

# Examining the Effects of Cyberbullying in South African Higher Education: Insights and Recommendations

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**Abstract:** This study explores the profound impact of cyberbullying within South African higher education institutions, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate its harmful effects. The findings reveal that cyberbullying significantly threatens students' well-being, academic performance, and mental health, including issues such as depression and social anxiety. Consequently, the study emphasizes adopting multifaceted approaches to address this pervasive issue. To tackle cyberbullying effectively, the research recommends the implementation of proactive measures, such as awareness campaigns, clear institutional policies, and robust reporting mechanisms. Moreover, fostering an inclusive and empathetic campus culture, establishing strong support systems, and enforcing appropriate disciplinary actions are identified as critical components of the proposed strategies. The study further underscores the importance of collaboration among key stakeholders, including educational institutions, families, students, and the broader society, to create a united front against cyberbullying. Stakeholders can cultivate a safer online environment for all students by working together. Additionally, the research advocates for the South African Department of Basic Education to play a pivotal role in equipping educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to address cyberbullying both inside and outside the classroom. In conclusion, the study calls for a holistic and collaborative approach to combating cyberbullying in higher education. This approach should integrate preventive measures, supportive frameworks, and disciplinary actions to mitigate the extensive consequences of cyberbullying on students' psychosocial development, self-esteem, and academic success. Immediate action and collective efforts are essential to ensure a secure digital environment for South African higher education students.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, South African Higher Education, Mental Health, Academic Performance, Student Well-being, Awareness Campaigns, Reporting Mechanisms, Prevention Strategies, Intervention Approaches

## Introduction

The use of cyber technologies and the Internet is prevalent in the digital world, Ashktorab and Vitak (2016) and has become indispensable resources for exchanging information among users, devices and organizations. Therefore, every society is heavily dependent on technological-mediated communication in this digital transformation era, whereby physical borders are no longer boundaries to information and communication flow (Mohiuddin, 2006). Although digital transformation improves critical business operations and economic growth by digital and cyber technologies, however, as noted by Tiirmaa-Klaar (2016), the application of these technologies poses ethical challenges to the society. As also noted by Gunarto (2015) cyber technologies have problematic implications as they create some cyber ethical issues such as personal privacy, access right and harmful actions. The excessive use of cyber technologies and Internet thus brings with it many social and cyber ethics-related issues affecting High Education Institutions (HEI)s students. The students are operating in a new world with unlimited access to the information which could affect either learning habits positively or negatively, when interacting with cyber technologies. The unethical cyber practices have thus become a common feature among students in HEIs. As also noted by Khasawneh (2012) many university students have engaged in cyber technology unethical acts such as copyright violations and digital piracy. Cyber technologies thus expose HEIs students to myriad cyber-attacks and unethical cyber practices that may result in devastating outcomes or profound impact if appropriate measures are not

implemented to mitigate the risks. These students and other internet users thus encounter a wide variety of unethical cyber behaviours on social media platforms, including cyberbullying, hacking, privacy violations, cybersex, fraud, pornography, digital piracy, cyber plagiarism, cybercrime etc. However, as indicated by Moor (2005) the students in HEIs lack the understanding and awareness of the ethical use of cyber technologies, leading to decisions taken without foreknowledge about ethical responsibilities and consequences. Unethical cyber behaviours have thus been prominent in many countries, in this digital world, whereby countermeasures and preventive measures against these behaviours need to be formulated. HEIs and other private institutions are under immense pressure as they are required to monitor unethical behaviours or acts closely as they may have implications on students' professional life and society at large. Cyberbullying is a significant issue that affects educational institutions globally, and South African higher education is no exception. The detrimental effects of cyberbullying have been widely studied and recognized, revealing its profound impact on students' mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Victims of cyberbullying often experience social isolation, diminished self-confidence, and an increased risk of disengagement or dropping out of their studies altogether (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). Despite these known effects, the lack of awareness and insufficient reporting mechanisms in South African higher education institutions remain critical barriers to effectively addressing this issue. It is therefore vital to make the students aware of the proper usage of cyber technologies and cyber spaces, to understand cyber ethics or computer ethics related to security, privacy issues and major negative impacts of these technologies. It is thus crucial for HEIs to create and adopt code of cyber ethics outlining the principles that will govern the use of cyber technologies and how students should behave in cyber spaces. The students should also adhere to cyber ethics while interacting with others and that will also allow them to make ethical decisions. Cyber ethics is a set of moral rules, or a code of behaviour applied to the online environment, and any responsible citizen should therefore observe these rules to help make cyberspace a safe place (Tavani, 2013).

The heightened prevalence of cyberbullying in virtual learning settings underscores the urgent need for robust prevention and intervention strategies. To address the multifaceted challenges posed by cyberbullying in higher education, comprehensive awareness campaigns and targeted educational programs are essential. These initiatives should aim to educate students and educators on identifying the signs and consequences of cyberbullying, fostering digital citizenship, and encouraging responsible online behaviour. Equally important is the establishment of accessible resources that provide support to victims and pathways for reporting incidents. Moreover, collaboration among higher education institutions, government agencies, and other stakeholders is vital to developing and implementing effective policies and protocols. These collaborative efforts should focus on creating a safer online environment while ensuring that preventive and corrective measures are integrated into institutional frameworks. Proactive strategies, including clear guidelines, training programs, and counselling services, are critical in mitigating the adverse effects of cyberbullying. In conclusion, cyber bullying in South African higher education has far-reaching implications for students' academic success, emotional well-being, and social development. Addressing this pressing issue requires a holistic approach that combines awareness, education, policy implementation, and support systems. By taking concerted action, stakeholders can work toward creating a safer and more inclusive educational environment where all students can thrive.

### **Understanding Cyberbullying Through Diverse Perspectives**

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant social issue with profound implications, particularly in educational contexts. A review of the literature reveals that cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon characterized using digital technologies to inflict harm. Researchers have explored various dimensions of cyberbullying, including its definition, forms, and impact on individuals. This review synthesizes contributions from multiple authors, highlighting commonalities and unique perspectives in understanding cyberbullying.

### **Defining Cyberbullying**

A recurring theme in the literature is the definition of cyberbullying as an intentional, aggressive act carried out using electronic means. Smith et al. (2008) describe cyberbullying as repeated hostile actions that target victims who cannot defend themselves, emphasizing repetition and power imbalance. Similarly, Hinduja and Patchin (2009) and Patchin and Hinduja (2010) highlight the deliberate nature of cyberbullying, noting its reliance on digital tools such as computers, cell phones, and social media platforms. Building on this, Tokunaga (2010) broadens the understanding by including any behavior via electronic media that communicates hostile messages, while Slonje and Smith (2008) emphasize the role of mobile phones and the internet as primary tools. Willard (2007) and Belsey (2005) further focus on the deliberate intent to harm through online communication, with Belsey underscoring the repetitive and hostile nature of such acts. There is no single definition of cyberbullying, but in South Africa, Belsey

(in Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009) describes it as "bullying that involves the use of information and communication technologies, such as e-mail, cellphone and text messages, instant messaging, and defamatory online polling websites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others." Williams (in Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009) further defines it as "the use of speech that is defamatory, constituting bullying, harassment or discrimination, and the disclosure of personal information that contains offensive, vulgar or derogatory comments." Varjas et al. (2009) also describe it as "the newer technological phenomenon of cyberbullying, which is defined as willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of digital platforms."

### **Types of Cyberbullying**

Nancy Willard, the director of Embrace Civility in the Digital Age, is among the pioneering authors to write extensively about cyberbullying. In her book, she identifies seven distinct types of cyberbullying. *Flaming* refers to heated arguments or exchanges, often featuring offensive or vulgar language, that occur in public online spaces such as forums, chat rooms, and discussion boards. *Harassment* involves the repetitive sending of offensive messages to an individual through personal communication channels like email or social media, targeting a person persistently. *Denigration* occurs when someone spreads false or hurtful information about another person online, aiming to damage their reputation or disrupt their relationships. *Impersonation* involves someone pretending to be another person online to send or post material that harms their reputation or social connections. *Outing and Trickery* include the sharing of sensitive or embarrassing personal information without consent, with *trickery* being a part of this where individuals deceive others into revealing such information, which is then shared publicly. *Exclusion* is the intentional act of leaving someone out of an online group or community. Lastly, *Cyberstalking* is characterized by the persistent sending of threatening or harmful messages with the intent to intimidate or extort the victim (Willard, 2007).

Nancy Willard identifies several types of cyberbullying, such as harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking. However, cyberbullying is not limited to these forms, as the digital landscape continues to evolve, introducing new and complex methods of online abuse. Additional types of cyberbullying include doxxing, where an individual's personal information is publicly shared online without consent, often leading to harassment or physical harm. Another form is revenge porn, involving the non-consensual sharing of explicit images or videos, which has devastating effects on victims' mental health and reputations. Trolling, characterized by intentionally provocative or inflammatory messages designed to upset or anger others, is another prevalent form, particularly in social media and gaming communities. Flaming, like trolling, involves hostile and abusive exchanges but is usually more direct and aggressive. Catfishing, where someone creates a fake online persona to deceive others, can also lead to emotional and psychological harm. These additional forms of cyberbullying illustrate the diverse and dynamic nature of online abuse, emphasizing the need for comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks to address the full spectrum of harmful digital behavior.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

#### ***Social-Ecological Framework***

The social ecological theory has proven particularly valuable in understanding traditional forms of bullying, such as face-to-face, verbal, and relational bullying (Espelage, 2014). This perspective highlights that health risks are not merely the direct result of individual behaviours. Instead, they arise from complex interactions between individuals and the environments in which they live (Espelage, Rao, and Craven (2012). Therefore, effectively addressing cyberbullying behaviour requires an ecological framework that integrates multiple dimensions. Specifically, this approach must consider ecological, cognitive, and psychosocial risk and protective factors, which can be influenced or moderated across various levels (Ellis et al. (2017). These levels include the individual, family, peer group, online environment, and broader community. Furthermore, it is essential to account for the interconnected nature of young people's online and offline social contexts (Slater (2002). Recognizing how they interact with others in digital spaces is critical to developing strategies that target these multifaceted influences (ElSayary, Alzaffin, and Alsuwaidi (2024). By addressing these layers holistically, the social-ecological framework offers a comprehensive way to mitigate the risks and promote protective factors associated with cyberbullying. The social ecological theory has proven particularly valuable in understanding traditional forms of bullying, such as face-to-face, verbal, and relational bullying (Hong et al. (2016). This theoretical perspective underscores that health risks, including the negative outcomes associated with bullying, are not simply the direct result of individual actions (Hymel et al. (2015). Rather, they emerge from a complex web of interactions between individuals and the multiple environments in which they operate. These environments include not only the immediate surroundings, such as home or school,

but also broader social and cultural contexts that influence behaviour. Consequently, this understanding allows for a more nuanced approach to addressing issues like bullying, as it acknowledges that the causes and impacts are multifactorial and interconnected (Mishna (2012). Therefore, effectively addressing cyberbullying behaviour requires an ecological framework that integrates multiple influence dimensions. In this regard, such a framework must go beyond focusing solely on the individual and instead consider the various contexts that shape their experiences and interactions (Gerring and Wade (2012). Specifically, it must account for ecological, cognitive, and psychosocial risk and protective factors, which can be influenced or moderated at different levels (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, and Prinstein (2018). These include individual characteristics, family dynamics, peer group influences, the online environment, and the broader community( Saiz et al. (2019). For instance, individual risk factors might include a young person's temperament or coping strategies, while family factors could involve parental support or supervision (Cross et al. (2015). In addition, online and offline peer group influences can also play a critical role in reinforcing or mitigating bullying behaviours (Hamsah et al. (2024). Moreover, it is essential to recognize the interconnected nature of young people's online and offline social contexts. In today's digital age, the boundaries between the two are increasingly blurred, with young people seamlessly navigating between physical and virtual environments (Dingli and Seychell (2015). As a result, their online interactions are often an extension of their offline social lives and vice versa. This dual context means that cyberbullying cannot be understood in isolation from the real-world relationships and pressures young people experience (Gianesini and Brighi (2015). Thus, understanding how they engage with peers in both realms is critical to developing effective strategies to combat cyberbullying. By addressing these multiple layers, individual, familial, social, and environmental, the social-ecological framework offers a comprehensive way to mitigate the risks associated with cyberbullying (Ashktorab and Vitak (2016). Additionally, it provides a model for promoting protective factors, such as strong social support networks, resilience, and healthy coping mechanisms, that can buffer against the negative impacts of bullying (Ultimately, this holistic approach helps to ensure that interventions are not just reactive but also preventative, fostering environments that support the well-being of people both online and offline.

### **The Prevalence of Cyberbullying**

The term "cyberbully" was first coined in a 1995 *New York Times* article by Molly O'Neill, and few could have predicted how quickly it would become a significant issue affecting millions of young people globally. Today, researchers universally acknowledge cyberbullying as a growing concern, particularly among children and adolescents, not only in the United States but worldwide. The widespread availability and misuse of technology, such as computers and mobile phones, have contributed to cyberbullying extending beyond the school environment.

### ***The South African Perspective***

In South Africa, there is no specific legislation prohibiting cyberbullying, highlighting a notable gap in the legal framework. Current responses to cyberbullying are "fragmented and rely on various pieces of legislation, common-law definitions of criminal offences, and civil law remedies" (Badenhorst, 2011:7). However, none of these measures serve as preventative mechanisms. While cyberbullying is a modern extension of bullying, which has been recognized as a form of harassment under the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011 victims may seek redress through protection orders. These orders function as interdicts rather than punitive or preventative solutions. If cyberbullying results in actions constituting common-law or statutory crimes, criminal prosecution can be pursued, although this approach is less ideal in school environments. Internationally, initiatives like the Safer Internet Plus programme, adopted in 2005, aim to equip parents, educators, and children with tools to combat harmful online content (European Commission, 2009). Locally, sexual harassment in schools is addressed through the Department of Education's 2008 *Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Public Schools* (De Wet, 2013:22). In South Africa, sexting could be classified as child pornography under the Films and Publications Act 65 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b). This classification may lead to the prosecution of children, presenting an unintended consequence of the legislation. The Electronic Communications and Transactions Act 25 of 2002 plays a significant role in cybercrime investigations by empowering cyber-inspectors with extensive powers of seizure and investigation. Additionally, certain provisions of the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 (Republic of South Africa, 1977) regulate general search and seizure warrants, further supporting legal action against cyber-related offences. It submitted by authors that, the absence of a dedicated piece of legislation addressing cyberbullying in South Africa creates significant challenges for institutions attempting to tackle this issue effectively. Currently, institutions must rely on a fragmented legal framework that includes the Protection from Harassment Act, the Films and Publications Act, and provisions from the Criminal Procedure Act. This patchwork approach creates uncertainty in determining which laws apply to specific cases of cyberbullying, making it difficult for schools, parents, and law enforcement to act decisively. Furthermore, existing laws primarily offer reactive

remedies, such as protection orders or criminal charges, rather than proactive measures aimed at preventing cyberbullying in the first place. Schools face additional challenges with jurisdictional issues, particularly when cyberbullying occurs off-campus, leaving administrators uncertain about their authority to intervene without infringing on constitutional rights such as freedom of speech. This lack of clarity also leads to inconsistent enforcement, as some institutions adopt robust anti-cyberbullying policies while others lack the resources or understanding to address the issue adequately. Moreover, without a unified legislative framework, opportunities for national awareness campaigns and standardized training for educators are limited, reducing public understanding of cyberbullying and how to combat it. The rapidly evolving digital landscape adds another layer of complexity, as current laws are not specifically designed to address the unique challenges posed by online platforms. As a result, institutions are left ill-equipped to address the problem comprehensively, highlighting the need for a singular, comprehensive law that provides clarity, consistency, and a proactive approach to combating cyberbullying in South Africa.

### **Cyberbullying in Higher Education: An Overview**

Cyberbullying has increasingly become a concern in higher education institutions in South Africa, where digital platforms are often used for academic, social, and administrative purposes. The impact of cyberbullying in this context is profound, as it affects students' mental health, academic performance, and social relationships. With the rise of online learning, social media platforms, and communication tools like WhatsApp and Facebook, students are more vulnerable to various forms of cyberbullying, such as harassment, exclusion, and impersonation (Espelage, 2014). Studies indicate that victims of cyberbullying in higher education may experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress, which in turn can lead to poor academic performance and increased dropout rates (Hong et al., 2016). Furthermore, the anonymity and accessibility provided by digital platforms make it easier for perpetrators to target their victims, often without facing immediate consequences (Ashktorab & Vitak, 2016). As a result, universities in South Africa are under pressure to develop strategies to prevent and address cyberbullying, ensuring that students can engage in a safe, supportive academic environment (Cross et al., 2015).

### **Effects of Cyberbullying on Academic Performance**

Cyberbullying has a significant impact on the academic performance of students, particularly in higher education. Victims of cyberbullying often experience psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, which can negatively affect their ability to focus and perform well academically (Bauman, 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Studies have shown that students who are cyberbullied tend to exhibit lower academic achievement due to increased stress, which interferes with concentration, motivation, and the ability to engage in coursework (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). For instance, victims of cyberbullying may become disengaged from their studies, leading to poor academic outcomes, absenteeism, and a lack of participation in class activities (Olweus, 2012). Moreover, cyberbullying can lead to a decline in academic confidence and social withdrawal, which further exacerbates academic struggles (Selkie, Fales & Moreno, 2016). The constant harassment and emotional toll caused by online bullying can disrupt sleep patterns, making it difficult for students to maintain their physical and mental well-being. The resulting fatigue and lack of energy can hinder their academic performance and participation in educational activities (Aboujaoude et al., 2015).

The long-term effects of cyberbullying on academic performance can also affect students' overall career prospects. When students struggle to maintain high grades due to the psychological impact of being bullied, their chances of securing academic scholarships or admissions to competitive programs may be diminished (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Furthermore, the emotional and mental toll can affect their professional growth, as the experience of being bullied may reduce their confidence in professional environments, making them less likely to pursue leadership roles or academic achievements in the future (P. K. Smith, 2015). In addition, academic institutions that fail to address cyberbullying appropriately may witness a decline in the overall learning environment, affecting not only victims but also the general academic climate (Cross et al., 2015). Therefore, addressing cyberbullying through preventive measures, counseling, and support services is essential for maintaining a healthy academic environment and ensuring that students can perform to the best of their abilities.

Cyberbullying in higher education has become a significant issue with far-reaching consequences for students' well-being and academic performance. According to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, students may learn and replicate aggressive behaviors, such as cyberbullying, by observing their peers or through exposure to media that portrays such behavior as acceptable. This theory helps explain why cyberbullying is prevalent on university campuses, where students are highly engaged in social learning and peer interactions. Research by Bauman et al. (2013) highlights the adverse effects of cyberbullying on students, including diminished academic performance,

emotional distress, and a decrease in social well-being. Cyberbullying can disrupt students' ability to focus on their studies, leading to absenteeism and, in extreme cases, academic failure (Barrett et al., 2012). Moreover, the psychological toll of cyberbullying, such as feelings of shame, isolation, and anxiety, can affect students' overall academic engagement and success (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). With the rise of digital platforms in academic settings, where much of students' social and educational interactions occur, institutions must adopt robust prevention and intervention strategies to address cyberbullying and protect students' mental health and academic performance (Gilroy, 2013).

### Intervention Strategies in South African Higher Education

Cyberbullying prevention and intervention strategies in South African higher education are crucial in maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment. Universities in South Africa are increasingly adopting policies and initiatives to address cyberbullying, focusing on both preventive and reactive measures. Preventive strategies include raising awareness about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying, promoting digital citizenship, and fostering a culture of respect and inclusion among students and staff (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Additionally, universities are implementing educational campaigns to educate students about the responsible use of social media and online platforms (Bauman, 2011). Training programs for faculty and staff also play a critical role in identifying and responding to cyberbullying incidents in a timely and effective manner (Cross et al., 2015). On the intervention side, many South African institutions have established support services, including counseling and victim support networks, to help those affected by cyberbullying (Selkie, Fales & Moreno, 2016). Furthermore, university disciplinary procedures are being updated to include clear guidelines on handling cyberbullying cases, ensuring that perpetrators face appropriate consequences (Olweus, 2012). Collaborative efforts between universities, law enforcement, and mental health organizations are also being explored to create a more comprehensive approach to cyberbullying prevention and intervention in the South African context (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). These strategies are critical in reducing the impact of cyberbullying on students' well-being and academic performance in higher education.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, cyberbullying within higher education institutions in South Africa poses significant risks to students' well-being and academic performance. It is critical for these institutions to adopt comprehensive strategies that effectively raise awareness, establish clear policies and reporting channels, offer robust support systems, and foster a culture of inclusivity and empathy. The effects of cyberbullying can be long-lasting, impacting students' psychosocial development, self-esteem, academic success, and mental health, leading to issues such as depression and social anxiety. As such, universities must prioritize both the prevention and intervention of cyberbullying to ensure a safer online environment for all students. Moreover, it is essential that institutions collaborate with various stakeholders, including families, students, and society, to tackle cyberbullying as a collective issue. A holistic approach is required, one that involves not only awareness campaigns and policy enforcement but also the creation of support structures for victims and the imposition of disciplinary actions against perpetrators. Furthermore, the South African Department of Higher Education must equip educators with the necessary tools and knowledge to address cyberbullying effectively, extending its reach beyond the classroom environment. By taking these measures, South Africa's higher education institutions can mitigate the harmful effects of cyberbullying, ultimately supporting.

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