Research Article

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Rethinking Education 4 Inclusive Development

Psycho-Social Effects of Cyberbullying in Selected Secondary Schools, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract: The psychological and social effects of cyberbullying on secondary school students are deep and far-reaching. Effectively addressing this issue requires a holistic approach involving the active participation of researchers alongside educators. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the psychological and social influence of cyberbullying on secondary school learners in selected KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools, South Africa. The Coping with Cyber Bullying Questionnaire (CWCBQ) was adopted from Sticca's works. While the p-value was used to establish the psychological and social influence of cyberbullying among secondary school learners, the independent t-test ($\alpha = \leq 0.05$) was used to compare differences in opinions among learners regarding the psychosocial effects of cyberbullying on victims in secondary schools. The study revealed that there were no statistical differences in cyberbullying behaviour and psychosocial effects on victims in secondary schools. Very few learners affirmed that cyberbullying could cause social and psychological harm to the lives of those who are bullied online. The study recommended the collaboration of various stakeholders, including learners, parents, teachers, school administrators, psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement agencies, to participate in the reduction, prevention, and management of cyberbullying in schools.

Keywords: Bullying, cyberbullying, cyber victimisation, psycho-social effects, collaborative partnership.

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying refers to the wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices, often done anonymously. In today's digital world, learners require electronic devices to access information and resources. These devices help students understand complex concepts, while quizzes and games can be used to reinforce learning and make it more engaging. However, while there are many benefits to using the internet, adolescents primarily log on to socialise (CRIN, 2001). Despite the advantages these gadgets offer, they also provide numerous opportunities for learners to harass one another. As the scale of gadget usage and the popularity of social networking continue to soar, so too do the opportunities for the misuse of technology. Predictors of cyberbullying behaviour include lower levels of cognitive empathy—understanding other people's emotional states—as well as affective empathy, which means responding emotionally to others' feelings. O'Dea and Campbell (2012) affirm that being part of an online social network may increase the likelihood of being contacted by strangers.

Although cyberbullying behaviours do not initially occur at school, their emotional effects often accompany secondary school learners when they attend. These emotions can lead to increases in violence and truancy, as well as decreased academic performance. Schools have a vested interest in addressing issues related to cyberbullying (Beran & Li, 2005). Cyberbullying is a phenomenon that is radically increasing. Studies on cyberbullying in secondary schools suggest that online bullying not only causes considerable suffering to individual learners but also has adverse effects on the school atmosphere (Smith, 2014; Gale, 2016). Cyberbullying has detrimental effects on secondary

school learners, leaving emotional and social scars on victims, often even more than traditional forms of bullying. Studies in the UK found that victims of cyberbullying showed a greater decrease in dimensions of self-concept, self-esteem, psychological maladjustment, and low levels of empathy. They experience loneliness and are afflicted with depressive symptomatology and stress compared to victims of traditional forms of bullying (Tintor et al., 2021; Estevez et al., 2019; Kyriacou & Zuiu, 2018). Chikwuere et al. (2022) found that cyberbullying has serious implications for university student life in Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Cameroon. The study determined the psychosocial impact and implications of cyberbullying on students using social media, which continuously undermined their academic progress and success. Similarly, a study conducted in Tanzania found that victims reported experiencing negative emotional, social, cognitive, behavioural, and academic outcomes due to online victimisation (Onditi, 2017).

While an increase in cyberbullying awareness is certainly evident, there is inadequate research to provide South African secondary schools with cyberbullying awareness and proactive steps to combat the problem. An extensive review of national literature on cyberbullying highlighted some research limitations. The available literature focuses on correlations between cyberbullying and cyber victimisation (Baldry et al., 2015; Popovic & Leoschut, 2012; Mkhize & Gopal, 2021; Tustin et al., 2014), the negative outcomes of cyberbullying on learners (Litwiller & Breusch, 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Dredge et al., 2014; Popovich & Leoschut, 2012; Smit, 2015; Tippett & Wolke, 2014), as well as the correlation between learners' characteristics, such as age, gender, school location, etc., and cyberbullying (Nkwanyana & Nzima, 2022; Biliso, 2020; Govender & Young, 2018; Motswi & Moshegoane, 2017; Campbell et al., 2020; Bayazit, Simsek & Ayhan, 2017; Young & Govender, 2018; Motswi & Moshegoane, 2017; Tustin et al., 2014; Cilliers & Chinyamurindibi, 2021).

Comparatively, there is very limited evidence in the literature regarding the social and psychological impact of cyberbullying on secondary school learners, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal (Chibuike et al., 2021; Chikwuere et al., 2021; Cilliers & Chinyamurindibi, 2021; Pillay, 2012; Motswi & Moshegoane, 2017; Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015). Against this backdrop, the present study was conducted to establish the psycho-social effects of cyberbullying on secondary school learners in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of this study could help the Department of Education and school authorities develop appropriate policies and take positive measures to combat cyberbullying behaviour in schools.

1.1 Psychosocial influence of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying attacks can be psychologically vicious (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009). Victims of cyberbullying may experience a variety of emotional impacts, with most showing an increase in emotional distress (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Similarly, et al. (2020) posited that, because of the public nature of cyberbullying, victims are compelled to bear the burden alone, as it is not easy to report such humiliation to others. Negative perceptions of cyberbullying create mental health challenges, as the messages from social media platforms serve as a constant reminder. Specific behavioural impacts and common factors derived from studies on cyberbullying (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Dredge et al., 2014) reported on learners in Grades 7 to 9.

Victims of cyberbullying may be less resourceful and resilient due to high levels of loneliness, which transfer into the online environment (Dredge et al., 2014). Popoviv and Leoschut (2012) assert that lower academic achievement and lower self-esteem are associated with cyberbullying perpetration, victimisation, and anxiety symptoms related to cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, in general, could lead to feelings of incompetence, alienation, and depression (Smit, 2015).

South African studies have produced mixed findings regarding the psychological effects of cyberbullying. Some studies have identified a significant relationship between cyberbullying and the mental well-being of learners, as well as emotional distress (Mong, 2020). These studies found that

cyberbullying resulted, among other indicators, in learners experiencing poor concentration, low academic achievement, absenteeism, anxiety, suicidal ideation, a sense of helplessness, and low self-esteem. Conversely, other studies examining the relationship between gender and cyberbullying among learners in Limpopo found no significant differences between cyberbullying behaviour and psychological and emotional distress (Motswi & Mashengoane, 2017; Paruk & Nassen, 2022)

Cyberbullying may adversely affect learners' social wellbeing in schools. When learners navigate computers, cell phones, and other electronic gadgets to acquire academic information, relate to and socialise with others, they may experience online harassment. Through their social involvement on social media, they can become perpetrators, victims, or bystanders in cyberbullying behaviour at school. Piccoli et al. (2020) distinguish between informational influence and referential informational social influence. Informational influence refers to new information or arguments provided in a group discussion that change a group member's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviour, while normative influence is conformity based on one's desire to fulfil others' expectations to gain acceptance (Piccoli et al., 2020). By being surrounded by peers who bully online, a learner may become involved in cyberbullying behaviour as a victim, a perpetrator, or a spectator.

 When bullying persists and a school does not take action, the entire school climate and culture can be negatively impacted. This hinders student learning and engagement, affects staff retention and satisfaction, and undermines parental confidence in the school, leading students to perceive that teachers and staff have little control and do not care about them (Sharif, 2008). Chukwuere et al. (2021), who studied the psychosocial effects of social media in African countries, found that cyberbullying had educational implications. The study revealed that learners were missing classes, quitting school, and disliking interactions with other learners because they had been bullied on social networks. Several bullying prevention programmes have been developed and tested in schools over the years. However, a growing body of research suggests that staff attitudes towards bullying, their perceptions of its prevalence, and their beliefs in their efficacy to intervene are critical markers for the success of intervention efforts (Biggs et al., 2008; Kallestad & Olweus, 2003).

1.2 Problem statement

Nowadays, schools rely heavily on technological resources such as computers, tablets, and cell phones as sources of information and teaching materials. These electronic gadgets have become integral to the support of learning and teaching during the educational process. The often-uncensored use of these gadgets enables learners to harass their peers online, making victims of cyberbullying susceptible wherever technology is accessed. The annually published Global Advisor Cyberbullying Study by marketing company Ipsos has revealed troubling statistics around cyberbullying, painting an especially worrying picture for South African schools, parents, and educational stakeholders (Johannes, 2018). When it came to their own children, 25% of South African parents reported that their child had been a victim of cyberbullying. The consequences of cyberbullying may lead to serious psychological and social distress, lower academic performance, and even suicidal tendencies among learners. Schools, parents, and other stakeholders in the education sector need to take necessary precautionary measures to curb cyberbullying behaviour and ensure the safety of learners in schools. There is a significant body of literature, both globally and locally, that discusses the effects of cyberbullying behaviour on learners (Baldry et al., 2016; Mkhize & Gopal, 2021; Tustin et al., 2014; Litwiller & Breusch, 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Dredge et al., 2014; Popovich & Leoschut, 2012; Smit, 2015; Tippett & Wolke, 2014; Nkwanyana & Nzima, 2022; Govender & Young, 2018; Motswi & Moshegoane, 2017; Campbell et al., 2020; Bayazit, Simsek, & Ayhan, 2017; Young & Govender, 2018; Motswi & Moshegoane, 2017; Tustin et al., 2014; Cilliers & Chinyamurind, 2021). However, there is very limited evidence in the literature regarding the psychosocial effects of cyberbullying in secondary schools, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. The

present study was conducted to address the effects of cyberbullying in KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools.

1.2.1 Research questions

The study aimed to answer the following research question: *Does cyberbullying have a psychosocial influence on learners in KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools?* To ensure reliability and validity, the CWCBQ was compared with studies conducted by authors who have examined the emotional and social impact of cyberbullying on young people.

2. Methodology and Ethical Considerations

The researcher used a quantitative approach to conduct this survey, which falls within the positivist research paradigm. The study was conducted in selected schools in the uThungulu, uMkhanyakude, and Zululand Districts. The Coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire (CWCBQ) was used to collect data from a sample of three hundred (300) learners drawn from 30 secondary schools. Fifteen of these schools were selected from rural areas and another fifteen from urban areas using a simple random sampling method. The data were analysed using the 19th edition of the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Yockey, 2018). Descriptive statistics were utilised to determine whether cyberbullying impacts learners' psychosocial well-being.

To address the objective of the study, the Coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire (CWCBQ) was adopted from the works of Sticca et al. (2015). To ensure reliability and validity, the CWCBQ was compared against studies by authors who have examined the emotional and social impact of cyberbullying on young people (Ranjith et al., 2023; Smith, 2014). The research instrument assessed themes such as depression, anxiety, hatred, self-esteem, suicide, mental health challenges, and poor academic achievement, all worsened by cyberbullying. Because the data presented were based on the disagreement between ranks of responses, the respondents' answers were rated using a four-point Likert scale where 1 = "strongly agree," 2 = "agree," 3 = "disagree," and 4 = "strongly disagree." The mean value of the individual variables was used to establish the degree and rank of the variables. A correlational analysis was used to determine whether cyberbullying behaviour has a psychosocial influence on victims in secondary schools. A one-sample t-test ($\alpha = \leq 0.05$) was employed to determine whether the mean differs significantly, while the p-value was used to establish the psychosocial influence of cyberbullying among secondary school learners.

The informed consent form was obtained and signed by the participants. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the nature of the questionnaire, and their rights, including confidentiality and the ability to withdraw at any time. Permission was sought from the Department of Basic Education to administer the questionnaire in the schools. Based on the respondents' approval, it was then decided to meet them personally with the questionnaire and retrieve it after three days. Ethical clearance was sought from the University of Zululand Research and Ethics Committee.

The study was conducted in selected schools in the uThungulu, uMkhanyakude, and Zululand Districts. The sample of three hundred (300) learners was drawn from 30 secondary schools, that is, ten schools from each district, using a simple random sampling method. Fifteen of these schools were selected from rural areas and another fifteen from urban areas, using a simple random sampling method. A total of 10 learners were randomly selected from each school, as illustrated in the population sampling distribution table below.

Table 1: Population sampling distribution table

Population sampling	Rural schools	Sample size	Urban schools	Sample size
Uthungulu district	5 schools	50 learners	5 schools	50 learners

Umkhanyakude district	5 schools	50 learners	5 schools	50 learners
Zululand district	5 schools	50 learners	5 schools	50 learners
Total	15 rural schools	150 learners	15 urban schools	150 learners

2.1 Ethical considerations

The study adhered to principles of research ethics. Respondents were informed of the objectives of the study. The researcher read and internalised the ethical guidelines provided by the university's research and higher degree committees. The use of the respondents' input was based on their consent, and they were not coerced into participating in the research. They were also allowed to withdraw at any time if the need arose. The issuance of informed consent was central to participants' voluntary participation. A confidentiality agreement was signed between the researcher and the respondents, stipulating that their identities would not be disclosed. Respondents were not promised any incentives for completing the questionnaires. It was envisaged that the research would benefit society, not just individual respondents. The researcher adhered to the university's Policy and Procedures on Research Ethics and its Policy and Procedures on Managing and Preventing Acts of Plagiarism. The study observed the principles of research ethics, namely informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

3. Presentation of Results

Does cyberbullying have a psychosocial influence on victimised learners in secondary schools? To determine whether cyberbullying has psychosocial effects on learners in secondary schools, seven key lead indicators emerged, namely: depression, anxiety, hatred, self-esteem, suicide, mental health challenges, and low academic performance. One-Sample Statistics (Table 2) and the One-Sample Test (Table 3) were used to present the data.

Table 2: One-sample statistics

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cyber-bullying promotes depression	300	1.94	1.103	64
Cyber-bullying leads to anxiety	300	1.69	103	58
Cyber-bullying promotes hatred	300	1.66	.998	58
Cyber-bullying lowers self-esteem	300	1.75	.978	56
Cyber-bullying may result in suicide	300	1.77	172	62
Cyber-bullying may result in mental health challenges	300	20	1.161	67
Cyber-bullying may lower academic performance	300	1.71	141	60

Table 3: One sample Test

	Test Value = 2				
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
					Lower
Cyber-bullying promotes depression	-.994	299	.321	-63	-.19
Cyber-bullying leads to anxiety	-5.413	299	00	-.313	-.43
Cyber-bullying promotes hatred	-5.960	299	00	-.343	-.46
Cyber-bullying lowers self-esteem	-4.426	299	00	-.250	-.36
Cyber-bullying may result in suicide	-3.770	299	00	-.233	-.36
Cyber-bullying may result in mental health challenges	-50	299	.960	-03	-.14
Cyber-bullying may lower academic performance	-4.879	299	00	-.293	-.41

3.1 Cyber-bullying leads to depression

Does cyberbullying promote depression? The results presented in Table 1 indicate that the mean of the sample (1.94) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 2 (see Table 2). Additionally, the results presented in Table 3 reveal that the t-test statistic is -0.994, while the p-value is 0.321. The p-value of 0.321 is greater than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and the test value of 2 is (-1.19, 0.6). The study indicates that cyberbullying does not promote depression in secondary schools.

3.2 Cyber-bullying leads to anxiety

Cyberbullying leads to anxiety. The results indicate that the mean of the sample (1.69) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 2 (see Table 2). Additionally, the results presented in Table 3 reveal that the t-test statistic is -5.413, while the p-value is 0.000. This p-value is less than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and the test value of 2 is (-0.43, -0.20). The study found that the learners believe cyberbullying does lead to anxiety.

3.3 Cyber-bullying promotes hatred

Table 3 presents the statistical significance of how much learners agree or disagree with the statement that cyberbullying promotes hatred. The mean of the sample (1.66) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 2 (Table 2). Also, the result as presented in Table 3 revealed that the t-test statistic is -5.960 while the p-value is 0.000. The p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and 2 is (-0.46, -0.23). The findings of the study revealed that cyberbullying does promote hatred.

3.4 Cyber-bullying lowers self-esteem

Does cyberbullying lower self-esteem? The results reveal that the mean of the sample (1.75) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 2 (Table 2). Also, the result, as presented in Table 3, revealed that the t-test statistic is -4.426, while the p-value is 0.000. The p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and 2 is (-0.36, -0.14). The study found that cyberbullying lowers self-esteem.

3.5 Cyber-bullying may result in suicide

Cyberbullying may result in suicide. The results reveal that the mean of the sample (1.77) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 3 (see Table 2). Additionally, as presented in Table 3, the t-test statistic is -3.770, while the p-value is 0.000. The p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and 2 is (-0.36, -0.11). Therefore, it was found that cyberbullying may not result in suicide.

3.6 Cyber-bullying results in mental health challenges

Cyberbullying may result in mental health challenges. The results indicate that the mean of the sample (20) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 3 (Table 2). Additionally, the results presented in Table 3 show that the t-test statistic is -0.50, while the p-value is 0.960. The p-value of 0.960 is greater than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and 2 is (-0.14, 0.13). The findings of the study suggest that cyberbullying may not lead to mental illness.

3.7 Cyber-bullying lowers academic performance

Cyberbullying may lower academic performance. The results indicated that the mean of the sample (1.71) is statistically and significantly different from the test value of 2 (Table 2). Additionally, the result presented in Table 3 revealed that the t-test statistic is -4.879 while the p-value is 0.000. The p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05. The 95% confidence interval estimate for the difference between the population mean score and 2 is (-0.41, -0.18). The study found that cyberbullying may negatively impact the academic performance of learners.

4. Discussion of Findings

The objective of the study was to explore the psychosocial influence of cyberbullying on learners in secondary schools. A one-sample t-test was used to determine whether the mean significantly differs from the hypothesised mean. The association between psychosocial effects indicators such as depression, anxiety, hatred, self-esteem, suicide, and mental health challenges was examined in relation to cyberbullying behaviour. The findings of the study revealed that there was no significant association between cyberbullying and depression among learners in secondary schools. Relatively similar results were found in the study by Kircaburun et al. (2019), which reported a very weak association between cyberbullying and depression among learners. These findings contradict those of the study by McDermott (2012), which found that the more learners experience cyberbullying, the more likely they are to report depressive symptoms compared to those who experienced less cyberbullying. The study further revealed that there is no significant association between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation. Similar findings were observed by Dennehy et al. (2020), whose study revealed that young participants perceived suicide as a solution to cyber victimisation across four secondary schools.

According to the present study, very few learners acknowledged that cyberbullying could cause social and psychological harm to their lives. There could be a variety of reasons for this. For learners, it is often just fun, and they find it entertaining. If there are spectators or others laughing along, this can encourage them to continue. Some learners bully others because they do not realise it is wrong

or do not understand the level of pain they are causing someone else. Revenge could also be a reason, as some learners may not be aware of the harmful consequences of cyberbullying. Power, frustration, and anonymity might also be factors that lead many learners to turn a blind eye to the effects of cyberbullying on victims. These findings align with those of Motswi and Mashengoane (2017) and Paruk et al. (2021), who also found no significant relationship between cyberbullying and psychosocial effects on learners in secondary schools.

In addition, the other psychosocial indicators, namely social anxiety, hatred, self-esteem, and mental health challenges, were also associated with cyberbullying. The present study found a significant relationship between these psychosocial distress indicators and cyberbullying. These findings concur with those of the study by Dennehy et al. (2020), which found a positive relationship between the psychosocial indicators and cyberbullying. Most learners believed that cyberbullying aggravated existing mental health problems, such as anxiety. Similar findings were reported by Brett Holfeld et al. (2019), who revealed that involvement in cyberbullying and experiences of cyber victimisation were associated with increased symptoms of anxiety but not depression.

However, these findings contradict those of other studies that found cyberbullying has negative psychological and emotional effects on its victims (Diamanduros et al., 2008; Chibuike et al., 2021; Chikuwuere et al., 2021; Farhanpour et al., 2019; Mong, 2020; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). According to these studies, cyberbullying is likely to have negative effects on learners' psychosocial adjustment or well-being, as evidenced by poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and psychosomatic problems like headaches and sleep disturbances. Similar findings were suggested in the study by Schenk and Fremouw (2012), which found that victims of cyberbullying experience a variety of emotional impacts, including anger, frustration, sadness, hurt, anxiety, embarrassment, and fear. Popoviv and Leoschut (2012) found that lower academic achievement and lower self-esteem are associated with cyberbullying perpetration, victimisation, and anxiety symptoms related to cyberbullying perpetration. Furthermore, the study by Schenk and Fremouw (2012) revealed that cyberbullying victims often suffer from depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, poor concentration, helplessness, and low self-esteem.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study focused on establishing whether cyberbullying has a psychosocial influence on secondary school learners. The findings revealed a mixed relationship between cyberbullying and psychosocial effects. Specifically, the study found no significant association between cyberbullying and psychosocial indicators such as depression and suicide. However, it did reveal a significant relationship between cyberbullying and indicators such as anxiety, self-esteem, and mental health challenges. The current data are based on general responses from participants who may or may not have experienced cyberbullying directly. As a result, it is acknowledged that these findings may not fully capture the nuanced experiences of cyberbullying survivors. While the current findings provide insight into general cyberbullying patterns and behaviours, it is believed that a follow-up study addressing this specific population would make a significant contribution to the literature on cyberbullying and its effects. Such a study would allow for a more detailed examination of their experiences and perspectives, which may further support or refine the conclusions drawn here.

The study recommends the need for collaboration among key stakeholders, namely learners, parents, teachers, and other educational professionals such as school administrators, psychologists, social workers, and law enforcement agencies, to participate in the reduction, prevention, and management of cyberbullying in schools. Schools need to adopt appropriate prevention strategies and incorporate them into existing bullying policies, where they exist, and develop such policies where they do not. They should provide teachers, parents, students, and community members with information about preventing and responding to cyberbullying. The Department of Education needs to assist with the

necessary resources to support schools in implementing intervention models to curb cyberbullying. The department may also consider including lessons on cyberbullying in the school curriculum. When harassment persists for extended periods, it is recommended that such incidents be reported to the police. Parents and teachers should be aware of the legal consequences of cyberbullying and should educate young people that the internet does not shield them from perpetrators. A fundamental element in the prevention and intervention of cyberbullying is social support. Therefore, peer helper programmes may prove particularly useful. Through these programmes, victims of cyberbullying, or any young person, can receive assistance from classmates who have been trained in responsible technology use, the risks involved—including cyberbullying—and coping strategies.

6. Declarations

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