and parents daily lodge complaints regarding cyberbullying perpetrated by peers from the same institution. Victims describe growing emotional distress and express fear of potential retaliation from alleged aggressors once their actions become known.

Thus, the objective of this research was to characterize the prevalence and forms of digital violence reported among students at the Joaquín Gallegos Lara School in the Guayaquil suburbs, describing victimization status, types of violence, and primary occurrence mechanisms, with comparative analysis by gender.

Methodology

Study design and approach

An observational, non-experimental, cross-sectional study with a descriptive scope was conducted, following the framework established by Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza (2018). The study aimed to characterize manifestations of violence in digital environments and their gender-based distribution within a school context, using data collected through a structured online survey.

Study area

This research was carried out at a public educational institution under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture. The school operates three academic sessions: a morning session offering technical baccalaureate specializations in Computing, Accounting, Electromechanics, Construction and Metal Structures Fabrication, and Automotive Mechanics; an afternoon session for upper basic education (grades 8 through 10); and an evening session offering a "two-for-one" program for grades 8–10 and intensive baccalaureate studies.

Located in the suburbs of Guayaquil, the school hosts a diverse community of administrative staff, teachers, students, and parents, with an estimated total enrollment of approximately 1,300 students across all sessions.

Population and sample

The target population consisted of 233 students enrolled in the afternoon session at Joaquín Gallegos Lara School in suburban Guayaquil (N = 233). The effective analyzed sample comprised 197 students (n = 197). Assuming a 95% confidence level (z = 1.96), a conservative proportion estimate of p = q = 0.5, and applying finite population correction, the achieved sample size corresponds to an approximate margin of error of ±2.75% for estimating proportions within the target population. Participants were selected through random sampling, yielding a probabilistic sample.

Instruments and variables

Data collection employed a survey composed of structured questions administered via an online form, following an initial reliability test and expert review, as well as a pilot test applied to approximately 10% of the population prior to full-scale implementation.

Additionally, a cybervictimization assessment instrument based on Nocentini et al. (2010) and adapted by Cortez (2025) was utilized, featuring an ordinal response scale: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Often; 4 = Always.

The variables analyzed were categorical and included: victimization status (non-victim/cyber-observer/victim on 1 or 2 occasions), type of violence reported, and form/channel of occurrence (private vs. public messages), along with the sociodemographic variable of gender.

Procedure

Confidentiality protocols were applied, and informed consent was obtained from selected participants. Given that participants were minors, institutional protocols were followed, including permissions and consent from legal guardians.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with frequencies and percentages employed to summarize the distribution of categories. Results are presented in aggregate form through comparative tables and graphs by gender.

Ethical considerations

The study incorporated confidentiality agreements and informed consent procedures, safeguarding participant identities and reporting results only in aggregated form.

Institutional permissions were obtained through a confidentiality agreement and the signing of informed consent by legal guardians, as all sample participants were minors. A WhatsApp group was created for participants, and digital media were used to indirectly demonstrate the positive value of networks in other aspects.

Results and discussion

Application of the sociodemographic survey to the 197-student sample revealed that females comprised a higher percentage than males (59% and 41%, respectively); two individuals identified with genders other than male or female. Seventy percent of participants were 16 years old.

Based on the survey results, Figure 1 shows that 58% of participants reported no direct victimization, indicating that over half of the sample had not been directly victimized across the considered categories. Cyber-observers, students who had witnessed or been exposed to violent situations in digital environments without being direct victims, constituted the second-largest group (18%). Direct victims appeared in smaller proportions, divided between those who reported having suffered violence on one occasion (11%) and those who indicated having suffered it on two occasions (13%). Collectively, these findings suggest that although the majority do not identify as direct victims, there is a notable degree of exposure and victimization within the digital environment among the studied group.

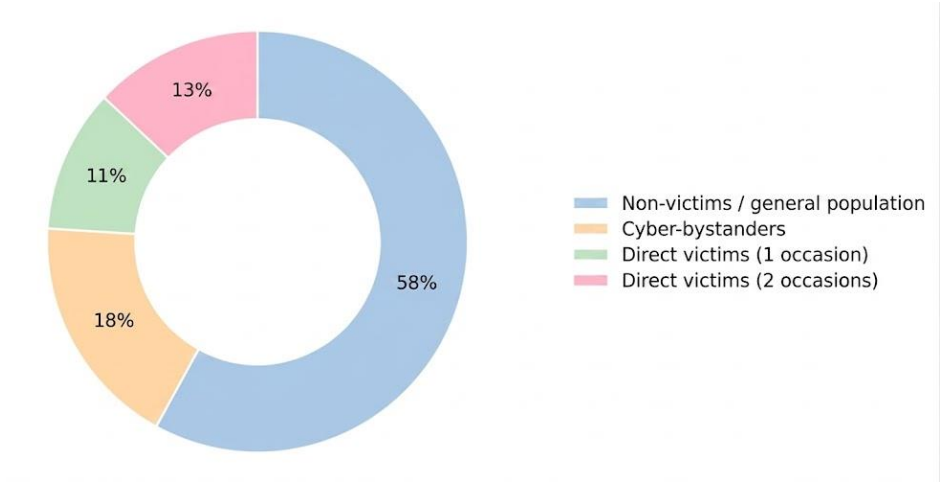
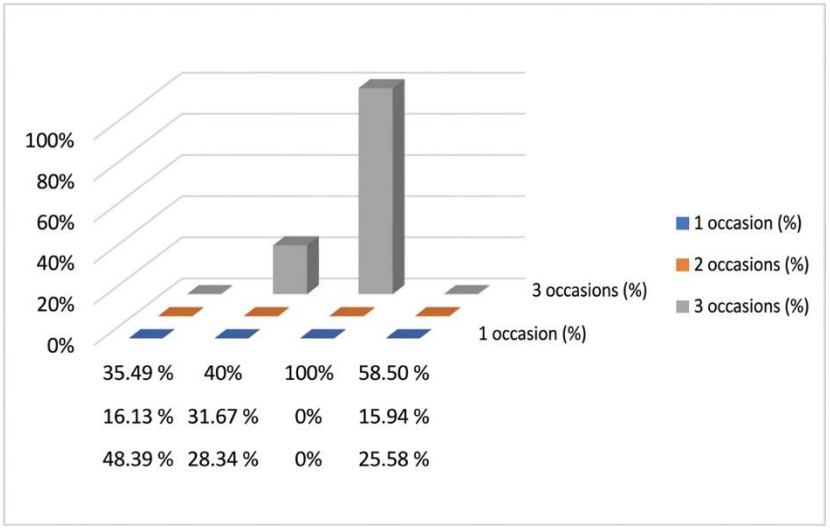


Figure 1. Experiences of digital violence among students (n = 197).

Female students accounted for the highest proportion of those affected on more than three occasions (40%), whereas male students predominantly reported victimization on a single occasion (48%), and individuals of other genders mostly reported three occasions.



Angee Cortez- Victims by occasion 1

Figure 3 presents the percentage distribution of the types of violence reported by gender. Among females, the "Other" category concentrated the highest proportion (38.3%), followed by family violence (25.0%) and sexual violence (23.3%), while the academic (1.67%) and political (5.0%) categories showed the lowest values. Among males, the largest proportion corresponded to academic (22.6%), followed by sexual violence and "Other" (both 19.3%), with lower percentages in political (9.68%) and family (13.3%) domains. Overall, the results reveal a differential pattern by gender, with a greater concentration of reports in "Other" and family violence among females, and a higher proportion in the academic category among males.

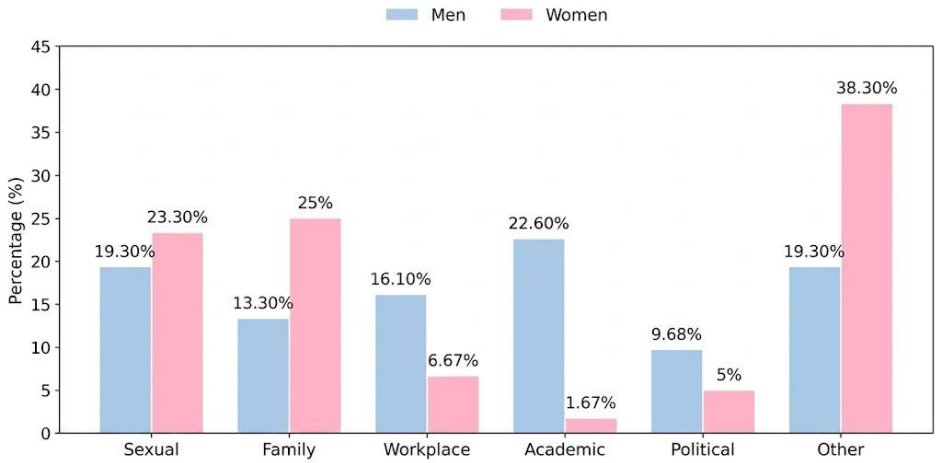


Figure 3. Percentage distribution of types of violence reported by gender. Comparison between males and females across categories: sexual, family, workplace, academic, political, and other.

This section addressed types of violence focusing on the individual's physical appearance or body configuration, applicable to both males and females, followed by comments directed at political orientation and the sending of digital pornography by the aggressor. Examining results by gender reveals differentiated patterns in the types of violence reported. Among females, the predominant category was aggressive comments directed at their person or body (45%), distantly followed by the sender sharing intimate images of the aggressor (5%) and

aggressive comments based on political orientation (5%). No female respondents reported demands to publish intimate images or aggressive comments about sex or sexual orientation.

Among males, aggressive comments toward their person or body also predominated (20%); however, a greater relative participation was observed in specific categories, particularly the sending of intimate images of the aggressor (10%) and aggressive comments based on political orientation (10%). Additionally, demands to publish intimate images were reported exclusively by males (5%), while categories related to aggressive comments about sex and sexual orientation registered no cases.

Globally, the highest concentration of responses fell under aggressive comments toward the person or body (65%), confirming that this form of violence constitutes the main axis of the phenomenon reported in the sample; the remaining categories remained at low proportions (≤15%).

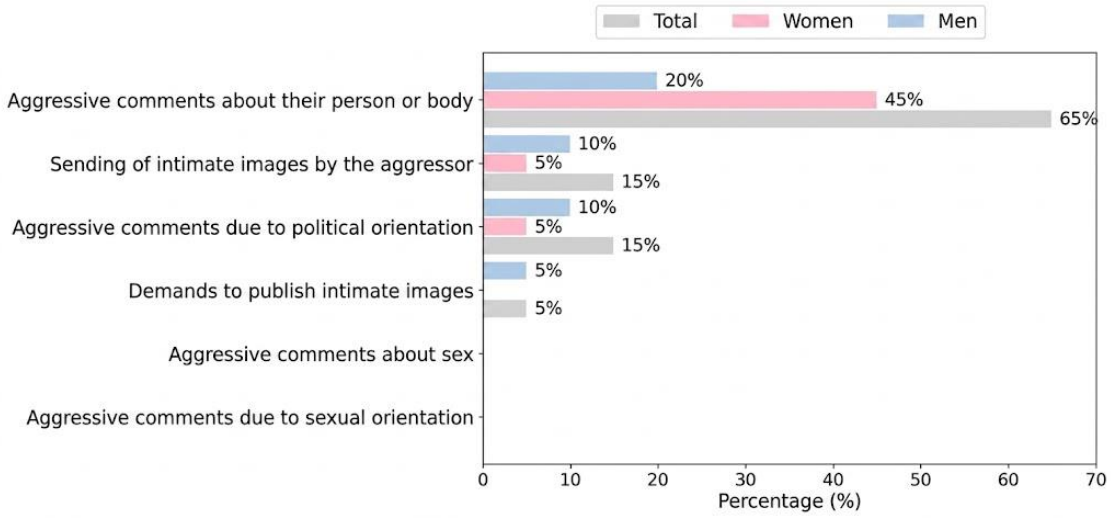


Figure 4. Types of violence by opinion and gender.

Furthermore, results show that within the "other" category, the most frequently reported medium for perpetrating violence through social networks was private messaging, with gender-based differences (Figure 5).

Among females, a clearly dominant pattern of private messages was observed (71.6%), while public messages represented a smaller proportion (28.4%). This suggests that, in this group, the violence reported in "other" primarily occurs through direct, non-publicly visible interactions.

Among males, private messaging also predominated (54.8%); however, the distribution was more balanced, with public messages reaching 45.2%. This indicates that, for males, violence under "other" manifests in both private spaces and more publicly exposed scenarios, although with a slight predominance of private channels.

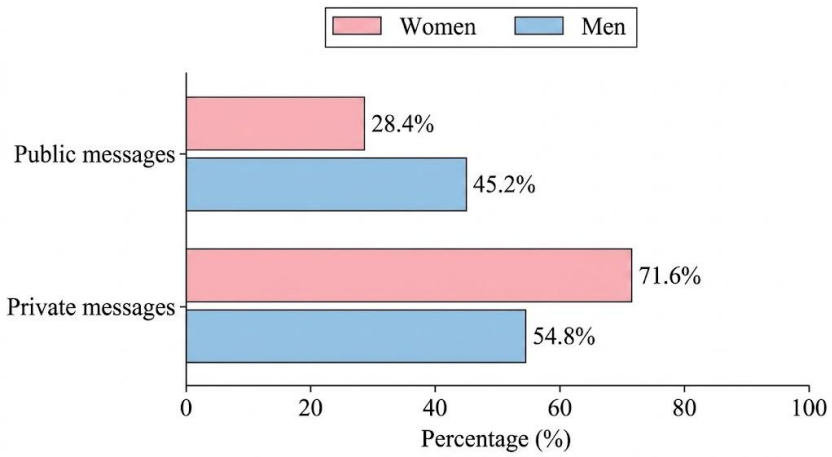


Figure 5. Distribution of message types reported in the "other" category by gender.

When examining the motivations leading to violence via social networks among students at Joaquín Gallegos Lara School in Guayaquil, the presumed primary causes appear to involve other aspects not captured in the survey, continuing from sexual types. In this regard, the findings align with those of Ferreiro et al. (2023), who identified behavioral manifestations related to sexism among study participants who did not conform to pre-established societal standards of beauty or who did not display excessive early interest in males.

Similarly, as Flores and Brown (2022) revealed, sexual stereotypes persist in current digital communication spaces and are reproduced by being maintained within societal parameters such as schools, households, and health systems. Likewise, Hernández (2022) noted in his analysis that sexual violence affected both women and men, but that women were more susceptible to expressions of sexual violence due to sociocultural reasons.

When delving more deeply into the emotions provoked by violent actions among victims, fear and insecurity emerged as the most common, with reference to the comparative study by Escudero (2021), who found that victims predominantly experienced fear, along with feelings of guilt, believing that the cause of their suffering originated from themselves and their own expressions or actions.

With respect to the profile of individuals who perpetrated some type of violence, analysis revealed diversity, with most using their own accounts and very few resorting to fake profiles. Nearly all perpetrators were unknown individuals, with only a very small percentage being acquaintances using their own profiles. Notably, this finding diverges from what Rivadulla and Rodríguez (2021) proposed, who indicated that, for female victims, aggressors were mostly former friends, whereas for males, they were people they knew but with whom they did not share a close bond.

Thus, the dynamics of violence through social networks among students at Joaquín Gallegos Lara School in suburban Guayaquil exhibit considerable complexity, underscoring the relevance of violent acts generated on social media within the student population.

Conclusions

Violence generated on social media appears to be implicitly embedded in the daily experiences of students at Joaquín Gallegos Lara School in suburban Guayaquil. A significant proportion of sampled students acted as cyber-observers of violent actions through social networks. A substantial percentage reported having been victims of violence or intimidation via social media.

The distribution of violence types revealed clear gender-based differences, suggesting distinct patterns of exposure and/or recognition between males and females. From a sociodemographic perspective, women in this study exhibited a higher overall incidence.

From a general standpoint regarding types of violence, numerous points represent unidentified forms of violence and those of a sexual nature. However, the most common category involved aggressive comments

directed at victims through internal messaging, leading to feelings of fear, insecurity, and guilt. Among males, this generated higher levels of insecurity, helplessness, and stress, with lower levels of fear.

Among females, the "other types of violence" category predominated (38.3%), followed by family violence (25.0%) and sexual violence (23.3%), indicating that reported experiences are primarily concentrated within the domestic sphere and in forms of violence that are not always categorized or explicitly addressed within traditional classifications.

Among males, the highest percentage fell under the academic category (22.6%), followed by sexual violence and "others" (19.3% each), suggesting that institutional contexts may play a relevant role in how these experiences are reported or perceived.

The consistent presence of the "other" category across both genders highlights a potential limitation in the classification system used; therefore, broadening or redefining categories in future measurements is recommended to better capture the diversity of violence manifestations and reduce sub-classification.

Overall, the results support the need for gender-differentiated prevention and intervention strategies, alongside specific actions in family and institutional settings, prioritizing safe reporting mechanisms, support services, and education for prevention.

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