RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Cyberbullying in Kenyan universities: Lessons and insights from the personal experience of deans of students

## La cyberintimidation dans les universités kenyanes : Leçons et enseignements tirés de l'expérience personnelle des doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants

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## ABSTRACT

Deans of students are the main points of contact between the university management and the students they serve in Kenyan universities. This position exposes them to acts of hostility both online and offline. This article explores the experiences of deans of students in Kenyan universities with cyberbullying. It specifically analyses the prevalence of cyberbullying among deans of students in Kenyan universities, the nature of cyberbullying meted out to deans of students, the strategies used by the deans to counter cyberbullying, and the effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating cyberbullying. This study was qualitative. Data was collected through interviews with 25 deans of students from eight private and seventeen public universities in Kenya. The study findings show that most of the deans of students have been bullied online at some time or another by their students. Deans of students were bullied for their looks, competencies, and associations. This, in turn, has affected how they perform their duties. The deans countered cyberbullying by blocking the bullying accounts, unfriending hostile "friends", deactivating or disengaging from social media, seeking legal redress, creating rapport with the students to stem hostility, seeking counselling, or confronting the bullies directly. The study revealed that the strategies used by the deans of students to curb cyberbullying were largely ineffective. This study recommends that universities provide staff sensitization training on cyberbullying and strengthen counselling and peer support systems among staff. This would enable their staff, such as deans of students, to deal with the effects of cyberbullying. These recommendations, if implemented, could help secure a favourable online working environment for the deans of students at Kenyan universities as they interact with their students, increase their morale at work, and improve the working relationship between students and the deans of students.

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**RÉSUMÉ**

Les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants sont les principaux points de contact entre la direction de l'université et les étudiants qu'ils servent dans les universités kenyanes. Cette position les expose à des actes d'hostilité en ligne et sur le terrain. Cet article explore les expériences des doyens des universités kenyanes en matière de cyberintimidation. Il analyse en particulier la prévalence de la cyberintimidation parmi les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants dans les universités kenyanes, la nature de la cyberintimidation subie par ces derniers, les stratégies utilisées par les doyens pour lutter contre la cyberintimidation ainsi que l'efficacité de ces stratégies pour atténuer les effets de la cyberintimidation. Cette étude était qualitative. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entretiens avec 25 doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants, issus de huit universités privées et de dix-sept universités publiques du Kenya. Les résultats de l'étude montrent que la plupart de ces doyens ont été victimes d'intimidation en ligne à un moment ou à un autre de la part de leurs étudiants. Les doyens d'étudiants ont été malmenés en raison de leur apparence, de leurs compétences et de leurs associations. Cela a eu des répercussions sur la manière dont ils s'acquittent de leurs tâches. Les doyens ont contré la cyberintimidation en bloquant les comptes des auteurs de ces intimidations, en supprimant les « amis » hostiles, en désactivant les médias sociaux ou en s'en désengageant, en demandant une réparation juridique, en établissant une relation avec les élèves pour endiguer l'hostilité, en demandant des conseils ou en affrontant directement les auteurs de l'intimidation. L'étude a révélé que les stratégies utilisées par les doyens des étudiants pour lutter contre la cyberintimidation étaient généralement inefficaces. Cette étude recommande aux universités de sensibiliser leur personnel à la cyberintimidation et de renforcer les systèmes de conseil et de soutien par les pairs au sein du personnel. Cela permettrait aux membres du personnel, tels que les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants, de mieux gérer les effets de la cyberintimidation. Ces recommandations, si elles sont appliquées, contribueront à garantir un environnement de travail en ligne favorable pour les doyens des universités kenyanes lorsqu'ils interagissent avec leurs étudiants, à améliorer leur moral au travail et à améliorer les relations de travail entre les étudiants et les doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants.

**MOTS-CLÉS**

*Cyberintimidation, intimidation, doyens chargés des questions liées aux étudiants, universités, étudiants d'université, Kenya*

## Introduction

According to Jowi (2009), Kenya has embraced mass education to address various social and economic challenges. For instance, the country has rolled out diverse strategies to increase the reach of university education and improve its quality by increasing student funding and encouraging and setting up quality assurance guidelines for universities through the Commission for University Education (Makau, 2022). Scholars such as Ngolovoi (2010) and Owuor (2012) argue that one of the strategies used by the Kenyan government to increase access to university education in the country is by increasing the number of public and private universities. Mukhwana et al. (2016) report that the number of universities in Kenya grew exponentially from six (6) in the 1990s to more than 70 in the 2000s. As the number of universities and students increased, so did the challenges faced by students and institutions. According to Yakaboski and Birnbaum (2013), challenges such as oppositional behaviour, inadequate housing, and dilapidated infrastructure jeopardize the government's effort to enhance education's contribution to national development.

Comprehensive student support services are required to support students in class and ensure they graduate with the requisite skills to enable them to contribute to

nation-building. Ludeman and Gregory (2013) opine that providing support services in financial aid, housing, food or catering, and counselling has great potential to boost student recruitment, enrolment, retention, and graduation. Kenyan universities offer these critical support services through the dean of students' office. Indeed, Yakaboski and Birnbaum (2013) report that all universities in Kenya, private or public, have established offices for deans of students to offer psychosocial support to students. Although their specific roles differ from one university to another, the job description of deans of students in Kenya is anchored in the *in loco parentis* philosophy. Essentially, they occupy a quasi-parental role for students in the university during their time away from their biological or legal parents. The goal of the service is to support students in coping with a range of new challenges, including the freedoms that come with enrolment at universities in contrast to the highly structured life secondary education had provided.

Deans of students in Kenya face a myriad of challenges in fulfilling the services required by their positions. One of the biggest challenges is inadequate preparedness for the role. According to Yakaboski and Birnbaum (2013), several deans of students are appointed through less-than-transparent processes with little regard for their skills or qualifications. At times, they are handpicked and serve the interests of the university management more than the students'. This may put them at cross purposes with the students they serve. Despite these challenges, deans of students in Kenyan universities offer essential services which enable their institutions to deliver their core mandates, exemplified by the graduation of competent professionals.

By its very nature, the office of the dean of students often deals with students closely and frequently serves as the face of the university administration. The office may also act as the arbiter in conflicts between students and other parties, including the university management. Thus, students regularly visit the office seeking counselling, comfort, redress, or guidance. Another role played by deans of students in Kenyan universities is organizing and supervising student representative elections. In this role, they are responsible for all the logistics associated with the elections. For instance, they might supervise nominations, printing ballot papers, actual voting, tallying the votes, and declaring the winners. Electoral challenges and differences are among the significant causes of hostility between deans of students in Kenyan universities and their students. The issues are often exacerbated by Kenya student politics closely mirroring national politics.

To reach the students they serve, deans of students in Kenyan universities currently use diverse communication channels. Lately, social media is one of the popular channels through which deans communicate or interact with their students. The popularity of social media amongst deans of students is partly because it enables instant and direct communication with students, as opposed to traditional forms of communication such as noticeboards and memos. Despite its benefits, using social media as a communication channel between deans and students exposes deans of students to the risk of cyberbullying. Disgruntled students, and other parties, may utilize social media to attack and vilify their deans, hiding behind basic social media features which enable anonymity, immediacy and broad reach.

This article analyses the prevalence of cyberbullying of deans of students in Kenyan universities; the nature of cyberbullying meted out to deans of students; the strategies the deans use to counter cyberbullying; and the effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating cyberbullying.

## Literature review

Cyberbullying is violence enacted digitally (Zhang et al., 2022). It is the application of the internet and associated technologies to harass, intimidate or cause harm to another person. This online harassment is emerging as a new phenomenon affecting many people (Parsitau, 2020). Globally, the increasing use and convenience of technology, coupled with more human interactions due to the enabled connections, has turned traditional bullying into digital bullying, making cyberbullying a form of bullying that is novel and challenging. Parsitau (2020) further explains that the ubiquity of the internet and other communication technologies in Africa, particularly Kenya, has unfortunately led to increased cyberbullying. This view is supported by Makori and Agufana (2020), who assert that the growth and explosion in the use of technology in various forms, such as the internet and mobile phones, and the exponential growth and uptake of social media, has exposed many young people to cyberbullying incidents. Parsitau (2020) expounds that cyberspaces are today characterised by online anonymity and, as such, they expose the "invisible evil world" of cyberbullying and online harassment that have wrecked lives; caused profound pain, and hurt millions of online users; destroyed relationships; and affected people's integrity, health, well-being and careers. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly apparent that cyberspaces can become violent and ungovernable civic spheres.

Ndiege et al. (2020) acknowledge that cyberbullying exists in institutions of higher learning in Kenya. They conducted research among 364 students in selected private universities in the country and determined that 75.8% of the students had experienced cyberbullying. They note that cyberbullying is real, and many learning institutions continue to grapple with its effects. Mathew (2019), in his study to establish the prevalence of cyberbullying behaviour among adolescents in sampled schools of Westland's Sub-County, Nairobi County-Kenya, reported a significant correlation between cyberbullying perpetration and cyber-victimisation behaviour. Unfortunately, the study concludes that students exhibiting cyber-victimisation behaviour tend to become perpetrators themselves. According to Nasir et al. (2020), cyberbullying is the natural outcome of unchecked or tolerated real-world bullying, be it in the home, at school or in the surrounding community. This encourages violent behaviour amongst students leading to increased bullying incidents. In their study on the identification and knowledge of bullying in adolescents and its effects on the behaviour of bullying friends, they observed that 20–25% of students had been opponents and victims of bullying, and between 4–9% had been bullies while 9–25% had been terrorized. Nasir et al. (2020) note that global reports on school violence and bullying stand at 22.8–48.2%.

According to Kwanya et al. (2022), cyberbullying often takes the form of exposure, outing, exclusion or isolation, impersonation, cat-fishing, cyber-stalking, trolling, flaming,

shaming, vigilantism, blackmail, and revenge porn, among others. Parsitau (2020) concurs that cyberbullying may involve trolling, sexual harassment, and other gender-based violence against men and women. Other forms of cyberbullying include sharing unwelcome content, sexual harassment, or threats of sexual violence, such as threats of rape, death threats, hate speech, and professional sabotage. According to Ndiege et al. (2020), cyberbullying may also take the form of victimisation through deception, public humiliation, writing mean and malicious messages electronically about someone, making fun of others and teasing them, telling lies to and about others, or sending them rude messages. They further state that male students were more likely to commit acts of cyberbullying compared to their female counterparts. Makori and Agufana (2020) also agree that cyberbullying can occur in various forms, such as sending malicious messages or text messages, messages of a sexual nature known as sexting, or sending pictures or videos of someone to distribute the content to others. Sometimes, individuals may impersonate others online or create false profiles to perpetrate cyber aggression.

Makori and Agufana (2020) opine that clearly defining cyberbullying and understanding its causes is crucial to mitigating it. However, having a unified definition of cyberbullying is difficult because it takes many forms. The common underlying feature is that, unlike traditional bullying, it is perpetuated on digital platforms on the internet, such as social media, and through mobile devices. This study identifies with the definition of cyberbullying provided by Belsey (2008), cited by Hollá et al. (2017), as using information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group to harm others. Nasir et al. (2020) advocate for increased health education to improve understanding of adolescent bullying behaviours. Ndiege et al. (2020) support this view and explain that it is imperative that educational institutions in developing countries, especially in Africa, put in place frameworks that can deal with this novel reality of cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning. They further acknowledge that most universities do not have a deterrent mechanism for cyberbullying among students, and most lack a proper framework to support victims. Ndiege et al. (2020) further urge that more research should be undertaken to provide effective mitigation strategies. The government of Kenya recognises the imminent reality of cybersecurity challenges in the country and has consequently put in place measures to tackle them. Among such measures is the enactment of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018). Section 14 of the Act specifically addresses cyberbullying.

In their research, Achuthan et al. (2023) mapped research on cyberbullying between 2010 and 2021. They showed that most research on cyberbullying came from developed countries such as the United States (which had more than 1 000 publications on the subject) and the United Kingdom (more than 400 publications). Only India and Indonesia from the developing countries were among the top contributing countries, with more than 100 publications. From the foregoing, it is evident that there is a substantial volume of literature on cyberbullying. It is also noted that a large part of the current research on cyberbullying occurs in developed countries. Thus, developing countries, especially those in Africa, have fewer studies on the vice (Ndiege et al., 2020). Meta-analysis research on cyberbullying by Kwanya et al. (2022) points out that most of the studies on

cyberbullying have revolved around the safety concerns of children, adolescents, and youth. There is also a gender perspective to the concerns in which girls have featured prominently. Thus, they argue that some perspectives of cyberbullying are inadequately covered by this research, especially in Kenya. These perspectives include theories of cyberbullying; elements of cyberbullying; forms of cyberbullying; legal and legislative frameworks; measurement of occurrences and effects of cyberbullying; demographic perspectives of cyberbullying; and strategies for coping with cyberbullying.

The study by Kwanya et al. (2022) reviewed 359 studies on the subject and found that, as much as they focused on cyberbullying among students, none included bullying among teachers or staff. Thus, there is a gap as educators' experiences are underrepresented. It is also evident that all the reviewed studies on cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning have focused on students. No study known to the authors has so far investigated cyberbullying from the perspectives of deans of students. Although they play a pivotal role in maintaining social normalcy in academic institutions, educators are often not the focus of research on cyberbullying, and when they are included in the scope of the research, they are more often than not considered in the light of their role in mitigating cyberbullying among students rather than their own experiences with cyberbullying (Fredrick et al., 2023; Rajbhandari & Rana, 2022). Similarly, while there are studies on cyberbullying in universities, the plight of deans of students as victims of cyberbullying seem to be ignored.

This article seeks to bridge this gap by drawing attention to the fact that deans of students also experience cyberbullying. Consequently, they also need psychosocial support to cope with this menace, just like their students. Like other victims of bullying, deans of students may become victim-bullies, thereby challenging the delivery of their crucial services to students and the institution.

## Methodology

According to Chen and Luppicini (2017), a phenomenological study examines reality from individuals narrating their real-life experiences and feelings. The phenomenon under study is cyberbullying. It is studied in the light of personal, real-life experiences of deans of students at universities in Kenya. A phenomenological approach was ideal for this study because it enabled the researchers to understand the nature, prevalence, and consequences of cyberbullying experienced by deans of students in Kenyan universities.

The population under study was deans of students at universities in Kenya. Although there are over 70 universities in the country, this research focused purposively on the 49 fully chartered. The 49 universities were then further stratified according to their location into eight regions, the former provinces of Kenya. These are Nairobi, Rift Valley, Nyanza, Eastern, Coast, North Eastern, Central, and Western. The regions were used to stratify the population because not all counties in the country have fully chartered universities; hence the distribution was more representative by region rather than county. The universities were further stratified into private and public universities. After that, the researchers purposely chose 17 public and eight private universities. There are more public than private universities in Kenya. Therefore, two public and one private

university were selected from each of the eight regions mentioned above, except the North Eastern region, which has no private universities. This produced a sample size of 25 deans of students. Primary data were collected using interviews guided by an unstructured interview schedule. Data were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti.

**Demographic data of deans of students**
From the sample of 25 deans of students, 7(28%) were female, while 18(72%) were male. All the respondents in the study had postgraduate qualifications, with 16(64%) of them having PhDs, while 9(36%) had master's level training. Table 1 shows the areas the respondents specialized in.

**Table 1: Area of professional specializations of deans of students**

| S/N | Professional specialization | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Counselling Psychology | 5 |
| 2 | Education | 4 |
| 3 | Religion and Theological Studies | 4 |
| 4 | Human Resource Management | 2 |
| 5 | Economics | 1 |
| 6 | Organic Chemistry | 1 |
| 7 | Leadership and Governance | 2 |
| 8 | Environmental Sciences | 1 |
| 9 | Social Education and Ethics | 3 |
| 10 | Public Administration | 1 |
| 11 | Peace and Conflict Management | 1 |
| Total | | 25 |

It is evident from Table 1 that the deans of students at Kenyan universities are drawn from a wide array of specializations. Nonetheless, the majority are specialized in fields associated with the humanities and social sciences. Counselling Psychology is the most popular specialization among the interviewed deans of students. This is followed by Education as well as Religion and Theological Studies.

## Presentation of the findings
All the deans of students in the 25 targeted universities were interviewed. The results of the interviews are presented here in five subsections structured according to the study's specific objectives.

**Prevalence of cyberbullying of deans of students**
The findings revealed that only 7 out of the 25 deans of students interviewed had not been cyber-bullied by their students. The remaining 18 deans had been bullied in cyberspace by their students. This indicates that the prevalence of cyberbullying of deans of students in Kenyan universities is high. From the findings, all the deans of students

who had been cyber-bullied by students were active on Facebook and WhatsApp for at least one hour daily. They used both platforms for official communication with students on institutional matters, follow-up on student activities, and assistance with online learning. This shows that, aside from memos on notice boards, deans of students interact with students online to a large extent and are therefore exposed to hostile online engagement. The deans who reported that they had not experienced cyberbullying also reported that they were not active on social media. A number of them did not have social media accounts. Figure 1 shows what the deans of students use social media for.



**Figure 1: Uses of social media by deans of students in Kenya**

**Reasons for cyberbullying of deans of students**
The deans of students concurred that most cyberbullying occurred during the student elections period. Students vying for elective posts in their respective university student unions bully deans of students for perceived unfair or biased election results. This is mainly because deans of university students in Kenya officiate students' elections as part of their official duties. Their involvement in student elections exposes them to bullying by students striving to gain political mileage by appearing 'tough and unafraid' of the university administration to be elected by their colleagues to elective posts in the students' union. Hereunder is a verbatim response to this question:

> *Respondent 15: The student elections period is the peak time for cyberbullying in the university. Students vying for leadership positions try to get political mileage by hitting at the administration.*

The respondents also reported that if students had any conflict with the university management, they would ordinarily bully the deans of students because they view them as representatives of the administration, as indicated in the verbatim response below.

> *Respondent 17: I am the face of the university administration to students; any conflict that arises between the university and the students ends up with me getting bullied.*

Deans also reported that their students often bully them when government funds disbursed by the Higher Education Loans Board (Helb) are delayed. Figure 2 shows the reasons why deans of students in Kenyan Universities are bullied.
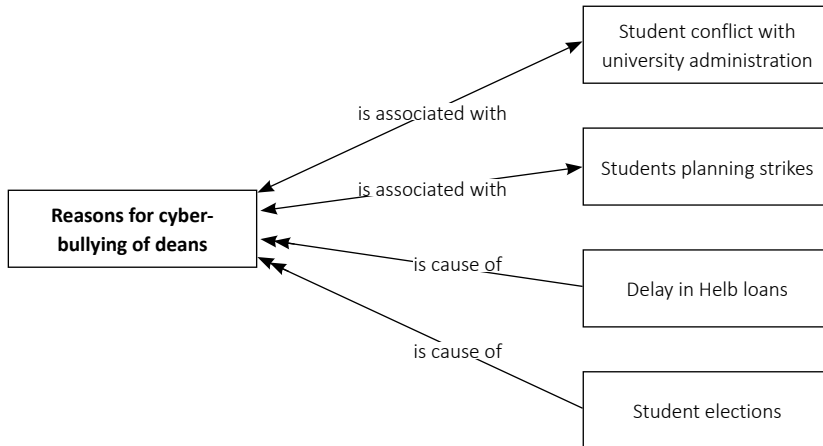


**Figure 2: Reasons why deans of students in Kenya get bullied**

**Types of cyberbullying experienced by deans of students**

Different types of cyberbullying include exclusion, cyber-stalking, shaming, outing, exposure, sextortion, blackmail, vigilantism, trolling, and flaming. The majority of the deans who experienced cyberbullying were trolled or flamed. This often took the form of inflammatory  rhetoric being directed at the deans in question online or the spreading of inflammatory and untrue statements about their character or alleged actions. Some of the experiences are captured in the verbatim responses below:

*Respondent 15: Yes, during students' election time, I was accused of favouring students from a particular community to win the elections.*

*Respondent 19: I had a negative experience on Facebook. The messages I received from my own students were hurtful.*

*Respondent 7: Mostly they were insults from students …*

*Respondent 18: The students would take any of my photos where I was featured with a lady and then claim that I was 'eating' their money entertaining women. The ladies in question were often my family members or work colleagues.*

Some deans also experienced cyber-stalking. One respondent said he was stalked by a female student who kept sending him strange messages.

*Respondent 11: This student would send me unsolicited messages while at the same time sending insulting messages to my wife.*

Deans of students also experienced varied forms of shaming, with one respondent stating that she was body shamed. Mean comments were made about her physical appearance and how she dressed. Hereunder is her verbatim response:

> *Respondent 2*: *To be honest, what they talk mostly about me is my hair; they say that it hasn't been dyed properly.*

### Effects of cyberbullying on deans of students

The effects of cyberbullying on deans of students were also varied. Those affected said that they were angered and distressed by the situation.

> *Respondent 19: It affected my family; it also annoyed and stressed me …*

> *Respondent 20: I was stressed and hurt psychologically. I kept thinking, 'What are my bosses saying?' It really affected me.*

For some, the cyberbullying incidents affected their motivation to perform their duties as deans of students to the same students who were bullying them. One said:

> *Respondent 20: One young man came back to seek my services after graduation; he was the same student who had abused me. I wondered whether I should write for him a good letter of recommendation.*

### Deans of students' strategies to counter cyberbullying and their effectiveness

All the 25 deans of students in Kenyan universities showed an awareness of the different ways to counter cyberbullying. As indicated in the word cloud shown in Figure 3, the most common strategy to counter cyberbullying is blocking the bullying accounts or unfriending hostile connections. Deactivating or disengaging from social media and seeking legal redress against those perpetrators whose identities are known were also suggested as strategies for confronting cyberbullying.

Deans of students in Kenyan universities also applied other methods of dealing with cyberbullying. Some of these included creating rapport with the students, seeking counselling, documenting the incidences, and confronting the bullies directly to correct the misinformation being circulated. Other strategies used are given in the verbatim responses below:

> *Respondent 1: My first reaction is to make friends with the students; once you create a rapport, it is easier to work with them.*

> *Respondent 8: … I make friends with them, especially during elections; be close to your students.*

> *Respondent 14: I had received counselling prior to assuming the office of dean of students; this made it easier for me to deal with cyberbullying.*

*Respondent 17: Sometimes, I stone-wall them, ignore them or fight back in case of misinformation.*

*Respondent 20: I made sure the case is very well documented … just in case I needed to take further action.*

The findings showed that while the deans of students are aware of the general strategies one can use to curb cyberbullying, most of them felt that the cyberbullying they experienced came with the territory and that they should take it in their stride. Thus, they chose to have a good rapport with their students rather than blocking or disengaging from social media.



**Figure 3: Word cloud of strategies used by deans of students to counter cyberbullying**

## Discussion of findings

Deans of students in Kenyan universities perform essential roles in helping to support students academically, personally and socially. Besides providing logistical support regarding accommodation and catering management, deans of students also offer career counselling and general guidance to the students under their care. According to Jackson (2016), one of the crucial roles of the dean of students is handling student crises while they are on campus. Essentially, they support students through the most challenging times during their stay on campus. Frequently, the divisions of deans of students are supported by professional counsellors, caterers, institutional housekeepers, sports coaches, chaplains, and social workers, among others.

The findings of this study reveal that the prevalence of cyberbullying in universities in Kenya is high. Deans of students, as university community members, often fall victim to cyberbullying. Although there is limited research on the cyberbullying of deans of students, several studies confirm that cyberbullying is prevalent in universities and other institutions of higher learning. For instance, Al-Rahmi et al. (2018) argue that as

many as half of university students have encountered acts of hostility in cyberspace. This is mainly because cyberbullying is rampant among youth and young adults who are university students (Kokkinos et al., 2014; Lee & Sanchez, 2018). Parsitau (2020) attributes the high prevalence of cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning to the rising levels of aggressive behaviour in society. She argues that with the growing ubiquity of ICTs, physical bullying has become digital. However, Kowalski et al. (2012) conducted a study revealing that most college students experience cyberbullying for the first time while at college or university. In other research, Kokkinos and Antoniadou (2019) explain that loneliness, idleness, anxiety, problematic internet use, and online disinhibition cause aggressive online behaviour. Regardless of the catalyst, Lewis (2011) asserts that the prevalence of cyberbullying is bound to increase with the growing adoption of digital technologies in society. D'Antona et al. (2010) explain that young people are exposed to digital technologies too early. Furthermore, this early exposure is not accompanied by adequate guidance on how to use these technologies ethically. Therefore, it can be deduced from the foregoing that institutions of higher learning globally are the crucibles of online bullying. It is, therefore, not surprising that nearly all the deans of students in Kenyan universities have been bullied online by their students.

The findings of our study revealed that the deans of students are often targeted because they work closely with the students. The close interaction can sometimes lead to disagreements which may sometimes result in bullying. Since the students may not confront their deans directly, they hide behind the veil of anonymity of digital media to express themselves. Betts et al. (2017) acknowledge that the anonymity digital technology affords its users is the leading enabler of cyberbullying. Deans of students are also considered the bridge between the university administration and the students. Therefore, students blame them for disagreements between the students and the administration. When this happens, the students may retreat behind technology to vent their anger towards the university by bullying the dean. According to Boakye-Yiadom (2012), who conducted a study in Ghana, some students were dissatisfied with the services of the offices of the deans of students which led to hostile online exchanges.

The deans of students in Kenyan universities have encountered diverse types of cyberbullying. These depend on the specific contexts and the issues around the conflict triggering the bullying. These include body shaming, trolling, cyber-stalking, and flaming. Although these were the forms of bullying the deans have so far experienced, this article argues that the deans may be exposed to all types of bullying. Betts et al. (2017) report that cyberbullying commonly experienced in universities includes sharing violent and unpleasant images, threatening and insulting communication. These forms of cyberbullying are likely to change as new technologies emerge. Similarly, they also change to circumvent the mitigation measures conceived to contain them.

It is clear from the findings that the deans of students are not immune to the effects of cyberbullying. They experience stress, anger, and anxiety. It is also clear that the relationship between the students and the affected deans might be strained due to the impact of cyberbullying. Some deans found themselves conflicted when it came to providing services to the same students who they believed bullied them behind the

veil of anonymity in cyberspace. Nixon (2014) explains that cyberbullying results in similar consequences regardless of the age or position of the victims. Therefore, bullied deans may experience loneliness, anxiety, and depression. These may lead to suicidal ideation, substance abuse, aggression, and other delinquent behaviour within and beyond the universities. Watts et al. (2017) explain that victims of cyberbullying may experience social strains which can affect their personal, social, and professional lives. Faryadi (2011) explains that victims of cyberbullying are unlikely to perform their duties effectively. Therefore, those exposed to cyberbullying may be ineffective in managing their responsibilities. Universities in Kenya should take cases of cyberbullying of deans of students seriously.

The findings demonstrate how the deans of students use diverse strategies to stem or cope with cyberbullying, echoing other studies. Watts et al. (2017) recommend reporting cyberbullying incidents to the relevant authorities and seeking legal redress. Faucher et al. (2014) recommend that serious action be taken against perpetrators of cyberbullying. These could include suspending or expelling the offenders. Such stringent responses will serve as examples to would-be bullies and stem the wave of cyberbullying in universities. Elçi and Seçkin (2019) recommend sensitization of university students on the criminal and immoral nature of cyberbullying and the possible consequences to the bullies. This awareness is likely to discourage students from perpetrating the vice. López-Meneses et al. (2020) explain that unless cyberbullying is countered with a severe response, it is likely to spread like a bushfire and consume the benefits of technology use in institutions of higher learning. Lieberman et al. (2011) recommend personalized counselling to perpetrators of cyberbullying.

## Conclusion

Many studies have demonstrated that cyberbullying is prevalent in institutions of higher education. Many of these studies have also revealed its prevalence amongst students. The current study has shown that, in some instances, deans of students are also bullied. The deans of students may experience diverse forms of cyberbullying depending on their contexts and the factors triggering it. The effects of cyberbullying on the personal, social, and professional lives of deans of students are diverse. Therefore, university authorities should take cyberbullying on deans of students seriously. Stringent action should be taken against the bullies to discourage these incidents.

## Recommendations

This study recommends the following actions for mitigating cyberbullying of deans of students in universities:

1. Cyberbullying should be acknowledged as a prevalent vice;
2. university authorities should develop policies and strategies for dealing with cyberbullying in their communities;
3. deans of students in Kenyan universities should develop clear strategies for social media use to reduce their exposure to cyberbullying;

4. deans of students in Kenyan universities are encouraged to embrace an open dialogue with their students as a means of pre-empting hostile responses such as cyberbullying;
5. universities in Kenya should hold regular awareness campaigns against cyberbullying;
6. and deans of students should seek psychosocial support, such as therapy, to cope with any adverse cyberbullying incidents.

**Ethics statement**

All participants in this study gave their informed consent before participating in the study. Additionally, the researchers obtained ethical clearance and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) in Kenya.

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