

Mitigating Cyberbullying Through Awareness and Intervention in Rural South African Schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the extent, nature, and impact of cyberbullying among high school learners in rural areas of Queenstown, Eastern Cape, South Africa. As access to digital technology increases, even in remote areas, learners are becoming more exposed to online risks. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 79 learners aged 14 to 21 in Grades 10 to 12 through questionnaires and follow-up interviews. The results showed that cyberbullying was more common and emotionally harmful than traditional bullying. Learners described it as ongoing and anonymous, which made it harder to deal with. A key issue was that many learners did not report incidents because they felt that parents and teachers didn't fully understand social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. The study also found that many rural schools lacked proper policies and awareness programs on cyberbullying. These findings highlight the urgent need for schools to introduce digital safety education, train teachers, and provide safe ways for learners to report incidents. The study calls for stronger support systems to help address the growing problem of cyberbullying in rural communities.

Keywords: Managerial Ownership, Leverage, Firm Size, Return on Assets, Earnings Management.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, technology has become an integral part of daily life, with advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) devices such as computers, smartphones, and tablets facilitating easier access to the internet [1] [2]. The proliferation of social media platforms has further enhanced communication and interaction, enabling individuals and organizations to connect seamlessly [3]. These digital platforms serve multiple purposes,

including information sharing, entertainment, and socialization [4]. However, alongside these benefits, the digital age has introduced challenges such as cybercrime, identity theft, online fraud, and notably, cyberbullying. The online environment allows individuals to engage in behaviors that they might not exhibit in face-to-face interactions, leading to illegal and harmful activities. This trend has extended to school-aged children, who increasingly use social media platforms to bully their peers.

Traditionally, bullying was a physical act, visible to others, and recognized for its psychological harm to victims, often resulting in long-term emotional difficulties and diminished self-esteem. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2018, 20% of students aged 12–18 reported being bullied at school. This prevalence has decreased over the past decade, indicating that interventions implemented in middle and high schools have been effective [5] [6].

In South Africa, cyberbullying has emerged as a significant challenge within schools. A study conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed that more than 95% of children in South Africa have regular access to the internet. However, the study also found that 70% of these children use the internet without parental consent, and 25% have added people they have never met face-to-face to their friends or contacts list. Furthermore, 18% have sent a photo or video of themselves to someone they have never met in person [7] [8]. These behaviors increase the risk of exposure to online violence, exploitation, and abuse. The study also highlighted that only 41% of children had received information on online safety, underscoring the need for comprehensive digital literacy education.

Further research indicates a concerning prevalence of cyberbullying among South African adolescents. A study published in the South African Journal of Psychiatry found that 56.7% of adolescent psychiatric patients had experienced some form of cyberbullying, with 6.2% identified as cyberbullies, 20.6% as cyber-victims, and 29.9% as both. The study also noted that female participants were more likely to be involved in

cyberbullying than males [8].

These findings highlight the complex and pervasive nature of cyberbullying in South African schools, emphasizing the urgent need for effective interventions, policy enforcement, and digital literacy programs to protect and support young people in the digital age.

2. Related Works

In today's digital age, technology plays a major role in our daily lives. With the development of the internet and digital devices like smartphones and tablets, life has become more convenient. Over the last decade, social media platforms have revolutionized how we communicate, interact, and share information. However, as much as these technological advances have brought convenience, they have also introduced significant risks, such as cybercrime, identity theft, online fraud, and one of the most pressing concerns, cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a serious issue, especially among teenagers. Unlike traditional bullying, which is often physical and visible, cyberbullying takes place online, making it easier for perpetrators to remain anonymous and harder for victims to escape. Social media platforms, which encourage self-expression, have inadvertently become breeding grounds for cyberbullying, where young people are targeted for their appearance, intelligence, or personal choices. Research on cyberbullying among South African youth has shown that this phenomenon is widespread, with many students becoming victims of online harassment. For example, a study using Facebook data revealed that the most common forms of cyberbullying include insults about appearance, intelligence, and even more personal matters such as sexting and outing [9].

The impact of cyberbullying extends beyond the digital world and significantly affects the academic performance and mental well-being of victims. As more schools embrace digital devices for teaching and learning, the issue of online harassment becomes even more concerning. Victims of cyberbullying often carry the emotional burden into the classroom, leading to difficulty concentrating, increased stress, and a loss of focus during lessons. Studies have shown that cyberbullying leads to absenteeism, with some students avoiding school altogether to escape their tormentors. In fact, research conducted in South Africa found that a substantial number of victims skipped school, while others reported a significant decline in academic performance due to the emotional toll of online bullying [10].

The emotional impact of cyberbullying is equally severe. Victims often experience feelings of isolation, sadness, and depression. Many choose to withdraw

from social interactions, which further exacerbates their emotional struggles. Research conducted in Limpopo province revealed that a significant percentage of cyberbullying victims reported a loss of self-confidence, depression, frustration, and even suicidal thoughts [10] [11]. These emotional challenges can have long-term consequences on a student's overall well-being and academic success [11].

Given the growing prevalence of cyberbullying, there is an urgent need for schools, parents, and policymakers to address this issue. Implementing comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policies, offering digital safety education, and creating a safe space for students to report incidents are essential steps in combating this form of online harassment. By working together, we can help protect students from the harmful effects of cyberbullying and ensure a safer, more supportive learning environment [11].

i. Teachers

With the increasing reliance on technology in education, it's crucial to develop strategies that ensure safety in the digital space. Teachers and students alike need the right resources and training to maintain a secure environment online. A key concern is that while teachers are often skilled at using technology for teaching, many lack the knowledge to ensure both their own safety and that of their students when navigating cyberspace. Teachers must be trained in data protection practices and understand how to combat cybersecurity threats. Routine Activity Theory (RAT) offers a framework that helps explain the risks of cybercrimes, highlighting three critical elements: the perpetrator (bully), the victim, and the guardian (teacher). Since teachers spend the most time with students, they are often the first to notice changes in behavior or academic performance. This makes them a crucial part of preventing and addressing cyberbullying. However, the lack of awareness and specific guidelines from the Department of Education regarding cyberbullying in schools underscores the need for better training and resources [12].

ii. Impacts

Cyberbullying significantly impacts both victims and perpetrators. While the victims face severe emotional distress, bullies themselves often struggle with psychological issues. Teenagers, often unaware of the consequences of their actions, misuse their access to technology. Cybersecurity should work to create an online environment free from harm, whether digital or physical. Cyberbullying is deeply connected to cybersecurity issues, which not only affect individuals but also compromises the broader cyberspace. Addressing both technical and non-technical aspects of cybersecurity can help mitigate these problems [13].

iii. Family

Family dynamics play a major role in shaping behavior and social interactions. Family support is critical in helping children develop healthy interpersonal skills. Victims of cyberbullying often lack sufficient family support, which can leave them vulnerable to the emotional toll of online harassment [14]. Parents should be more involved in their children's social lives, encouraging participation in social activities and monitoring online behavior. This involvement can help prevent issues like depression and anxiety and increase self-esteem. Socioeconomic factors and parental supervision of technology use also contribute to a child's vulnerability or resilience to cyberbullying [14].

iv. Bullies

The relationship between victims of bullying and those who engage in bullying is complex. Many bullies were themselves once victims, which can perpetuate a cycle of aggression. Cyberbullying often involves a level of anonymity, which makes it harder for the victim to identify the perpetrator. Many teenagers engage in cyberbullying without fully understanding the impact on their victims, viewing it as harmless teasing or entertainment. However, some bullies are motivated by the desire for popularity or to assert power over others. Others may be acting out of loneliness, frustration, or a need to fit in. These motivations can lead to bullying behavior that is both harmful and persistent [15].

v. Audience (Bystanders)

Bystanders can play a key role in cyberbullying, either by perpetuating the issue or by intervening to stop it. Many bystanders choose not to get involved due to fear of retaliation, social pressure, or a desire to avoid being labeled a "snitch." This inaction can indirectly support the bully and contribute to the victim's distress. However, bystanders have the potential to be part of the solution by reporting incidents and supporting victims. The behavior of bystanders is a critical factor in determining the outcome of cyberbullying situations [16].

vi. Depression

Depression is a growing concern among South African youth, with alarming rates of adolescents affected by mental health issues, including those exacerbated by cyberbullying [12]. Cyberbullying is particularly harmful, as it often leads to depression, anxiety, and other emotional issues. Victims of cyberbullying are at a higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, as well as long-term mental health challenges. The effects of cyberbullying can linger long after the incidents themselves, leading to issues such as substance abuse, antisocial behaviors, and even suicide [12]. It's crucial to address these issues both through prevention and intervention, to help

support victims and reduce the occurrence of cyberbullying [17].

vii. South African Legislation and Policies

South African legislation currently addresses bullying in schools but does not yet provide comprehensive rules regarding cyberbullying. While the Constitution acknowledges cyberbullying as a violation of human rights, rapid technological advances have outpaced the development of legal frameworks to protect individuals in cyberspace. The Children's Rights Commission emphasizes the need for stronger measures to safeguard minors, especially in school environments. Although the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011 includes cyberbullying as a form of harassment, more needs to be done to ensure the protection of students and to enforce these laws effectively [18].

viii. Cyberbullying Forms

Cyberbullying manifests in various forms, including:

- **Flaming:** Online arguments or fights that involve aggressive, inflammatory, or offensive language.
- **Harassment:** Sending hurtful or threatening messages with the intent to intimidate or harm the victim.
- **Denigration:** Spreading rumors or false information online to damage someone's reputation.
- **Impersonation:** Pretending to be someone else online to spread harmful content or ruin their reputation.
- **Outing and Trickery:** Sharing private information or embarrassing photos without consent, often to humiliate the victim.
- **Cyberstalking:** Repeatedly sending threatening messages or monitoring the victim's online activities, sometimes leading to identity theft or blackmail.

Each form of cyberbullying carries significant emotional and psychological consequences for the victims, and a greater understanding of these behaviors can help in developing effective strategies to prevent and address the issue.

3. Research Method

This study will adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of young people's behavior and experiences in cyberspace. The primary aim of the research is to focus on online activities, experiences, and to enhance communication with learners. The quantitative method will provide numerical and data-driven insights into the frequency of cyberbullying incidents, mainly relying on self-reported data from participants to measure how often these incidents occur. Quantitative data is useful for performing statistical and mathematical analyses, and

it can be visually represented through graphs and charts. It allows for the generalization of findings based on data collected through interviews, questionnaires, and observations. This approach helps us better understand the scope of the problem. On the other hand, qualitative data will offer a deeper insight into the participants' perceptions and emotional experiences, shedding light on their feelings toward the issue of cyberbullying.

I. Research Design

To gather quantitative data, a survey will be conducted among high school students to measure the prevalence of cyberbullying. This will be achieved through a self-administered survey approach. The participants, consisting of students in grades 10, 11, and 12, will come from various schools, ensuring representation across different gender and age groups. The survey will focus on identifying students' awareness of cyberbullying, their understanding of its potential harm, how frequently they encounter such incidents, and whether they have been personally involved or witnessed cyberbullying. Additionally, the study will explore whether these incidents have been reported [19] [20].

The survey will also test the hypotheses, using a positivistic paradigm as outlined by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009). This will help us gain a clear and unbiased perspective on the occurrence of cyberbullying in cyberspace. The qualitative research design will be used to gain in-depth insight into the victims' perceptions and emotions (Denzin, 1989), providing a fuller understanding of their personal experiences and feelings [21] [22].

II. Population

The target audience for this study will be secondary school students in Queenstown and the surrounding villages. To collect the data, both open and closed-ended questionnaires will be used. The questions will be written in simple and clear language to ensure that all participants fully understand the topic. The questionnaires will focus on how cyberbullying is addressed in their schools and whether the students believe the measures in place are effective. Since the term "effective" may be subjective, the study will provide a definition of the term to ensure consistency across all responses. To facilitate a smooth response process, all participants will receive a letter beforehand that outlines the purpose and significance of the study. This will help participants understand the context of the research and encourage their participation.

III. Data Analysis and Sampling

Data will be collected from students in grades 10, 11, and 12, with both male and female participants from different age groups across various schools. The research will employ an electronic questionnaire,

which will allow for the efficient collection of data. The descriptive statistics method will be used to analyze the responses and identify trends in the data. In addition to collecting quantitative data, the study will also gather informed consent from all participants. This ensures that they are aware of the study's purpose, how their data will be used, and their right to privacy. All data collected will be anonymized, and personal identification will not be used in any way to protect the identity of the participants.

This research approach will provide valuable insights into the extent of cyberbullying in schools and the effectiveness of current measures, while also shedding light on the emotional and psychological experiences of those affected.

4. Results and Discussion

This paper looks at how high school students in Queenstown, Eastern Cape in South Africa, perceive and experience cyberbullying. An electronic survey was conducted with 43 students from Grades 10 to 12, covering topics like demographics, digital access, awareness of online threats, and the effects of cyberbullying. The findings highlight some worrying trends, pointing to the need for stronger interventions and better support for students dealing with cyberbullying.

Participant Demographics

In terms of grade levels, the majority of respondents were in Grade 12 (58.1%), followed by Grade 11 (23.3%) and Grade 10 (18.1%). The age distribution showed that most participants were aged 16–17 (37.2%), which corresponds with the typical age of learners in Grades 11 and 12. The second largest group was aged 18–21 (25.6%), followed by those aged 14–15 (11.6%). This range of ages offers a glimpse into the varied perspectives of learners at different stages of their high school journey.

Gender-wise, the majority of respondents were female (60%), while 33% were male, and 7% chose not to disclose their gender. The slight preference for female learners in the sample suggests that their experiences of cyberbullying might differ from those of their male counterparts, which is something that could be explored further in future studies.

Device Ownership and Internet Usage

When it comes to digital access, nearly three-quarters (74.4%) of learners own a cell phone or tablet, which indicates that most students have personal devices to connect with others online. A smaller portion (9.3%) owned a computer or laptop, and 23.3% had both types of devices. Interestingly, only 2.3% reported owning no personal device, which suggests that digital access is widespread, especially among older students. WhatsApp was the most

popular platform for communication, with 83.7% of respondents using it regularly. Facebook (62%) and Instagram (25.6%) were also commonly used, while Twitter was the least favored (7%). This preference for social messaging apps, especially WhatsApp, highlights the importance of these platforms in the daily lives of students, but also points to potential risks regarding cyberbullying and harassment.

The survey also revealed that 63% of learners spend between 2 to 5 hours online each day. Given the time spent online, it's concerning that 55% of respondents confirmed that their online activity was not monitored by parents or guardians, leaving many students to navigate the digital world without sufficient oversight.

Awareness of Cyber Threats

The study found mixed levels of awareness about cyber threats. While 53.5% of learners were aware of cybercrimes, 30.2% had no understanding of the term. Despite this lack of awareness, most students (83.7%) used password protection on their devices, suggesting some level of understanding of cybersecurity practices. However, a troubling finding was that 53.5% of students who had experienced cyberbullying chose not to report the incidents. Many cited reasons such as fear of retaliation, embarrassment, or simply feeling that the issue wasn't significant enough to warrant attention.

Perceptions and Experiences of Cyberbullying

An overwhelming 93% of respondents agreed that cyberbullying was a serious issue, describing it as harmful, cowardly, and often stemming from the perpetrator's insecurity or desire for dominance. The psychological effects on victims were significant, with many reporting stress, anxiety, depression, and a decline in academic performance. In fact, 50% of those who had been cyberbullied admitted that their schoolwork had suffered as a result. Some learners even resorted to skipping school to avoid further harassment.

Bystander Involvement

A disturbing 43% of respondents identified as bystanders who had witnessed instances of cyberbullying but did nothing to intervene. Common reasons for this inaction included fear of becoming a target themselves or the belief that bullying wasn't their problem. Many learners expressed frustration with bystanders, noting that their passive behavior only enabled bullies to continue their harmful actions. This highlights the need to educate students not only on how to protect themselves but also on how to be proactive in supporting others who are being bullied.

Comparison with Traditional Bullying

When comparing cyberbullying to traditional bullying, most students felt that cyberbullying was more harmful because of its anonymity and its ability to reach a wider audience. Unlike traditional bullying,

which is typically confined to physical spaces like school grounds, cyberbullying can happen at any time and anywhere, making it harder for victims to escape. Some learners (12.4%) admitted to having participated in bullying in the past, often due to peer pressure or personal conflicts. This points to the social factors that can drive students to engage in hurtful behavior, and the need for broader educational efforts to address these underlying issues.

The findings of this study paint a troubling picture of the cyberbullying situation in high schools across the Eastern Cape. Cyberbullying is a serious issue that affects many students' mental health and academic performance. However, the study also reveals significant gaps in reporting, limited parental supervision, and a passive bystander culture that enables the continuation of bullying behavior. The results emphasize the urgent need for schools to implement comprehensive anti-bullying programs that include cybersecurity education, encourage reporting, and foster a culture of intervention among bystanders. These measures are crucial in protecting students and ensuring their well-being in an increasingly digital world.

5. Conclusion

The paper highlights that cyberbullying is a significant issue for high school students, with its impact becoming more severe as students get older. Girls tend to experience more bullying than boys, although boys are more likely to be the ones bullying others. The study suggests that bullying may be less common in younger grades due to lower levels of maturity, but as students mature, they become more aware of the harmful effects of cyberbullying, making it a bigger issue. However, it's not just age or grade level that influences bullying it's also about the lack of supervision and control over online activities, which increases the risk of students becoming victims.

The growth of internet access and device ownership for educational purposes has introduced risks that schools and teachers can't always manage, especially outside of school hours. Since many students are online for hours each day, interacting on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, it increases their chances of being targeted by cyberbullies. These incidents often happen after school or on weekends when victims are alone and vulnerable. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can follow students everywhere, making it much harder for them to escape.

The study also found that bystanders often don't intervene when they see cyberbullying, either out of fear of becoming targets themselves or because they don't feel it's their problem. This lack of intervention allows bullying to continue unchecked. Cyberbullying

takes a huge toll on victims, affecting their mental and emotional well-being. Many victims become anxious, depressed, and socially isolated, and in some cases, it leads to suicidal thoughts. Victims often struggle with their schoolwork and may even skip school to avoid the bullying.

In conclusion, the study suggests that schools, parents, and the wider community need to take stronger action to prevent cyberbullying. Schools should implement programs to raise awareness and address bullying when it happens, while parents need to monitor their children's online activity more closely. Everyone has a role to play in stopping cyberbullying and protecting the mental health and well-being of young people.

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