

## The Nature and Prevalence of Cyber Bullying Behaviors among South African High School Learners

Ronald J. Odora<sup>1</sup> and Sheila N. Matoti<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of Limpopo, Turfloop Campus, Polokwane, South Africa*  
E-mail: Ronald.Odora@ul.ac.za

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Educational and Professional Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Central University of Technology, Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa*  
E-mail: smatoti@cut.ac.za

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence of cyber bullying behaviors among South African high school learners (adolescents) and the extent to which learner rights are violated by such behavior. A sample of 346 Grade 11 and 12 high school learners (201 girls and 148 boys) from two provinces, namely, Limpopo and the Free State completed the questionnaire. Results indicated that there are differences in each age group regarding the mode of electronic technology most prevalent for cyber bullying in and out of school. The findings indicate that girls were more likely to be cyber victims than boys and that boys were more likely to be cyber bullies than girls. More Internet-based bullying through social networking sites was reported than through mobile phones, especially as students get older. These findings point to a high prevalence of cyber bullying and gross violation of learners, which can also serve as a basis for prevention and intervention programs to cope with cyber bullying.

### INTRODUCTION

The world over, adolescents represent the largest and fastest growing users of Internet, which has become indispensable for personal and educational purposes such as social networking, schoolwork and information gathering (Greenfield 2004; Subrahmanyam and Lin 2007). It is evidenced that over the past few years, communication applications of the Internet such as email, instant messaging and blogging have become entrenched in the lives of many adolescents (Lenhart et al. 2005; Baker and White 2010). Web-based social networking services have made it possible for young people to connect with one another and share interests and activities across political, economic, and geographic borders (Reston 2007). Although this is good for cross-border linkages and networking, it is also subject to abuse with dire consequences.

This study investigated cyber bullying tendencies among South African high school learn-

ers and links this to human rights violation, especially violation of children's rights. Section 28 of the South African Constitution stipulates that, "...every child has a right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation." Bullying of any form can be viewed as a form of abuse. The literature consulted on cyber bullying will form the basis for discussion.

### Internet Usage and Social Networking Among Adolescents

Recently, many adolescents have acquired an appetite for the Internet and have embraced some online social networking sites to meet their social and relational needs (Sameer and Patchin 2008; Lenhart et al. 2011). The explosion of technology and social networking sites on the Internet has seen bullying being moved from physical confrontation in the schoolyard to a more psychologically damaging experience. A high percentage of adolescents are being exposed to interpersonal violence, aggression, mistreatment and harassment while online through what has been termed as "cyber bullying" defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones or other electronic devices" (Hinduja and Patchin 2009: 5, 2012). Any form of harm that is inflicted on anyone is

\*Address for correspondence:

Sheila N. Matoti  
Central University of Technology, Free State  
Bloemfontein, South Africa  
Telephone: 051 507 3370  
Fax: 051 507 3367  
E-mail: smatoti@cut.ac.za

violation of human rights. Cyber bullying also falls under the ambit of violation of human rights.

The most common form of cyber bullying highlighted in recent studies (Patchin and Hinduja 2013, 2010a, 2010b, 2008) includes threatening text messages, unauthorized dissemination of private videos, and Facebook and Form spring postings on social networking sites. These are some of the many ways students use cell phones and computers to ridicule, humiliate, harass and intimidate one another.

### **The Nature and Extent of Cyber Bullying**

In South Africa, bullying is no longer limited to physical acts, such as hitting, kicking or pushing, verbal aggression, such as name-calling and abusive language, or relational aggression, such as spreading rumors or socially excluding peers but also include cyber bullying, which takes place indirectly over electronic media (Smit 2014). According to Goodno (2011) cyber bullying occurs when adolescents use technology deliberately and repeatedly to “bully, harass, hassle and threaten”, leaving their victims without any escape. Based on its severity, cyber bullying may result in “low self-esteem, family problems, academic problems, school violence, delinquent behavior and suicidal thoughts” (Goodno 2011).

Bauman (2013) is of the view that cyber bullying is prevalent because of the wide availability of digital technology and the proliferation of technological innovations, which will therefore mean that research, and by implication legislation, will always lag behind. This is not to say that a magnitude of research on cyber bullying, especially in other countries, has not been done in recent years, but that the “very nature” of electronic communication leads to different results (Kowalski et al. 2014).

Research findings on the prevalence of cyber bullying vary from one study to another, largely due to different ways that the behavior is defined, and the different sampling and methodological strategies employed (Tokuna 2010). Among the many articles published in peer reviewed journals as of 2011, Finkelhor et al. (2000) found that about six percent of youth had been harassed online in the previous year, while Juvonen and Gross (2008) found that seventy-two percent of the youth had been cyber bullied within the same period.

Based on a number of studies in the United States (US), electronic dating violence is found to be more prevalent among adolescents than other forms of cyber bullying. For example, *Patchin and Hinduja* (2010) who examined the relationship between middle school students’ experience with cyber bullying and their level of self-esteem, found that students who experienced cyber bullying, both as a victim and an offender, had significantly lower self-esteem than those who had little or no experience with cyber bullying. Similarly, research on traditional bullying among adolescents (*Patchin and Hinduja* 2010) also found a relatively consistent link between victimization and lower self-esteem, while finding an inconsistent relationship between offending and lower self-esteem.

A similar study by Silverman et al. (2001) found that between twenty percent and thirty percent of adolescents had experienced psychological and verbal violence by their romantic partners. Another study of high school students from 2007 reported that eighty-five percent of the boys and ninety-two percent of girls engaged in psychological aggression against their partners in their current dating relationship, while eighty-five percent of boys and eighty-eight percent of girls also revealed that they had been the victim of this type of aggression in their dating relationship (O’Leary et al. 2008). As is expected, dating violence is pronounced during adolescence due to the newness of the romantic relationships for boys and girls and an as yet underdeveloped ability to constructively cope with frustration, jealousy or other negative emotions (Mulford and Giodano 2008).

It is clear from the research findings that cyber bullying experiences can have a significant effect on the emotional and psychological well-being of adolescents. Bullying, whether online or not has been associated with a host of other negative psychological and behavioral outcomes such as suicide tendency, dropping out of school, sadness, anger, frustration, embarrassment or fear, aggression and fighting, drug use and carrying a weapon to school (Ericson 2001; Hinduja and Pachin 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010a; Rigby 2013; Yharra and Mitchel 2007). The South African Schools Act bars learners from carrying dangerous weapons to school. Although this is the case, incidents of the use of dangerous weapons have been reported in some schools.

While previous research have illuminated the nature and extent of cyber bullying behaviors in the developed countries such as the United States (Patchin and Hinduja 2012), few studies have attempted to shed light on the level of prevalence of such bullying among South African adolescents. A number of limitations were reported in the previous studies, such as the geographical location and the use of a representative sample (Hinduja and Patchin 2013).

According to international studies (Olweus 2012), cyber bullying is less frequent among young people than traditional bullying. Olweus maintained that claims by the media and researchers that cyber bullying has increased dramatically and is now the big school bullying problem among young people in the US are largely exaggerated. His studies found very little scientific support to show that cyber bullying among young people in the US has increased over the past five to six years, and this form of bullying is actually a less frequent phenomenon.

To demonstrate that cyber bullying is less frequent than “traditional” bullying, Olweus cited several large-scale studies he conducted, including one involving approximately 450,000 U.S. students in Grade 3 to 12. As a follow-up, regular surveys were conducted in connection with the introduction of Olweus’s bullying prevention program in 1,349 schools from 2007 to 2010. Another study followed 9,000 students in Grades 4 through 10 in 41 schools in Oslo, Norway, from 2006 to 2010. Tustin et al. (2012) conducted an exploratory study to determine the digital divide and inequality among digital natives in Gauteng Province. A total of 1,050 young people between the ages of 12 and 21 years (Grade 8 to 12) enrolled at secondary schools across the Gauteng province participated in the survey. The study found that while mobile phones can be used to educate children, access to the Internet could provide a tool for bullying. The study also found that thirty-seven percent of the 1,050 young people surveyed were victims of online abuse, of these 40.3 percent did not report it, while almost fifty-two percent did and 8.9 percent were uncertain. In many cases, cyber bullying was found to take place mostly through SMS and social media. Factors included retaliation, peer pressure, anger, recognition or entertainment. These factors could actually drive a victim to being physically ill or even build a suicidal tendency.

The results above suggest that the new electronic media have actually created a few ‘new’

victims and bullies. Olweus (2012) argued that to be cyber bullied or to cyber bully other students seems to a large extent to be part of a general pattern of bullying where use of electronic media is only one possible form, and in addition, a form with low prevalence. These findings do not suggest that cyber bullying cannot be a problem in schools and outside of school. On the contrary, cyber bullied children, like targets of more traditional bullying often suffer from depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety and even suicidal tendencies. This shows that violation of human rights is expanding into a new territory, that of cyber bullying. According to the literature, the emergence of cyber bullying needs to be noted as a distinct phenomenon impacting the lives of many young people, families and communities and that if ignored, it could reach undesirable crisis levels, which could negatively impact the broader society. The purpose of the study was to investigate the nature and level of prevalence of cyber bullying among South African adolescents as a result of indulging in social media. The assumption is that learners who experience cyber bullying are more likely to do the same to others. Results of such analysis should shed more light to this emerging problem in a way that will help inform appropriate prevention and response strategies.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey. A descriptive design was chosen because it provides comprehensive information about a given problem or situation, its variables and its features. It is also more precise in its focus and scope than exploratory design.

### Participants

A total of 346 Grade 11 and 12 learners from 50 schools from two provinces in South Africa were randomly selected to participate in the survey. The sample was representative in terms of age, gender, school location and province.

### Data Collection Instrument

A questionnaire was designed by the researchers and based on the literature reviewed it was used to collect data from the participants. An expert validated the instrument before it was

piloted to determine its reliability and validity. Based on the pilot results, the instrument was modified before administering it to the participants. The research instrument was categorized into three construct dimensions, namely, biographical information, use of social network and prevalence of cyber bullying. Participants were asked to answer each question by marking either a cross or a tick in the correct box.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 23.0). Descriptive statistics were first computed to better understand the characteristics of the sample and the nature of cyber bullying perpetrated by adolescents in this population.

### Ethical Issues

It was made clear on the onset by the researchers that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw if they so wished. Names of the participants remained anonymous and the information collected from the participants was treated

with high confidentiality. The participants were made aware of the significance of the study. Teachers were advised to give students privacy while they completed the survey questionnaire.

## RESULTS

### Prevalence of Internet Bullying by Location of School

As can be seen from Tables 1a and 1b, the majority of learners come from township schools. Townships are areas that were designated for black South Africans under the apartheid government. It is therefore not surprising to get the majority of learners coming from township schools. The breakdown of the findings is as follows:

A total of 102 (61.6%) students from township schools often used their cell phones to chat with other people while 101 (61.6%) reported sending or receiving messages from people they do not know. This is a problem as the messages could lead to dangerous encounters. The questions to be asked here are: How did strangers get hold of one's contact details? What else do they know about a particular learner? What is their intention of sending learners they do not know messages?

**Table 1a: Prevalence of internet bullying by location of school**

		City (n = 63)			Township (n = 164)			Rural area (n = 119)		
		Very often	Few times	Never	Very often	Few times	Never	Very often	Few times	Never
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	56	7	0	102	48	14	29	41	49
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	15	43	5	30	101	33	22	40	51
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	0	11	52	10	18	136	4	8	101
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	1	15	47	9	33	122	5	25	83
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	8	36	19	9	73	82	12	34	67
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	0	22	41	9	64	91	8	37	68
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	4	21	37	17	49	98	9	20	84
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	6	13	44	20	44	100	36	79	225

**Table 1b: Prevalence of internet bullying by location of school (Mean difference)**

		<i>City</i> ( <i>n</i> = 73)		<i>Township</i> ( <i>n</i> = 209)		<i>Rural area</i> ( <i>n</i> = 58)	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	1.11	.317	1.46	.650	2.12	.792
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	1.84	.545	2.02	.621	2.26	.765
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	2.83	.383	2.77	.549	2.86	.441
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	2.73	.482	2.69	.571	2.69	.552
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	2.17	.636	2.45	.599	2.49	.683
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	2.65	.481	2.50	.602	2.53	.628
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	2.53	.620	2.49	.678	2.66	.621
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	2.60	.661	2.49	.705	2.63	.644

A total of 64 (39%) learners sometimes received threatening information through their cell phones. This is very dangerous. What are learners expected to do in such situations? Do they report to the parents, teachers, peers or police? Are such behaviors covered under the schools' safety policies? Are learners aware of their rights under such circumstances?

Out of 164 students surveyed, 73 (44.5%) in township schools used their cell phones to share with friends a secret about someone else, com-

pared to 36 (57.1%) students from the city schools.

Table 1b shows the means for the individual statements.

#### Prevalence of Internet Bullying by Province

A comparison of Limpopo and Free State learners in Table 2a shows the following.

A large number, 131 (79.9%) Free State learners used cell phones to chat with other people

**Table 2a: Prevalence of internet bullying by province**

		<i>Limpopo Province</i> ( <i>n</i> = 176)			<i>Free State Province</i> ( <i>n</i> = 164)		
		<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	56	68	52	131	28	5
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	31	76	69	36	108	20
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	12	18	146	2	19	143
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	14	49	113	1	24	139
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	17	54	105	12	89	63
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	13	63	100	4	60	100
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	21	38	117	9	52	102
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	17	38	121	19	41	104

more often than Limpopo high school learners. A significant number 89 (54.3%) of Free State learners use cell phones a few times to share with friends a secret about someone else as compared to 54 (32.9%) students from Limpopo Province.

Similarly, 60 (36.6%) students from Free State do receive threatening information through their cell phone as compared to 63(35.8%) students from Limpopo Province. There is little indication

to show that learners from both provinces used their cell phone to bully other people or SMS to send harmful comments about someone else.

Table 2b shows the means for both provinces and the mean differences.

### Prevalence of Internet Bullying by Age

Tables 3a and 3b show the prevalence of Internet bullying by age. The majority (209) of the

**Table 2b: Prevalence of internet bullying by province (Mean difference)**

		<i>Limpopo Province (n=138)</i>		<i>Free State Province (n=201)</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	1.98	.785	1.23	.490
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	2.22	.724	1.90	.578
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	2.76	.566	2.86	.382
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	2.56	.638	2.84	.383
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	2.50	.668	2.31	.602
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	2.49	.632	2.59	.542
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	2.55	.700	2.57	.598
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	2.59	.661	2.52	.696

**Table 3a: Prevalence of internet bullying by age**

		<i>13-15yrs (n =63)</i>			<i>16-18yrs(n = 164)</i>			<i>19 yrs plus (n = 164)</i>		
		<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	17	20	36	142	55	12	28	21	9
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	9	22	42	48	133	28	10	29	19
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	5	6	62	8	26	175	1	5	52
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	4	16	53	11	45	153	0	12	46
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	6	21	46	19	98	92	4	24	30
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	3	18	52	10	93	106	4	12	42
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	10	13	50	18	61	130	2	16	39
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	7	15	51	27	51	131	2	13	43

**Table 3b: Prevalence of internet bullying by age (Mean difference)**

		<i>13-15yrs</i> ( <i>n = 73</i> )		<i>16-18 )</i> ( <i>n = 209</i> )		<i>19yrs plus</i> ( <i>n = 58</i> )	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	2.26	.817	1.38	.593	1.67	.735
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	2.45	.708	1.90	.597	2.16	.696
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	2.78	.559	2.80	.488	2.88	.378
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	2.67	.579	2.68	.570	2.79	.409
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	2.55	.646	2.35	.641	2.45	.626
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	2.67	.554	2.46	.588	2.66	.608
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	2.55	.727	2.54	.650	2.65	.551
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	2.60	.661	2.50	.715	2.71	.530

learners who participated in the study fell in the range of 16-18 years, 73 in the range of 13-15 years and 58 in the range of 19 and above. The mean age was 15.6 years. Bullying and sending harmful messages appeared mainly in the age range of 16-18, followed by the age range of 13-15 years as shown in Table 3.

#### Prevalence of Internet Bullying by Gender

Table 4a shows that a majority, that is 291 (85.6%) learners surveyed, own cell phone with

an Internet application. A total of 110 (79.7%) boys own cell phones with an Internet application compared to 181 (90.0%) girls. Table 4a also shows that 126 (62.7%) girls use cell phones more often to chat with other people as compared to just 28 (20.3%) boys. There are also a significant number of boys, that is 97 (48.3%) and 82 (40.8%) girls who have, on few occasions, used their cell phones to share with friends a secret about someone else and received threatening information through their cell phones.

**Table 4a: Prevalence of internet bullying by gender**

		<i>Boys (n = 138)</i>			<i>Girls (n = 201)</i>		
		<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Very often</i>	<i>Few times</i>	<i>Never</i>
1	How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	60	47	31	126	49	26
2	How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	28	66	46	40	118	43
3	How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	7	18	113	7	19	175
4	How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	7	35	96	8	38	155
5	How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	11	46	81	18	97	86
6	How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	7	40	91	10	82	109
7	How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	15	36	87	15	54	131
8	How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	9	35	94	27	44	130

**Table 4b: Prevalence of internet bullying by gender (Mean difference)**

	<i>Boys (n=138)</i>		<i>Girls (n=201)</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 How often do you use your cell phone to chat with other people?	1.79	.787	1.50	.715
2 How often do you send or receive messages from people you do not know?	2.14	.710	2.01	.644
3 How often do you use your cell phone to bully other people?	2.77	.531	2.84	.456
4 How often do you use SMS to send harmful comments about someone else?	2.64	.577	2.73	.527
5 How often do you use your cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else?	2.51	.642	2.34	.636
6 How often do you receive threatening information through your cell phone?	2.61	.585	2.49	.593
7 How often do you threaten someone who annoyed you online?	2.52	.686	2.58	.629
8 How often do your parents or teacher monitor your social network account?	2.62	.608	2.51	.722

Table 4b shows the mean scores of learners by gender.

### DISCUSSION

Research has shown that cyber bullying does occur and manifests itself in many ways. Cyber bullying can occur between people who know each other, such as love partners (Siverman et al. 2001; Mulford and Giodano 2008). It can also happen between strangers. Adolescents are more prone to cyber bullying as they form a majority of Internet users.

This study has found that high school learners, who easily fall under the category of adolescents, use the Internet frequently. The study showed that 215 (62%) the learners from Free State province used the Internet more than those from Limpopo as seen in Table 2. Furthermore, learners from township and city schools used the Internet more than those in the rural schools (Table 1). This means that exposure to computers and cell phones increases the prevalence of Internet usage and consequently, cyber bullying. This confirms the findings by Kim et al. (2004) who argue that with the development and increased accessibility of electronic technology in the form of computers and mobile phones, the opportunities for peer victimization has greatly increased.

The study also showed that girls use Internet applications more than boys and sometimes for the wrong reasons as shown in Table 4. There are also a significant number of girls 97 (48.3%) and 82 (40.8%) boys who have, on a few occasions, used their cell phone to share with friends a secret about someone else and received threatening information through their cell phone. This means that a learner can be a bully in one in-

stance and a victim in another. The study found that 51 (14.7%) out of 350 learners use their cell phone to bully other people. Although this number appears small, it is an indication of the increasing level of cyber bullying among young people irrespective of the school location.

The study also found that 88 (25.4%) out of 346 learners did send SMSs with harmful comments about someone else. Sending harmful comments about other people is dangerous as it could affect the people concerned emotionally and psychologically. About a third (34.7%) of 346 learners indicated having threatened other people who annoyed them online. This cyber rage if not stopped can go on for a long time, causing harm in the process. Bullying and sending harmful messages occurred mainly in the age range of 16-18, followed by the age range of 13-15 years as shown in Table 3. This is a cause for concern as learners are more vulnerable during these years.

Differences were found in each age group regarding the mode of electronic technology most prevalent for cyber bullying in and out of school. More Internet-based bullying through social networking sites was reported than through mobile phones, especially as students get older (Tarapdar and Kellett 2011). Similar studies (Holfeld and Leadbeater 2015) also found cyber bullying to be related to age (or access to technology), with older students more likely to engage in cyber bullying than younger students.

Contrary to the above findings, over sixty percent of learners from the three school locations indicated that they neither received threatening information through their cell phones nor used their cell phones either to bully other people through their cell phone, indicating that the prevalence of such cyber bullying behaviors

appears to be insignificant. This particular finding seems to support the view of Olweus (2012) who has constantly maintained that cyber bullying is, to a large extent, part of a general pattern of bullying where use of electronic media is only one possible form, and in addition, a form with low prevalence.

The role of parents and teachers in addressing the problem of cyber bullying among young people was interrogated. Over sixty percent of the learners indicated that their parents or teachers rarely monitored their social network account. This finding suggests that cyber bullying is likely to be more prevalent among young adolescents with little or no parental guidance.

The findings discussed here appear to support earlier research findings on cyber bullying behaviors and psychological effects. For example, an exploratory research by Tustin (2012) in the Gauteng Province in South Africa found that while mobile phones can be used to educate children, access to the Internet could provide a foundation for bullying. Tustin (2012) found that thirty-seven percent of South African teenagers were victims of online abuse, of these, 40.3 percent did not report it, while almost fifty-two percent did and 8.9 percent were uncertain. In many cases, cyber bullying was found to take place mostly through SMS and social media. Factors include retaliation, peer pressure, anger, recognition or entertainment. These factors could actually drive a victim to being physically ill or to have suicidal tendencies.

Another study by Mishna et al. (2010) on cyber bullying behaviors among middle and high school students in the United States found that boys were more likely to be cyber bullies, whereas girls were more likely to be cyber victims.

From the findings of this study and other related literature, one can conclude that bullying is a complex phenomenon and takes on different forms along with the changes in society. Cyber bullying like all other forms of bullying can affect learners emotionally and psychologically. This is a gross violation of their rights as learners as well as rights of other people. Learners can be bullies and also victims. In the wake of the Internet's rapid development, parents, schools and researchers alike are all challenged to keep up with a younger, digitally savvy generation.

This study found that cyber bullying occurs in many ways but is more prevalent when young people use technology as an instrument to harass their peers—via email, in chat rooms, on social networking websites, and with text mes-

saging through their computer or cell phone. The study also found that the prevalence is far lower among learners in rural schools than in city and townships schools. Irrespective of what method is used, cyber bullying has some serious psychological implications on those bullied and should be stopped. The findings of this study show that the older the learners are, the more unlikely he or she will engage in cyber bullying.

Cyber bullying challenges schools in new ways, and hopefully the current study may encourage schools to discuss this issue and how school counseling staff can optimize their resources in alliance. In order to combat cyber bullying, both contextual and individual approaches are necessary, meaning that there is a need to take into account the structure surrounding the students as well as the single individual in this matter. Providing young adolescents with a safe and caring school experience can change their behavior towards bullying in general and lay the foundation for the students' development and perspective of the world. Reducing bullying is an important issue that needs to be tackled with strengthened resolve whenever it happens, be it online or offline.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the emergence of cyber bullying needs to be viewed as a distinct phenomenon impacting the lives of many young people, families and communities and that, if ignored, it could reach undesirable crisis levels, which could negatively impact the broader society. This assertion is substantiated by the present research findings that the majority of learners appear to have been cyber bullied or used their mobile phones to bully others. The nature and extent of cyber bullying experienced among secondary school learners appears to vary according to province, school location, gender and age. On a positive note, the study found a low prevalence of cyber bullying among young adolescents as compared to the traditional bullying. The findings of this study have some implications for the parents, teachers and school counselors alike.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the research findings some practical interventions to address the current cyber bullying phenomenon are hereby proposed. The Department of Basic Education

should formulate codes of conduct and other school policies that address cyber bullying. Having done that these should be communicated to all members of the school community. There needs to be a policy in place that is not only implemented but consistently enforced, and appropriate consequences relating to cyber bullying should be in existence. Bullying prevention programs should be incorporated in the school curricula and should also include substantive instruction on cyber bullying. Educators need to intervene in cyber bullying incidents by constantly monitoring the learners' social network sites, as failure to do so may negatively impact the learners' academic performance. Schools and communities should invest time and technical efforts in anonymously disclosing identified cases of cyber bullying to young adolescents. This strategy can substantially increase the perceived risk of disclosure and is likely to reduce further the existing cases of cyber bullying among South African youth.

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