

Cyberbullying and learner wellbeing in South Africa: A Social Work Perspective

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Research Article

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Abstract

The rise of globalization, accessibility of technology, and digital connectivity has increased cyberbullying among learners in South Africa, presenting a consequential threat to their well-being. This study explores the devastating, harmful effects of cyberbullying in educational settings and the role of technology and social media in perpetuating this phenomenon. The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design, using semi-structured interviews with 21 social workers from the Limpopo Department of Social Development. Participants were purposively selected based on eligibility and experience with school-based bullying cases. Five themes emerged from the thematic content analysis: school violence and gangsterism, academic decline, suicidal ideation, mental health deterioration, and the permanence of digital records. The findings underscore the urgent need for policy intervention, psychosocial support, and school-based prevention strategies. The study highlights the critical role of social workers in mitigating the impact of cyberbullying on learners.

Introduction

Cyberbullying constitutes a serious violation of fundamental human rights. This includes the rights to safety, psychological well-being, education, and dignity as enshrined in the South African Constitution and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Masilo, 2018). Cyberbullying is the repeated intentional act that is harmful to learners through technological tools, social media, and digital platforms. The emergence of globalization has increased accessibility to technological devices and global internet use among learners (Orben, 2020). Learners use social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Short Message Service (SMS) extensively as their primary means of communication. These social networking sites are also used inappropriately to harm other learners perceived as weaker targets (Smith & Anderson, 2018). While social networking sites and the internet can be used to enrich the learners and enhance their education, they can also be used to make others lose self-esteem and to expose other learners to violence, aggression, and cyberbullying (Cosma et al., 2020). Cyberbullying has become more common because of the socialization done through the digital and technological era. Digital socialization occurs without adult supervision or restriction (Paat & Markham, 2021).

Cyberbullying takes different forms, including the use of inappropriate materials, the sharing of sensitive information, false information, sending angry and offensive messages, rude messages, and private information (Anderson, 2018). This happens through the use of electronic devices such as cell phones, laptops, tablets, and computers. This is intended to threaten, harass, intimidate, and inflict injuries, harm, or distress to the victims (Tzani-Pepelasi, Ioannou, Synnott & Ashton, 2018). Online behaviours which constitute cyberbullying include name-calling, cyber-stalking, unwanted solicitation for sex, cyber-harassment, online gossip, and spreading rumours without permission (Skilbred-Fjeld, Reme & Mossige, 2020). It also includes posting of someone's inappropriate materials, videos, pictures, embarrassing messages, and offensive photos on a public platform. These are the extensions of traditional bullying

into the digital realm, using electronic and digital tools, distinguishing traditional bullying from cyberbullying (Quintana-Orts, Rey & Neto, 2020).

Background, research gap, aim, questions and objectives

The rise in globalization and the growing increase in the use of electronic devices, laptops, smartphones, and tablets has made cyberbullying a global public health concern and a global problem (Farhangpour, Maluleke & Mutshaeni, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2024). They provide learners with enhanced opportunities to improve their academic performance and conduct research. However, these tools are also used to humiliate, harass, and intimidate other learners (Uludasdemir & Kucuk, 2021). The abuse of these tools exposes learners to cyberbullying, which has devastating effects on their lives. Victims of cyberbullying are known to have depression, anxiety, stress, isolation, poor academic achievement, loss of norms and morals, and lead to drug and substance abuse (Kasturiratna et al., 2025). They display maladaptive behaviour, dysfunctionality, absenteeism, aggression, and violence within the educational setting. The victims of cyberbullying may further turn defensive, become bullies within cyberspace, and join gangs seeking protection (Teichert, 2019).

South African schools have recorded a huge volume of violence and aggression. The Department of Basic Education has conducted a study to understand the hotspot schools with a high volume of violence in the country (Naidu, 2019). A total of 1345 schools were identified as hotspots for violence and crime. This has created an unsafe environment for learners in South African educational settings (Masilo, 2018). Cyberbullying, which includes the use of electronic devices, smartphones, tablets, laptops, computers, social media, and emails among learners, has been recorded to account for 58% in South Africa (Manda, 2018). South Africa has witnessed an increase in cyberbullying, with continuous reports of violence in schools. The prevalence of violence in South African schools has been seen as a reflection of the violent nature and crime experienced in South Africa (De Wet, 2024). School violence threatens the school's safety, teaching and learning, and academic performance. School violence has escalated to gangsterism and led to cyberbullying with severe and devastating consequences (Juan et al., 2019). The South African Council of Educators has reported that 68% of teachers have reported having experienced violence at school, while 49% of learners reported having been exposed to violence within the educational settings (South African Council of Educators, 2020). Cyberbullying was recorded as the most common form of school violence within educational settings (Hendricks, 2018).

Despite the increasing literature on school violence and learner well-being, a significant research gap remains in understanding cyberbullying as a human rights concern through a social work perspective, especially in South Africa (Pretorius, 2020; Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Existing literature prioritizes psychological outcomes, prevalence rates, and educational impacts while neglecting the lived experiences of social workers responsible for child protection and the rights-based implications of digitally mediated harm. (Masilo, 2018; Makori & Agufani, 2020). In addressing this gap, this study aims to explore social workers' lens on the effects of cyberbullying on learner well-being in South African schools. This focuses on how their experiences intersect with psychosocial functioning, safety, and

dignity (Graham, 2023). The study was guided by the following research question: How do social workers understand and respond to the impact of cyberbullying on learners within the learning environment? The study considered the following research objectives: to examine the perceived effects of cyberbullying on learners, to identify emerging patterns of harm within educational settings, and to indicate the role of social workers in mitigating these consequences through rights-based interventions (Mguye & Omodan, 2023; Horton, 2016). Beyond its local significance, the study contributes to the global discussions on social justice, digital violence, and child protection by providing knowledge and insights relevant to the international context, which resonate with the rights of children within the digital age through policy development, informing comparative research, and social work practice across diverse educational and cultural settings (Staples, 2023).

Positioning cyberbullying within a human rights and social work framework

Cyberbullying should be understood beyond the educational and psychosocial challenges, but also as a human rights concern and a threat to safety, dignity, and holistic development. The intentional use of technological materials to harm others undermines the fundamental human rights, including the rights to education, mental well-being, and dignity (Pretorius, 2020). From human rights perspectives, cyberbullying shows the systemic and structural inabilities to protect children within the digitalized social space. The violation of the children's rights to safety, dignity, and mental health constitutes a human rights abuse and violation. Social work is inherently rooted in social justice, human rights, and the protection of vulnerable populations, positioning cyberbullying as a significant professional concern (Masilo, 2018). Social workers are positioned as key actors in realizing cyberbullying as a rights violation and infringement instead of isolated misconduct. They are committed to promoting social functioning, empowerment, and the dignity of those affected by cyberbullying. Social work interventions extend beyond psychosocial problems and include policy development, prevention, advocacy, and strengthening of protective environments within educational settings and communities (Kennedy et al., 2024). Addressing cyberbullying aligns with social work values of social justice, advocacy, respect, dignity, and challenging systemic violence. Positioning cyberbullying within the human rights discourse, social workers move from crisis-driven interventions and responses to transformative mechanisms that promote equitable access to support, safe digital engagement, and sustainable learner well-being (Hendricks, 2018).

Theoretical framework

This study has integrated the human rights approach and ecological theory to provide a holistic understanding of cyberbullying as a form of harm affecting learners within interdependent, interconnected social systems (Teater, 2020). The human rights perspectives frame cyberbullying as a violation of learners' rights to dignity, safe learning environments, equitable access to education, and psychological integrity. This perspective positions learners as rights holders and communities, schools, parents, families, and state institutions as duty bearers (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). The ecological theory supports this perspective by positioning this violation within multiple, interacting environmental systems

that include family, individuals, society, schools, and, increasingly, technological environments. The integration of these frameworks enables a comprehensive analysis of how systemic, technological, and relational factors intersect to perpetuate cyberbullying, while also showing the responsibility of social systems to promote and protect learner well-being (Sikhakhane et al., 2018). From social work perspectives, the combined approach reinforces the professional's ethical standards, norms, and mandate to intervene at both micro and macro levels of interventions by addressing individual harm, strengthening protective environments, and advocating for rights-based practices and policies that foster dignity, safety, and inclusive educational environments in the digital age (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018).

Literature review

Contextualizing cyberbullying in South Africa.

The emergence of technology and the internet has transformed the techniques and methodology of socialization among learners and adolescents in educational settings in South Africa. This has not only transformed socialization and communication among learners and adolescents, but it has also changed the socialization of almost everyone throughout the world (Thwala, Okeke, & Tshotsho, 2018; Farhangpour, Maluleke & Mutshaeni, 2019). Cyberbullying takes place through different platforms and applications and depends heavily on the availability of the internet. It occurs through sending, sharing, and posting negative information about another person (Pillay & Sacks, 2020). It also includes false and harmful information, text, online social media, forums, and digital technology with the intention of harming, humiliating, threatening, and harassing the victims. Cyberbullying was found to threaten the mental health and well-being of learners, leading to stress, depression, and isolation from the learners' community (Sikhakhane, Muthukrishna, & Martin, 2018; Dewee, Madima & Tshidada, 2024). Learners are harassed, intimidated, and threatened through electronic means. Cyberbullying has been increasing in educational settings in South Africa, with learners experiencing destructive effects (Brandt, 2017; Thwala, Okeke & Tshotsho, 2018). Some of the effects of cyberbullying are dropping out of school, poor school performance, depression, contemplating suicide, and suicide. In 2021, a learner, Ms. Lufuno Mavhunga from Mbilwi secondary school, was bullied by her fellow learners through the use of electronic devices and social media (Shopphi, 2024).

The use of social media to inflict harm on learners in South African schools

Concerns about the use of social media to harm learners in South Africa are growing. The proliferation of social media platforms has led to an increase in cyberbullying and harassment, which has negatively impacted the mental health and general well-being of learners within an educational setting (Bayzan & Uladasdemir, 2025; Manda, 2018). Fake news and misleading information are two ways that social media is used to harm learners in schools. This includes disseminating untrue information and rumors about specific people, harming their credibility and reputation. On social media, these rumors and misleading information can spread quickly, causing serious harm and embarrassment to the

target (Smahel, Wright, & Cernikova, 2018). According to Shophi (2024), cyberbullying and online harassment are two ways that social media is used to hurt learners. Social media platforms' anonymity has made it simpler for bullies to find ways to harass their targets. This involves making up false profiles to harass or degrade learners, exchanging intimate images and information, and sending threatening, harassing, humiliating, and inappropriate messages (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018; Beran & Li, 2017).

Research methodology

The study has adopted the qualitative research approach. The qualitative research approach is one of the three research approaches and is non-random. Using this approach, the researcher chose participants based on a set of inclusion criteria. This qualitative research approach uses non-numerical methodology or tools for data analysis (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016). This approach was used because the researcher wanted to understand the participants' feelings and attitudes in their natural settings (Mathews & Ross, 2018). The study employed the exploratory research design to get in-depth and explore the understanding of the participants about the dark side and effects of cyberbullying. The design was used to get more knowledge and insight into the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2018). This design was suitable and relevant to the study because it provided the researcher with an opportunity to gather appropriate information on cyberbullying and its effects. It was important to consider this design because it discovers more hidden and unknown information about the phenomenon under consideration (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher developed qualifying criteria for participant eligibility in the study. This was considered because not everyone was eligible to participate in the research study. The study sought to understand social workers' understanding of the dark side of cyberbullying and the effects that are experienced through cyberbullying within educational settings. The study considered the following set of criteria for participating in the research study:

- The participants should be social workers who are registered and in good standing with the South African Council for Social Service Professions.
- Must be social workers who are employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development.
- Must have three years of experience working with learners and educators who have been exposed to the bullying phenomenon.
- Must be based in a school or linked to a school responding to bullying incidents taking place within the school environment.

The reason for choosing social workers from the Department of Social Development is that they respond to incidents of bullying reported in Limpopo schools. This excludes other social workers who are working in different settings because they do not have an active role in the bullying phenomenon. Social workers from other sectors would not meet the criteria for inclusion in the research study.

Limpopo Province has witnessed a surge in cyberbullying incidents. Although the traditional form of bullying is taking place, cyberbullying has been increasing with devastating effects on learners (Pillay, 2020). The prevalence of cyberbullying has prompted the researcher to conduct this study. The study was conducted across all five districts of Limpopo Province, with participants selected from each district (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). Social workers employed by the Limpopo Department of Social Development served as the study population. This population was chosen because of their active role in addressing cyberbullying in schools in Limpopo Province (Muthevhuli & Obadire, 2021). The study used non-probability sampling to recruit participants. Non-probability sampling involves selecting participants based on a non-random mechanism. This sampling method aligns with the adopted qualitative research approach and selects participants who are eligible and meet the inclusion criteria (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). Not all social workers were eligible to participate in the study due to the specific inclusion criteria. The study used a sample of 21 social workers for data collection. The sample was determined by the principle of data saturation, as information began to repeat at participant 21 (Simon & McGannon, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants into the study. This sampling technique was used because the researcher knew the participants. Individuals with the required experience were approached and recruited to participate in the research study. The researcher included participants who were comfortable participating in the study and had experience dealing with bullying (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, & Bezuidenhout, 2017). Participant selection was influenced by eligibility and experience in working with cyberbullying (Polit & Beck, 2017).

Data collection is an essential process of every empirical research study. Data were collected from social workers through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). An interview guide was used during the interviews with the participants, and follow-up questions or probes were used to clarify uncertainties in their answers. The duration of the interviews varied, with participants spending 30 to 50 minutes (Blanche, Durreim & Painter, 2021). English was adopted to develop the interview guide and for communication during the interviews due to the diverse nature of the participants. The participants did not have concerns or problems with English during the face-to-face interviews (Moreno, 2017). Thematic content analysis was considered for data analysis in the study. The study followed Creswell's steps of data analysis to interpret the collected data. The researcher engaged an independent coder to ensure the study's findings are valid, dependable, verifiable, and transferable. Themes were developed by organizing codes to create meaningful themes. This process was important for identifying repeated information to develop themes, subthemes, and categories (Habib, 2022).

Ethics and principles are integral to every research project. Informed consent was a key ethical principle that ensured participants were informed of the aims and objectives of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were provided information about the benefits and the risks of their involvement in the study. The researcher also sought participants' consent to be interviewed and to be audio-recorded (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2019). Confidentiality was maintained in the study through safeguards for information. The researcher kept participants' information confidential in lockable cupboards that were accessible only to the researcher (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. The identity of the participants was never compromised at any point in the

research study (Babbie & Mouton, 2017). The principle of avoiding harm was observed during the face-to-face interviews. The researcher avoided sensitive questions that might emotionally harm participants (Creswell, 2018). The researcher had a contractual agreement with the psychologist at a public hospital to ensure that debriefing is provided to any participant who may be triggered during the study. Cyberbullying is a sensitive social issue that triggers many people, and this was the reason for having an agreement with the psychologist (Moreno, 2017). The study obtained ethical clearance from the University of South Africa and the Limpopo Provincial government, Social Development in particular. The College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee approved the application for permission to conduct the study with ethics number 69719675_CRECHS_2022.

The study adopted Gibbs' steps in Creswell 2014 to ensure confirmability. The researcher demonstrated the links between the data and the study's findings. This was done to demonstrate the achievement of confirmability in the research study. The demonstration that the study findings were not concocted, imaginary, or fabricated ensured the achievement of the confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher ensured dependability by using an independent coder. This exercise ensured the consistency of the study results and the data collected by the researcher. The researcher ensured the research's credibility by managing the risks and biases inherent to qualitative studies. The findings of this study reflect the exact meaning presented by the research participants (Moreno, 2017). The research was peer-reviewed by experts in the field of social work to maintain the credibility of the study's findings. The data analysed and the conclusions drawn in the study were peer-reviewed by a seasoned social worker in the field. It was significant to look into the applicability of the research findings in a different research setting to confirm and ensure transferability. Through the application and systematic procedures of the research methodology and design, the study ensured transferability and that its findings can be applied in a similar context (Simon & McGannon, 2018).

Study findings

Cyberbullying was found to have devastating effects and consequences in the lives of learners, bystanders, educators, and society. The educational settings have been the most affected environment by cyberbullying. This has been the case because of easy access to the internet, smartphones, and other technological devices. The surge in cyberbullying has been associated with the surge in internet access and the global village that is the result of globalization. Cyberbullying was found to affect learners' academic work, affecting their mental health, leading to depression, contemplation of suicide, and ultimately, the commission of suicide. Little to no supervision of the use of smartphones and access to the internet has had a significant influence on the spread and prevalence of cyberbullying.

Table 1

Themes
Theme 1: School violence, gangsterism, and aggression
Theme 2: Drop in individual and school performance
Theme 3: Contemplation of suicide and suicide
Theme 4: Mental health, anxiety, and depression
Theme 5: Permanent electronic record

Theme 1: School violence and gangsterism

The participants stressed that cyberbullying has lots of consequences within educational settings in South Africa. The study revealed that cyberbullying leads to school violence, which compromises the safety of learners. It found that schools are becoming violent zones with learners carrying weapons to protect themselves. Learners who are embarrassed on social media, through electronic devices, emails, and texts, become violent and want to retaliate. Furthermore, the study found that schools have gangsterism that uses technology, electronic devices, and social media to threaten, harass, intimidate, and intentionally harm others. The participants revealed that gangsterism is becoming rife in many schools, and learners use social media and technology to target their victims. The following are some of the excerpts submitted by the participants:

Cyberbullying causes dysfunctionality in educational settings and affects a lot of people in a negative way. Learners create a cyberspace to hurt other learners, and in response, the learning environment becomes a violent space. Schools are no longer safe because of the surge in cyberbullying, and learners are always scared they may be exposed on social media or through other digital devices. P4

Schools are violent zones, and learners are no longer safe. The effects of cyberbullying bring a violent environment, harassment, and intimidation through electronic devices. Learners have easy access to the internet and smartphones, and they abuse these resources to inflict harm on others through social media such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Twitter. P7

There are gangs that have developed to support each other through technology. These gangs target the weak and use technology to abuse other learners. If learners are not doing what the gangs need, they take to social media to harass other learners and intimidate them. P15

School violence was established to be prevalent in South Africa. Masilo (2018) highlights that there is an increase in violence within the school environment, and this is attributed to cyberbullying, which is more common among learners. Cyberbullying has been identified to cause devastating harm to learners because of the accessibility of data (Pretorius, 2020). Cyberbullying disrupts the normal functioning of learners in educational settings, and learners use violence through technology to hurt other learners. This is common in many schools in South Africa as schools are becoming crime and violent zones with learners and educators feeling unsafe (Brandt, 2017). Gangs have been established in schools to hurt

other learners through digital devices. This occurs when learners perceived as weak do not comply with gang instructions (Lumadi, 2024). Although some of the effects may be associated with the traditional form of bullying, the study has established that school violence and gangsterism are effects of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying results in school violence, which is witnessed and published to everyone in South Africa and the world. This has also been associated with gangsterism targeting their victims through the use of social media (De Wet, 2024).

Theme 2: Drop in individual and school performance

The study established that cyberbullying has a huge contribution to the drop in performance for the learners and for the school. Individuals were found to drop in their academic performance and attendance after experiencing cyberbullying. Learners experience difficulty coping with cyberbullying and their exposure to social media and other applications. As a result, these learners struggle to focus on their academic work because of embarrassment in cyberspace. This may result in learners dropping in their grades or failing because their focus is more on dealing with the repercussions of cyberbullying than on their academic work. The study further found that school performance drops because of cyberbullying. Learners find it difficult to focus on their academic work, which affects the entire school's performance. The school performance drops because learners witness cyberbullying incidents of their fellow learners, and they become scared.

Individual learners who have experienced cyberbullying struggle to improve their grades and perform poorly at school. This also affects learners who are referred to as bystanders who stand and do nothing when others are being bullied. Learners struggle, and some fail because of a lack of capacity to cope with incidents of cyberbullying. Some learners feel embarrassed and do not attend classes, which further disadvantages them academically. P9

Cyberbullying is witnessed by every learner who has access to the internet or digital devices. Therefore, the cyberbullying incidents affect the performance of the entire school because learners have witnessed disturbing incidents that disrupt their social functioning. Many schools that have witnessed cyberbullying have dropped in performance because all the learners have experienced such bullying. P19

Shariff (2018) concurs with the study's findings on the drop in academic performance. Cyberbullying affects learners in their academic work because learners find it difficult to focus on their academic work due to embarrassment on the internet. They are unable to find the balance between academic work and the incidents of cyberbullying. These learners are expected to go back to the school community that bullied them and witnessed the harassment and intimidation through social media and digital devices (Smahel, Wright, & Cernikova, 2018). Interestingly, the study found that cyberbullying affects the performance of the entire school. This is because individual drops in performance affect the entire school, and cyberbullying would have been witnessed by everyone in the school community. This is a critical revelation that cyberbullying not only affects the victims and the bullies but also the entire school community, which includes the learners and the educators. This ultimately affects the entire school's performance. This is important because limited studies have arrived at this conclusion, as many have

limited the drop in academic performance to that of the learners who are affected by cyberbullying. This study has found that because cyberbullying is witnessed by almost every learner in the school, teachers, and administrative staff, it therefore affects the performance of the entire school.

Theme 3: Contemplation of suicide and suicide

The study has found that one of the dark sides of cyberbullying is the contemplation of suicide. It was discovered that learners have suicidal thoughts, with some attempting to act on their thoughts when they fail to cope or fear embarrassment. The study revealed that some learners overdose on medication in attempting to commit suicide. This was found to be the case because of the exposure of cyberbullying, as it is witnessed by many people. The volume of people who see inappropriate photos and materials posted on the internet is massive, making learners struggle to cope with the embarrassment. Some learners successfully commit suicide because of the pressure, stress, and inability to cope with a cyberbullying incident. The study found that this is one of the devastating dark sides of cyberbullying. The study revealed that a significant number of learners have committed suicide as a result of cyberbullying. This has been found to be the case because of the number of people who witness the incidents of cyberbullying and the lack of capacity for learners to cope.

Many learners have attempted suicide because of cyberbullying and the lack of capacity for learners to cope with the incident. Contemplation of suicide is prevalent among learners in educational settings. P2

Learners overdose on medication in attempting to commit suicide to avoid the embarrassment associated with cyberbullying. Learners do this because they fear the school community after they have been bullied through technology, where everyone has access and can witness the intimidation, threats, and harm. P10

It is really emotional talking about cyberbullying because many learners have taken their lives because of this phenomenon and the incidents. We have had many cases of suicide among learners because they were exposed to cyberbullying, and they fear other learners within the educational setting. P14

Cyberbullying has, over the years, been confirmed to have destructive effects on the learners who are victims of bullying. One of the terminal effects of cyberbullying that has been witnessed over the years is the contemplation of suicide (Dewee, Madima & Tshidada, 2024). Shophi (2024) concurs with the findings of the study about the rate of suicide associated with cyberbullying among learners. The study indicates that learners do not have sufficient capacity to understand and be able to deal with the challenges similar to those of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is broadcast on many platforms, applications, and digital devices through the use of laptops, computers, and smartphones. Despite the support that learners may receive from their families after experiencing cyberbullying, learners continue with their plan of committing suicide to avoid further embarrassment (Kennedy et al., 2024).

Theme 4: Mental health, anxiety, and depression

The study revealed that cyberbullying makes a significant contribution to the decline in mental health of learners. Learners are unable to have a sound and stable mental health condition that would assist them

in coping with stress. Learners who have experienced cyberbullying find themselves in the worst mental health situations. The study found that these learners develop anxiety and fears because they think that at any time, they may experience similar incidents of cyberbullying. The anxiety makes them scared and causes stress about what may happen next. Depression is one of the psychosocial difficulties that learners experience when they are exposed to cyberbullying in an educational setting. This happens because learners isolate themselves from other learners, their families, the school community, and society.

Learners are heavily affected in terms of their mental health and develop many social and psychological problems because of the experience of cyberbullying. The learner's mental health becomes unstable because of a lack of or limited support to assist them in coping with the cyberbullying adversity. P3

Learners victims of cyberbullying develop anxiety and, at times, are unable to relate to any person, including their fellow learners. Cyberbullying affects the learners who, in turn, find themselves developing many elements that are associated with anxiety and fears. P12

Depression is the dark side of cyberbullying experienced by learners in the learning environment. Cyberbullying leads learners to stress, fears, and anxiety, which ultimately leads to depression. The depression of learners leads to many other social problems, including contemplation of suicide and struggle with academic work. P20

The findings of this study concur with those of Manda (2018). Mental health difficulties have been found to be one of the dark sides of bullying. Learners have inadequate abilities to deal with stress, anxiety, and depression, and this affects their mental health. The effects make it difficult for learners to socialize, leading them to isolate themselves from the entire school community (Pretorius, 2020). The findings concur with the literature regarding the development of anxiety as a result of cyberbullying. Learners who have been exposed to cyberbullying develop a high level of anxiety and fear. These learners struggle further, and some get depressed because of the stress and fears associated with this (Lumadi, 2024). Learners become dysfunctional, do not cope with their educational work, do not want to mix with other learners, and decide to isolate themselves because of cyberbullying. Learners get depressed because of cyberbullying, especially because of the spread of technology and social media used to distribute their information. The nature of cyberbullying subjects learners to psychological problems such as anxiety, insomnia, depression, and various other mental health problems (Smahel, Wright, & Cernikova, 2018).

Theme 5: Permanent electronic record

The study established that cyberbullying has a permanent dark side on the internet. This means that whatever is posted about a learner on the internet remains permanent, as people can always access it. The study found that permanent electronic and digital records are destructive and remind the learners even after they have grown. The incidents are not easily deleted from the internet, and this always leaves a scar on the learners who have been victims of cyberbullying. The destructive, insensitive, threatening, and intimidating information will always be on the internet, and this is a serious effect or dark side of

cyberbullying. At a later stage in their lives, learners will always remember the unpleasant events they experienced as learners. This may affect learners' lives as they grow. The study revealed that the permanent electronic records isolate learners from the entire society and make them feel less of themselves.

Despite the fact that learners may move from the incidents of cyberbullying, the internet will always have details of what transpired earlier in the lives of learners. This may trigger learners based on their experiences. P16

I have assisted a client who was bullied in cyberspace while a learner in a secondary school. This client came to me when they were old and working. What was troubling was that the internet had not forgotten the incidents, and he expressed that his children would know that he was once bullied. P18

Learners do not have options but to understand that their bullying incidents will always be with them for their lives. This may expose learners to bullying even as grown adults, as the information is accessible. P21

Lumadi (2024) agrees with the findings of the study and alludes that the internet always has incidents of bullying that took place many years ago. This is destructive, as some people are trying to forget such incidents. Children of these learners will learn of the incidents of cyberbullying and may make their children be bullied at school (Shariff, 2018). Cyberbullying leaves a permanent footprint on the internet that can be accessed in the years to come by anyone. This means that even if the information is deleted from the internet, some may still have saved the bullying that occurred in cyberspace (Girmen & Kilic, 2018). The researcher concurs that cyberbullying is different from other forms of bullying because it remains on the internet permanently. Unlike physical and verbal bullying, cyberbullying remains available and accessible for everyone who might want to access the information.

Discussions

The study's findings affirm that cyberbullying violates a learner's fundamental human rights, especially the rights to a safe school environment, dignity, mental and psychological well-being, and integrity, which are central to both child protection and social justice (Lumadi, 2024). The pervasive nature of digitally mediated harm exacerbates the vulnerability of learners through abuse beyond physical spaces and inadequate opportunity for recovery, thereby reinforcing social exclusion and inequality. From the social worker's point of view, these findings show the profession's significant role as both an intervening and advocacy-oriented discipline, mandated to address cyberbullying using rights-based approaches (Manda, 2018). A rights-based social work perspective requires protecting learners as rights holders and promotes well-being and resilience. The study shows the importance of social workers to integrate human rights standards, principles, and norms into policy advocacy, school-based practice, and systemic prevention strategies to mitigate technologically driven harm and protect learners' rights to dignity, safety, participation, and comprehensive development (Shopphi, 2024).

The study has outlined that cyberbullying is one of the most dangerous forms of bullying, with a severe dark side. The study shows the effects that are associated with cyberbullying and how learners exposed to this form of bullying suffer. The study highlights that cyberbullying has a huge dark side in the lives of learners in educational settings, which includes suicide (Girmen & Kilic, 2018). The nature of cyberbullying is that it is accessible to many people because of the easy access to the internet and the availability of digital, electronic, and technological devices. Interestingly, the study established that some of the dark sides of cyberbullying are that it has a permanent electronic record on the internet because the events and incidents cannot be deleted from the internet. This was an outstanding revelation because this may be accessed by the children of the victims of the learners. (Lumadi, 2024). The availability of this information may be detrimental because children of the victims may also be abused, violated, harassed, and intimidated at school about incidents involving their parents. The study also revealed that cyberbullying influences violence within the school environment and compromises the safety of learners and other stakeholders in educational settings. Cyberbullying is a violent act that is done through the use of technology and affects the learners, the school, and society. It was found that many schools are violent hotspots because of the surge and increase in cyberbullying (Masilo, 2018). It is important to indicate that cyberbullying not only occurs in educational settings but also within communities. However, learners have access to the internet, smartphones, laptops, and other digital devices, and they use these applications and platforms to harm other learners in cyberspace.

Mental health was found to be one of the dark sides of cyberbullying, and this has serious repercussions in the lives of the learners, bystanders, educators, and society. The study revealed that cyberbullying essentially harms the mental health of the learners, and this affects various other social issues. It leads to learners victims of cyberbullying to have anxiety and fears of revictimization (Shariff, 2018). Learners get stressed because of the incidents of cyberbullying and develop low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, and isolation. Contemplation of suicide and ultimately committing suicide were also found to be some of the dark sides of poor mental health resulting from the incidents of cyberbullying. The general effects of cyberbullying are the ability to make learners feel sad and develop poor well-being. The learners feel emotionally vulnerable, ashamed, and develop feelings of guilt, frustration, and embarrassment (Kennedy et al., 2024). One of the dark sides of cyberbullying is that it impairs learners' abilities to focus in the classroom, leading to poor academic performance of learners and a drop in the school's performance.

Limitations

The study's limitations were mainly due to the sample of 21 social workers, who were purposively selected and had at least 3 years of experience. This limits statistical generalization and may not include the experience of those new to the profession but working in similar environments. Although widely accepted as a language in many professions, English is a limitation because it is not the participants' first language. Cyberbullying context and settings or environment may differ across contexts, globally, regionally, and locally. This may make transferability difficult.

Conclusion

The study concludes that cyberbullying represents a significant human rights violation, particularly the rights to mental health, safety, dignity, and safe, meaningful participation in education. The findings demonstrate that cyberbullying goes beyond the psychosocial problems and educational issues, requiring a rights-based response to mitigate the violation of human rights. Social workers need to use rights-based interventions and approaches in addressing cyberbullying and recognize learners as rights holders. The integration of human rights standards and principles into social work practice underscores the necessity of systemic prevention strategies, crisis intervention, trauma-informed care, and advocacy that address individual experiences and the broader ecological environments in which cyberbullying occurs. Maintaining learners' rights in the technological age requires coordinated rights-oriented social work interventions that advance social justice, protect learners' well-being, and promote a safe educational environment within and beyond South African schools.

Declarations

Ethical consideration

The study obtained ethical clearance from the university's research ethics committee and the Limpopo Province Research Ethics Committee.

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Data availability statement

Research data are available on request

Declaration of funding

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Author Contribution

T conceptualized the study, wrote all aspects of the study

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