Cyberbullying among high school learners in Zimbabwe: Motives and effects

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ABSTRACT

The influence of communication technology such as social media in Zimbabwean high schools has immensely contributed to cyberbullying among learners. The study sought to establish the motives and effects of cyberbullying among high school learners. The study triangulated both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. The study sample was made up of 3 teachers and 60 learners. The teachers participated in key informant interviews whilst learners responded to questionnaires. Of the 60 learners, 30 were further selected to participate in three focus group discussions each comprising of 10 learners in order to gain an in-depth qualitative reflection of the larger sample's experiences. The motives for cyberbullying among high school learners included differences, peer pressure, exposure to violent media, intimate relationships, fun and boredom, low self-esteem and jealous whereas the effects of cyberbullying were reported to be poor mental health, low school attendance rate, emotional instability, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, truancy and bad relationships among the learners. The study established that there is need for high school learners to be educated on safe and healthy methods of using information communication technologies. Learners' online activities have to be monitored both at home and school so as to create a cyber-bullying free learning environment.

KEY TERMS: *cyberbullying, motives, effects, high school learners, Zimbabwe*

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Current and previous volumes are available at:
https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/

ASWNet
Africa Social Work Network

How to reference using ASWNet style:

Mabvurira V. and Machimbidza D. (2022). Cyberbullying among high school learners in Zimbabwe: Motives and effects. *African Journal of Social Work, 11(3)*, 98-107.

INTRODUCTION

The use of communication technology has both merits and demerits to human kind in the modern world. Communication technology in form of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook has remarkably enabled easy communication between teachers and their pupils for example through online learning and promoting remote communication. Nevertheless, the same technology has been accompanied by negative effects such as the development of poor mental health, truancy and suicidal tendencies among high school learners. High school children who are in the process of discovering their identities are the ones who are at risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying as a negative impact of communication technology such as social media. Cyberbullying among high school learners causes both mental and social problems. This study intended to reveal the motives and effects of cyberbullying among high school learners in Zimbabwe.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The 21st century has witnessed a sharp increase in the use of information and communication technologies by people from all walks of life. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is widely popular due to its gadgets which facilitate with mobility that reduce the human work load (Makori & Agufana, 2020; Payne, 2015; Tustin et al, 2014). The educational sector has not been an exception in the monopolization of the benefits of technological use. Campbell et al (2012) and Hashem (2015) theorized that the monopolization of technology is rapidly growing and the younger generation which includes school going children are the ones caught in the frequent use of technology.

The advent of communication technology in schools and their learners has given birth to a noticeable development. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube have improved the communication channels between teachers and their respective learners. Farhangpour et al (2019) depicts that teachers find social media as an important catalyst that improves the learning process and affects the way teachers acquire their information, share it and collaboratively use it with their learners. According to Tarisai and Manhibi (2017), social media plays a pivotal role in the development of the staff in schools in relation to the new curriculum. Consequently, the learners' access to learning materials like online documents has been improved showing that the use of social media has been developing the schools in Zimbabwe. This has been one of the mechanisms used in Zimbabwe to achieve Sustainable Development Goal four of ensuring inclusive, equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. However, it should be noted that communication technologies have been used for bad intentions and school learners have not been spared.

Smith et al (2008) claimed that cyberbullying is an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individuals using electronic forms of conduct repeatedly and over a time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself. Cyberbullying is a portent which calls for social workers to render child protection services to the survivors. Zhou et al (2013) noted that cyberbullying exhibits many similarities to the traditional face to face bullying but has serious mental and health problems which call for immediate response in schools. The rate of cyberbullying in most Zimbabwean schools is on the rise and there is need to assess the motives and effects of the problem on learners. Chiwapu (2014) denotes that studies of cyberbullying executed show an increase in the percentages of children who have been cyberbullied in the previous years.

The cyberbullying study goes a long way in helping the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in promoting the healthy use of social media in high schools. It affects school going children in their learning process as victims usually abscond from school and in most cases they perform badly. More so, cyberbullying negatively impact the health of children leading to poor development in all spheres of life. The study is not only confined to helping the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education only but also the Department of Social Development in improving the school social worker intervention. This study will also act as a tool that will empower teachers to identify cyberbullying cases and reduce them to create a healthy environment for all learners. Further, it has been researched that there is a correlation between cyberbullying and the performance of learners in school (Chiome, 2015; Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015) thus; if cyberbullying is reduced a positive result is attained in the performance of learners.

In light of the new era that people exist in today, it should be noted that various researchers (Chiwapu, 2014; Chiome, 2015; Makori, & Agufana, 2020) have taken concern and interest in the cyberbullying studies and different aspects of the cyberbullying phenomenon have been researched. Most of the studies have been done in European countries and limited studies on cyberbullying have been done in Zimbabwe. Therefore, this particular investigation seeks to add more information concerning cyberbullying that is contextual to Zimbabwean schools. Additionally, of the few studies done in Zimbabwe, most of them have concentrated on the features of cyberbullying. A short fall is witnessed in the motives and effects of cyberbullying among Zimbabwean high

school learners. Therefore, this study identified motives behind cyberbullying, examined its impact and come up with recommendations to reduce it.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed methods approach which combined qualitative and quantitative data. The mixed method approach was adopted in this study to allow the acquisition of both qualitative and quantitative data. Miles et al (2013) encapsulated that qualitative data are a source of well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human process thus the researchers considered it in this study. The quantitative aspect of the data collection method enabled the researchers to quantify facts gathered from the learners. The case study research design was chosen because it appropriately answers the how and why types of investigations which is in line with the inquiry of the motives and effects of cyberbullying. Additionally, this design was chosen because it allows for both qualitative and quantitative analyses of data. Learners' experiences, feelings and perceptions were captured to allow a comprehensive understanding of the motives and effects of cyberbullying among learners.

Population

The target population consisted of high school learners who had either been perpetrators or victims of cyberbullying. The study also included guidance and counselling teachers as the key informants for the study as they are the ones in charge of learners' welfare. The population consisted of 208 learners and 10 Guidance and Counselling teachers from one high school in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Participants and sampling procedures

In this particular study, a sample of 60 learners was drawn from a population of 208 learners who had experienced cyberbullying with the use of purposive sampling method. The researchers used the sampling frame (Guidance and counselling case record books of cyberbullying cases). Purposive sampling method relied on the opinion of the researchers to choose the participants for the study. The researchers also used purposive sampling in selecting 3 key informants who were guidance and counselling teachers for interviews.

Data collection techniques, methods and procedures

There are various data collection methods in research. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with three key informants. Questionnaires were distributed to 60 learners to collect information. More so, the researchers conducted three focus group discussions each comprising of 10 learners aged between 13-17.

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data drawn from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic content analysis framework was most suitable for this study as findings were presented in narrative and descriptive form. Also, the data quality was managed throughout the data collection, data entry, data validation and data cleaning processes. The researchers employed the descriptive statistics to analyse the quantitative data gathered. The quantitative data was also coded and entered into the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). This data analysis technique was opted for its competence in terms of providing reliable and efficient summarisation of data in statistical and narrative forms, which were wholly necessary for the study.

Ethical considerations

Ethics are vital to consider as they guarantee the safety of both the participants and the researcher. In that regard, the researchers sought permission and authorization from the University of Zimbabwe and the Headmistress of the high school to conduct the study. This was to create good relations with the school and to be given the time to carry out the study even during school lessoning hours. To ensure informed consent, the researchers clearly and fully explained to the participants what the study was about and its purpose before they volunteered to participate in the study. Informed consent was vital to this research as it determines the success of upholding the voluntary participation ethic. The researchers further explained to participants that they were free to withdraw from the study without being questioned on why they wanted to withdraw from the research. More so, standard written permission was sought from the legal parents and guardians of the learners. Only learners who assented were involved in the study. The researchers ensured that they observed voluntary participation of the participants. Voluntary participation refers to a human research subject's exercise of free will in deciding whether to participate in a research activity. Also, the researchers made sure that participation was not fixed or dependent on

circumstances like authority and financial benefits. Moreover, since the study focused on the minority group within the school, participants were guaranteed that personal information was not to be disclosed to third parties hence it was to be kept confidential. The researchers explained to the participants and key informants that during the recording of the information and results names were not to be disclosed but rather pseudo names were used.

FINDINGS

Demographic information of study participants

Among the 60 learners who participated in the study, 39 were female and 21 were males. Of the three teachers, two were females while one was male. The learner participants who were between 13-15 years were 15 whilst those who ranged from 16-17 years were 45.

Motives and effects of cyberbullying among high school learners

The results from the survey questionnaires demonstrated in Figure 1 indicate that high school learners are motivated by a set of factors to cyber bully each other. The results indicated that the learners are mostly (n=16) motivated by the need to have fun and reduce boredom among themselves. The study showed fun and boredom has the highest percentage (26.7%) while the differences among learners have the second highest proportion (21.7%) of motivating learners to execute cyberbullying activities. Both peer pressure and intimate relationships were reported to be contributing (16.7%) in motivating learners to cyberbully each other. The findings also demonstrated that the motives for cyberbullying that were less frequent among high school learners include low self-esteem (3.3%), jealous (8.3%) and exposure to violent media (6.7%).

Figure 1: Summary of the motives for cyberbullying among high school learners at Lobengula High School
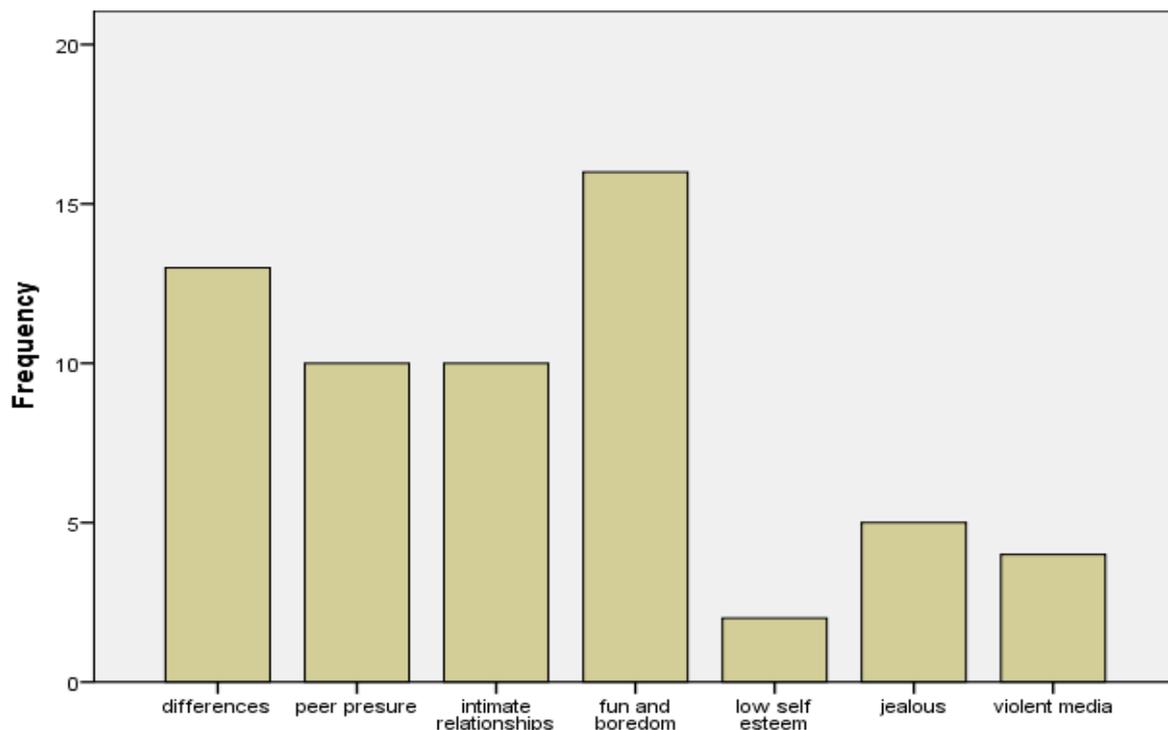
Differences among learners

The participants reported that differences are one of the major motives for cyberbullying among learners. They reported that the differences include socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity and the physical appearance of learners. Learners from high income families were more likely to cyber bully those from low income families. One of the respondents revealed this when they said:

> *In my class the girls who cyber bully others on WhatsApp are those that have everything at school, they wear nice uniforms and their fees are always paid up thus they feel that they have power and control over others* (R1).

This brought into light that the availability of uncontrolled resources on children can result in learners being motivated to cyber bully others. The differences in the other respondent who had been cyber-bullied because of their different ethnicity also shared their story when they said:

> *My classmates used to create WhatsApp messages quoting the broken Ndebele that I would have spoken. In our class WhatsApp group they used to call me Bhurawayo and they would all laugh at me. I had a hard time fitting in this school* (R5).

To further support that differences among high school learners resulted in cyberbullying, one female respondent expressed how their difference in appearance resulted in them being cyberbullied when they said:

> *Because my feet are the longest among all the girls in my class in our social media groups I have earned myself names such as lofu and sisbhudi meaning that I have a big foot that can be compared to that of most boys. I am embarrassed because of the names that people call me on social media and it makes me feel like I don't deserve to be a girl* (R6).

These findings demonstrated that the face to face discrimination that had been done traditionally is now evolving and now takes place in the cyberspace. The learners are emotionally tortured and embarrassed through platforms such as social media apps.

Peer pressure

The participants identified peer pressure as one of the major motives for cyberbullying among learners. They reported that the need for one to belong to a certain group at the school compels them to conform to behaviours of that group they want to be part of. One of the respondents uncovered this when they said:

> *When I was a new student at this school, the boys I sat next to the first weeks loved capturing pictures of people who they termed ugly and created pictures written gorilla- the beginning of evolution and would circulate the pictures. When I joined the group I was forced to also join in as I saw them doing* (R16).

The learners felt comfortable when cyberbullying others in groups. The learners also reported that cyberbullying others because of peer pressure felt good and one would not feel guilty and scared to victimize those of lower control than them. One of the respondents also revealed during the focus group discussion how they were influenced by their friends to cyberbully another classmate when they said:

> *When I discovered that (omunye u chick) some girl from my class was dating (umemba wami) my boyfriend, my friends encouraged me to bring my mobile phone to school so that we can take a video while I was beating the girl up and tearing her uniform then post the video on you-tube. I did as they said and we attacked the girl and circulated the video* (R23).

This showed that learners at schools are negatively influencing each other to cyberbully those with little power. This similarity may be attributed to the nature of human beings that they have needs to belong and be identified with a superior group in the society hence they would conform to the group norms to be part of it.

Intimate relationships

During the data collection process, intimate relationships surfaced as one of the motives for cyberbullying. The respondents revealed that most of them were now having relationships and that cyberbullying emanated from those relationships at times. The respondents also revealed that a lot of pictures are shared in those relationships and those relationships are usually initiated on WhatsApp groups. One of the respondents who had been a victim of cyberbullying shared their story when they said:

When I was in form 3, I used to date a form four boy who occasionally asked for my naked pictures, I used to send him and when we broke up he started sending those pictures to our school WhatsApp group. I was scared and I stopped coming to school. I even considered committing suicide because I could not handle the pressure (R13).

More so, those who wanted to get into relationships with girls who did not want to date them resorted to cyberbullying. The respondents reported that most of these relationships were online based and if anything went wrong they would result in the partners cyberbullying each other in most cases. One of the key informants revealed this when they said:

One of the major motives for cyberbullying is the dating and courtship that is undertaken by the learners. They lack guidance and the relationships are usually kept confidential thus even though the student is cyberbullied, they fail to report and they can end up being harmed (K3).

These results are indicative of the fact that learners enter into relationships without any form of guidance since they are not allowed to have relationships. This has the potential to result in a sharp increase in the levels of cyberbullying since the whole case will not be reported. One observes that there is a gap in the existing literature on relationships as one of the motives for cyberbullying.

Fun and boredom

The findings show that fun and boredom has the greatest potential (26.7%) to influence the learners to cyberbully others. The respondents reported that at times cyberbullying was not executed to hurt others but just to have fun as a group or individual. Furthermore, they indicated that boredom could motivate them to undertake cyberbullying activities and at times they never knew that they would be bullying someone online. To validate their notion, one of the respondents commented:

I used to embarrass others online through giving them nick-names that described their imperfections. I used to do this to make other classmates laugh but I never thought about how the person felt. I also did not know that it was cyberbullying (R9).

These findings demonstrate that the learners lack necessary guidance and education on how they should behave online.

Low self-esteem, violent media and jealous

The respondents revealed that low self-esteem among other learners motivates them to cyber bully others. The findings showed that those with low self-esteem felt powerful when they bully others. One of the key informants expressed this when they said:

In some cases of cyberbullying that we identified as the guidance and counselling teachers, we would be amazed by the perpetrator because they would be those learners who never stand in front of others and who are always quiet in class (K2).

The findings also showed that violent media that exposed children to cyberbullying activities acted as a motive for cyberbullying learners. This was brought into play when one respondent said;

My friend and I used to watch a lot of teenage movies and one of them is the cyberbully in which a girl was cyberbullied online. This made us have the desire to also experiment it through cyberbullying a certain girl from our class (R6).

Closely linked to the above motive, the respondents reported that jealous was also one of the motives for cyberbullying. Some respondents admitted that there were some learners who did very well at school and had very good reputations that made them wish to destroy them. One of the respondents revealed this when they shared that:

> *Our class teacher used to favour some from our class and she made us feel like we were not important at school. As a group with my friends we started sending her anonymous text messages and calling her with unknown numbers telling her that she was ugly and should stop going to school because there was someone waiting to rape her. All we wanted by then was for her not to come to school* (R19).

Effects of cyberbullying on high school learners

It emerged from the results that cyberbullying had a number of detrimental effects on high school learners. The table below illustrates various effects of cyberbullying on learners. The results show that the major (n=19) negative effect of cyberbullying is absconding school. The respondents revealed that being cyberbullied intimidated them; they would feel scared to go to school while others felt embarrassed to go to school. At times it would be difficult for the learners to report the case since they would be threatened. The second (16.7%) detrimental effect of cyberbullying identified was its potential to reduce the self-esteem of the victim. Most of the learners who were cyberbullied reported that at some point in their life they did not have confidence with themselves and they were made to feel small by the cyberbully comments. One respondent revealed this when they reported:

> *My classmates used to post pictures of my school shoes saying that it looks like a tractor, it made me feel like I didn't deserve to be at school like others and I always wanted to hide because I felt that l was not good enough* (R6).

This entails that cyberbullying has the potential to create a society full of people who are incompetent and who can fail to develop the nation.

Table 1: Summary of the effects of cyberbullying on high school learners.

Effects		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Poor mental health	3	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Poor grades	9	15.0	15.0	20.0
	Bad relationships	4	6.7	6.7	26.7
	Low self esteem	10	16.7	16.7	43.3
	Truancy	7	11.7	11.7	55.0
	Absconding school	19	31.7	31.7	86.7
	Emotional instability	5	8.3	8.3	95.0
	Suicidal thoughts	3	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The results from the survey questionnaires as shown in the table above indicate that learners are affected by cyberbullying in a number of ways. It was found that 31.7% (n=19) of the learners abscond school as a result of cyberbullying. The table shows that the second leading effect of cyberbullying among learners is low self-esteem with 16.7% (n=10) followed by poor grades with 15% (=9). The findings also illustrate that effects of cyberbullying with less frequency include poor mental health and suicidal thoughts both with 5%, bad relationships 6.7% and emotional instability 8.3%. The main mission of the education system is to render quality education to learners and it is evident that cyberbullying has the potential to affect quality education. Cyberbullying causes learners to abscond school which affects their performance at school. This notion is supported by Tustin et al (2014) who believe that the most notable effect of cyberbullying in a school setting is its power to affect the academic progress of a learner. The cyber-bully victims are noted to be having low grades, low school attendance rates, high truancy levels, accumulating detentions, cutting class, carrying weapons into the school setting as well as perceptions that the school is not a safe environment for them. This all shows that it is necessary to prevent cyberbullying in a school setting.

DISCUSSION

This research was aimed at revealing the motives of cyberbullying in a bid to understand it from the ground through particularly looking at high school learners. The other key objective was of further identifying the effects of cyberbullying on learners. The study had justice in providing answers to these research questions through discovering various motives behind cyberbullying such as peer pressure, low self-esteem and differences among learners. In answering the second research question on the effects of cyberbullying on high school learners, the research study established the following *inter alia*; poor mental health, poor grades and suicidal thoughts.

Zimbabwe lacks a distinct legal or policy framework that solely tackles issues of cyberbullying in the educational environment. Rather the only provision of cyberbullying is provided under the Cyber Security and Data Protection Act [Chapter 11:22] of 2019. Section 164B of the Act states that any person who unlawfully and intentionally by means of a computer or information system generates and sends data message to another person, or posts on any material on any electronic medium accessible by any person, with the intention to intimidate, harass, threaten, bully or cause substantial emotional distress or humiliate someone or to encourage a person to harm himself or herself, shall be guilty of an offence (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019). This provision however foregoes the fact that these cyberbullying offences are being committed by learners in schools and how best the problem can be contextually addressed.

On the motives behind cyberbullying among high school learners, it was found that 26.7% were motivated by fun and reducing boredom. The findings imply that some learners engage in cyberbullying to satisfy their own needs as they find pleasure in technologically bullying others through platforms such as WhatsApp. Other respondents argued that cyberbullying was not seen as a means to hurt others but just as a ground of having fun in groups. In that regard it was noted that learners lack guidance and control when it comes to the use of technology thus exposing others to cyberbullying in the name of having fun and reducing boredom. These findings complement Smit (2015) as well as Farhangpour et al (2019) who argue that although it may be seen as cyberbullying to many, learners engage in such activities online to have fun and develop controversial jokes in avoidance of boredom. However, the findings of this study contradict with Smith et al (2008) who claimed that cyberbullying is an intentional act carried out by a group or individuals using electronic forms of contact repeatedly. Results of this study prove that learners engage in cyberbullying unknowingly and unintentionally in the name of fun and reducing boredom, which clearly stipulates lack of knowledge.

The study also detected differences among school going children as a motive behind cyberbullying in school. These include differences in ethnicity, socio-economic situations and appearance. It was found that 21.7% (n=13) of learners who participated viewed cyberbullying as solely motivated by differences as they noted that children from high income families were most likely to cyber bully those from low income backgrounds. It was found that learners who cyber bully others on social media platforms such as WhatsApp mostly have good uniforms and their fees paid in full thereby instilling a sense a dominion and power over others. It can thus be understood that the availability of uncontrolled resources on children can result in learners being motivated to cyber bully others. Campbell et al (2012) and Hashem (2015) theorized that the monopolization of technology is rapidly growing and the younger generation which includes school going children are the ones caught in the frequent use of technology thus exposing other learners to cyberbullying.

It was discovered that peer pressure is one of the reasons behind cyberbullying among learners. It was reported that the issue of conformity to group norms and behaviours compels some learners to partake in cyberbullying others for the sake of being embraced in their respective friendship groups. This notion is in line with the argument brought forward by Compton et al (2014) and Payne (2015) who stipulates that high school learners tend to copy the activities of the peers they perceive as superior. With 16.7% (n=10) of the participants citing peer pressure as a motive behind cyberbullying, it was further noted that this would lead to creation and circulation of pictures of some learners with captions written degrading names. This clearly points to a devastating view towards some learners resulting in low self-esteem and emotional instability. This justifies findings by Zhou et al (2013) and Rachoene & Oyedemi (2015) who noted that cyberbullying exhibits many similarities to the traditional face to face bullying but has serious mental and health problems which call for immediate response in schools.

After facing cyberbullying, it was found that 31% of the learners would abscond from school in a bid to avoid further bullying and humiliation. It was also found that cyberbullying would present effects of poor grades among learners due to low self-esteem and limited concentration due to unfavourable learning environments presented by cyberbullying. It was further accounted that 5% of learners developed suicidal thoughts as a result of cyberbullying due to a sense of worthlessness and self-hate. Reflecting on gender dimensions, females were the most affected by cyberbullying considering that they formed the larger part of the study sample.

Having had detected such issues on cyberbullying among high school learners it becomes eminent that social workers are aware of challenges being brought about by technology. Chiwapu (2014) denotes that cyberbullying percentages among children in schools have been on the rise for years. Smit (2015) and Chiome (2015) call for immediate response to the effects of cyberbullying in schools. This raises the need for social workers to assist

learners through various initiatives in ensuring that they are safeguarded against the devastating effects of cyberbullying on their wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers make the following recommendations,

- Online activities of school learners need to be supervised and monitored both at school by teachers and at home by caregivers.
- There is a strong need for high school learners to be educated on safe and healthy methods of using information communication technology such as not disclosing one's personal information on the internet.
- Introduce staff development trainings of guidance and counselling teachers on cyberbullying to improve their chances of identifying cyberbullying cases.
- Educate high school learners on cyberbullying and encourage them to report cyberbullying cases as they are on the rise in schools.
- Conscientise the community at large on cyberbullying so that there is minimized victim blaming and discrimination on those who have been victimized.
- One noted that most of the motives for cyberbullying are conceived by the environment; hence there is need for social workers, teachers and parents to educate learners on cyberbullying and its effects so that they don't influence each other to partake in cyberbullying activities.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to establish the motives and effects of cyberbullying among high school learners. The findings presented the need for fun and obliteration of boredom as the major motive for perpetrators to victimize others. Most learners indicated that they cyber bullied others because they wanted to have fun and make those around them laugh. Other motives of cyberbullying include the differences among learners, peer pressure, intimate relationships (revenge porn), low self-esteem, jealous and exposure to violent media. The results portrayed that learners are affected by cyberbullying psychologically, physically and socially. The psychological effects included suicidal thoughts, emotional instability, poor mental health and low self-esteem whereas the social effects included absconding school, truancy and bad relationships with family and friends. The physical effects included the potential of the victims and perpetrator getting into violent conflicts.

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