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**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying: a narrative inquiry

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying which is a worldwide problem presenting a variety of negative experiences to learners, including those in rural areas. Therefore, this requires rural school learners to be proactive, cautious, and vigilant to combat bullying on social media platforms may affect their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. Since the experiences of rural school learners concerning bullying on social media platforms remains under-researched, this narrative inquiry contributes to bridging this gap by dissecting the narratives of rural learners to emerge with incisive insight and strategies to mitigate social media bullying. Bronfenbrenner ecological theoretical framework underpinned this study which adopted a qualitative interpretivist paradigm which was found suitable for exploring rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying and its effects. This qualitative narrative inquiry research design elicited data by conducting narrative interviews involving five rural school learners from the same school who were purposefully sampled. Thematic analysis was then applied to dissect the collected data. Six themes emerged from this analysis. The findings suggested that Facebook and WhatsApp platforms were mainly utilised by rural school learners to bully each other because of jealousy, boredom, and lack of knowledge which impaired victims physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Recommendations emanating from the findings were aligned to the training of learners on how to deal social media bullying, how to prevent being vulnerable to social media bullying, and learners can educate and assist one another to annihilate this scourge. Also, school officials should invite and collaborate with parents and teachers, the Department of Education that can appoint psychologists, psychiatrists, or counsellors, and the school community in the vicinity of the rural school, in addition to structuring school and national education policies that address social media bullying.

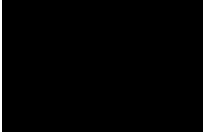
Keywords: collaborations, ecological theoretical framework, school community, social media bullying, rural school

DECLARATION

I, Sphelele Ncebo Myeni, student number 221108226, declare that:

1. This research study, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs, or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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Sphelele N. Myeni

Signature:  Date: 15/07/2024

As the supervisor, I hereby approve that this dissertation be examined.

Professor D. J. Hlalele

SIGN.....

DATE:

DEDICATION

The dissertation is dedicated to:

My mother *Sibongile Myeni*, and my father *Lakheni Myen* for giving me the incredible gift of LIFE. This work is also dedicated to my lovely wife *Zamandosi Myeni* who always supports me.

I thank God for the guidance and strength that enabled me to overcome the obstacles while I was writing this dissertation.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explored rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying. According to Kircaburun and Alhabash (2020), social media are quick messaging applications which are easy to access and operate. Children have convenient accessibility if they have computers and cellphones with modern apps (Mineo, 2020). This new trend of easy online communication leads to more virtual relationships that are facilitated by various social media platforms (Macdonald, 2020). In the context of the current study rural school learners referred to the learners who are attending school that is located in deep rural area where there are limited resources for technology and social media bullying education.

Additionally, social media affords different opportunities to keep 'relationships' ongoing, not only with people around you, but also with those who share similar interests with you (Eckstein, 2021). According to Auxier and Anderson (2020), children between the ages of nine-to-ten own smartphones; therefore, they have become 'addicted' to the digital world, especially when they prepare for entry into secondary schools Yates, S. J., Carmi, E., Lockley, E., Pawluczuk, A., French, T., & Vincent, S , 2020). During the past few decades, the reliance on social media has exponentially grown (Thota et al ,2023). Learners gain a lot of information and knowledge through platforms such as Facebook, You Tube, TikTok and WhatsApp since there is a wide range of topics offered and discussed. The schools' benefit from utilising these media platforms as they foster effective communication which is easier and better for learners and parents during after-school hours (Nasta, 2019; Richer et al., 2022).

Supratman (2019) contends that social media helps learners with the acquisition of information, engender new friendships, and revive old ones which keep users preoccupied and entertained. However, spending a lot of time in social platforms can have a negative impact, especially for children and adolescents who can possibly become victims or perpetrators of social media bullying (Aizenkot, 2019). Learners who have experienced bullying tend to exhibit different symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). According to Armitage (2021), bullying that occurs during childhood which can result in dire consequences

including health-related issues that may escalate in later life. Moreover, such victims of social media bullying may often find themselves alienated at school as bullying has been associated with acceptance and the struggle to socialise with others (Hosowaz et al,2021).

During the Covid-19 lockdown there were many cases reported about social media bullying among children and adults, which were attributed to having too much time to surf social media platforms (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). Generally, bullying is associated with aggression which leads to disturbance (Karagianni & Karabatzaki, 2022). Bullying is defined as a conscious desire to harm another person consistently (Drigas & Mitsea, 2022). It occurs on social media platforms which are more severe in harming individuals than other types of bullying that occur elsewhere. This is so because when it occurs, it reaches not only a few people, but many who may have their own opinions which might hurt even more. Social media bullying in South Africa is problematic as it affects learners' performance at school which sometimes may lead to an increase in the dropout rate at schools (Erreygers et al., 2019). The ever-increasing rate of social media bullying among rural learners has troubled researchers because these incidents are reported, but finding solutions and strategies to deal with them are proving to be elusive (Taufany & Adam, 2019).

Unsettling examples of the harmful effects of social media bullying have appeared in the press (Brady & Conn, 2019). Young people who are perpetrators of social media bullying have been reported to have abused alcohol and drugs, as they suffer from anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression (Gaffney et al., 2019). Victims of social media bullying absent themselves eight times more than others and may come to school carrying dangerous weapons to protect themselves inside and outside the classroom (Wang et al., 2020).

Further, social media bullying is globally known to be a worrying phenomenon occurring among school learners which has more long-lasting effects than traditional bullying (Nwufu & Nwoke, 2019). This is so since those who bully others online hide their identity, and subsequently do not get punished for their actions (Schonfield, 2019; Nwufu & Nwoke, 2019). Various harmful effects on learners have been reported as social media bullying is a debilitating phenomenon that virtually ruins the lives of rural school children through a range of negative ways (Cilliers, 2020) and halts the enjoyment of being at school (Farhangpour et al., 2019). The victims of online bullying suffer from long-term mental and physical scars which hinder progress in academic performance as well as continuing with the routines of life (Farhangpour et al., 2019). Learners including learners from

rural schools may be in danger of experiencing social media bullying which includes victimisation, emotional and physical abuse, isolation, and social challenges (Cabrera, 2022).

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This study was motivated by my experiences of social media bullying during teaching in rural school environments. Professional and personal experiences as an English First Additional Language (EFAL) and Life Orientation (LO) teacher for over a decade, included dealing with numerous incidents of social media bullying. I had witnessed and had to intervene regarding such incidents. Most of the incidents occurred on the Facebook platform. There was one incident where a Grade 10 learner was brutally beaten up by a group of girls who were claiming that she had gossiped about them. It did not end there as pictures and video clips were taken and posted on social media called Facebook. The video clip went viral until most of the learners at school had it; even the community members who were not part of the school received this video clip. This led to the alleged perpetrator leaving school as she became the laughing stock of the community. In addition to this fake news which embarrassed innocent learners on social media, this type of bullying may lead to poor academic performance, increase the dropout rate, harassment, isolation, and suicidal thoughts (Jabulani & Eward, 2021).

The Department of Basic Education [DBE] (2020) warned that social media bullying physically and psychologically damaged victims which negatively disturbed the educational experiences and progress of learners. WhatsApp and Facebook have become well-known as platforms used by educators when they want to convey messages to their learners when they are not at school. Therefore, communication between educator and learners has become easier and quicker. However, this afforded bullies to continue bullying online which led to them harassing their educators since they had their educators' social media details (Rana et al., 2022). One example of this was when a learner posted a sex tape of an educator on Facebook which was in retaliation to failing the teacher's subject.

There are limited studies on rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying in South Africa (Schofields, 2019). Hence, this calls for the urgent need to research this phenomenon (Ruedy, 2020) by mainly focusing on strategies to eradicate this scourge in rural schools (Gaffney et al., 2019). The current study contributes to new knowledge by finding solutions to mitigate rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Social media bullying affects both the bully (perpetrator) and those who are bullied (victims). Both experience low self-esteem, absenteeism, depression, and nervous conditions (Manna et al., 2019). In South Africa, teachers in rural school regularly deal with social media bullying to bring this it under control (Farhang et al., 2019). Social media bullying is mostly reported in urban schools compare to rural schools because urban schools may be exposed to a variety of checks and services that deal strictly with combating this phenomenon (Farhang et al., 2019).

Since social media bullying negatively affects rural school learners' successful completion of their school years, it is imperative that this phenomenon be tackled expeditiously to enhance the matric throughput rate. (Jenkins, 2019). Additionally, parents who are not concerned about checking and monitoring what their children do on online platforms may be 'assisting' to make social media bullying rampant. This may be because parents and teachers lack the necessary skills needed to address social media bullying in rural schools (Lent, 2022). According to the South African Children's Rights Policy every child has the right to freedom of speech, education, privacy and protection against all forms of violence (*RSA Constitution*, 1996). However, there have not been effective systems and school policies that prioritise the dealing with social media crimes at schools. Hence, perpetrators of social media bullying continue harassing learners at will knowing that the possibility of being caught is remote. The impact of social media bullying affect both psychological and physical aspect of the child (Kwan et.,al 2020). Therefore, it is very crucial to address social media bullying through education, support and prevention strategies to mitigate social media bullying. This study aimed at exploring rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying to possibly emerge with solutions. By exporing the social media bullying happening in rural school may contribute to the existing body of knowledge an provide insights for policy makers.

1.4 AIM, OBJECTIVES, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.4.1 Aim

- The study aimed to explore rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying by using the narrative inquiry approach to collect and analyse data.

1.4.2 Objectives

- To understand the narratives of rural school learners on social media bullying;
- To unearth the causes and challenges of social media bullying in rural schools; and
- To suggest recommendations on how social media bullying can be mitigated in rural schools.

1.4.3 Research Questions

- What are the narratives of rural school learners who experience social media bullying?
- What is informing social media bullying in rural schools?
- How can social media bullying in rural schools be mitigated?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The current study unpacks, informs, supports, and empowers educators and learners about understanding and tackling the scourge of social media bullying by recommending strategies that may be useful when addressing incidents of social media bullying in schools. Additionally, suggestions are provided for teachers, learners, and parents to manage social media bullying in a procedural and amicable manner. Lastly, the study envisions conscientising all stakeholders to collaborate effectively and revise school policies to contribute to eradicating the scourge of online bullying.

1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN OVERVIEW

According to Glasser and Straus (2017), there is a difference between theory and framework but they are combined to form *theoretical framework*. Wearing et al. (2016) define theory as a product of the results of rational thoughts. The current study is underpinned by the Ecological Theory of Bronfenbrenner (1980) who maintains that children are at the centre of a larger system in which they interact to shape their general behaviour. The child's age, attitudes, impulsiveness, and defiance mould their character which is also influenced by social media which display bullying acts. Bronfenbrenner's (1980) theory espouses that human development is shaped and guided by different systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

The systems theory embraces various aspects of a child's development which involves interacting within many systems that may have long-term effects. However, the theory extends beyond the child's development to encompass deep elements such as the ecological and social environments. Bronfenbrenner (1980) thus proposed the Ecological Systems Theory which focused on the dynamics of the environment that influence a child's development (Ozturk et al., 2023). Bronfenbrenner's (1980) notion of Ecological systems theory is acknowledged as a leading theory on how human development is impacted by social surroundings. This implies that one's upbringing has an impact on different aspects of one's future life such as how one feels, thinks, and makes choices which are all socially influenced by interacting with people and/or media around them. For example, when a person relocates, a different culture may be imbibed or assimilated that could 'alter' who they really are.

This implies that if one's social function with any of the five systems migrates or shifts, then the person may change (Renn & Annorl,2023). Children's five microsystems are interconnected; hence, they are examined in the context of the current study. These systems are significant as they assist in understanding what informs socioeconomic issues such as violence, drug-abuse, and even bullying. In a rural school context, the microsystem may mean the immediate environment in which a learner interacts with on a daily basis. To comprehend the phenomenon of social media bullying occurring in a rural school, involves interviews with parents (of both perpetrators and victims), educators, and learners (Tistey, 2022). In addition, engaging the society and the school management may be connected to the mesosystem in a rural school. Also, the exosystem may involve social workers, mass media, and laws promulgated to curb social media bullying (Allen et al., 2020). Moreover, the rural school learners' cultural, social, and ideological background is related to this exosystem. Lastly, the chronosystem may involve patterns, technical development, and changes that reflect cultural standards mostly on the internet (Bronfenbrenner, 1980).

1.7 RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

1.7.1 Research Approach

Qualitative research provides thick insights by analysing and interpreting real-world problems. It operates differently when you compare it to quantitative research which collects numerical data to inform interventions. In qualitative research, information is generated and dissected for further examination and interpretation to elicit relevant and valid results. Furthermore, participants'

experiences, opinions, and behaviours are acquired to obtain rich data. The *how* and *why* of occurrences are asked to make-sense of the collected data. Research can be used as a stand-alone study by means of qualitative data (Tenny, 2022). Research techniques are applied to combine ideas and procedures utilised to conduct a study in a bigger area of discussion (Snyder, 2019). Qualitative approach was used in this study to address why and how social media bullying occurs in rural school. This current study applied the qualitative narrative inquiry technique which blended with the interpretive paradigm in line with the study's goal. The significance of storytelling as a source of acquiring knowledge lies in its artistic qualities of openness, spontaneity, and creativity.

1.7.2 Research Paradigm

Interpretivism, realism, post-positivism, positivism, and pragmatism are elements of research culture. When the collected data migrates to the interpretation stage, the researcher needs to gently, skilfully, and instinctively adhere to the principles of working within the interpretivism paradigm. This view holds that a single person's thinking does not give the whole and true picture of the real-world, therefore the information garnered through various sources must be authenticated and make-sense by testing several perspectives on its own (Katri,2020).

Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm ensures that the researcher considers distinctions regarding individuals as social actors. Since studies based on interpretivism are concerned with meaning by utilising different methodologies for the representation of different elements of phenomenon (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020), interpretivist principles are used to unpack cross-cultural differences in institutions, ethical dilemmas, attitudes, and studying variables which influence mindsets. Since the data in such studies is reliable and trustworthy, it has significant validity and credibility elements to enhance the quality and authenticity of the study (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivist paradigm was applied in the current study to study what causes the rural school school learners to bully each other on the social media platforms.

1.7.3 Research Design

The methodology of narrative inquiry which was adopted for this research study, is defined as the integration of structure, knowledge, and comprehension to compose a real-life story (Wang et al, 2019; Connelly, 2004). The term *narrative* implies the human and personal aspects of human and cultural experiences of the surroundings and beyond. Lastly, according to Mohajan (2018),

narrative analysis focuses on stories shared by the participants who may be learners, teachers, parents, and/or members of the SMT. Since narrative inquiry primarily focuses on significant life events, it was appropriate to explore the intricacies and subtleties of rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying (Mertova & Webster, 2019).

1.7.4 Narrative Interviews

Narrative interviews refers to a qualitative research method that put together in depth-,personal stories and experiences from individuals. Therefore during the interview process an interviewer may aske open ended questions that allows the interviewee to answer freely Langley & Meziani, 2020) .

This study collected data from participants by conducting narrative interviews. Specific questions based on the study's topic were asked and answered through participants telling their own stories. Rural school learners were telling their own stories of bullying. Prior to the collection of data, the researcher explained what was expected from the participants by demonstrating a good example of a narrative. Furthermore, clarifications were provided for follow-up purposes and for probing (Willis, 2019). Narrative interviews were conducted with participants by using a carefully planned narrative questions schedule as per appendix 8 which facilitated answering questions freely and uninhibited without any interference from the researcher. Probing questions were also asked for clarification and elaboration to elicit in-depth and rich data (Muller, 2019). There are four phases of narrative interviewing: the preparation, initiation, questioning, and concluding phases (Giovanna & Chiara, 2019). Individual interviews were held with each participant of the current study.

1.7.4.1 Phase one

Firstly, the preparation phase is when the research topic is introduced to the participants to prepare for the interview. Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying as the topic of this study was introduced and explained to the participants. What is informing social media bullying and how it can be mitigated was also highlighted as research questions. According to Muller, (2019) ,research topic should represent the interest of the interviewer, therefore,verything pertaining to the research topic which is rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying like the issue of confidentiality and where data will be kept was explained as participants needed

to know all the processes of the research study. Finer details of the study with the assistance of visual aids were presented.

1.7.4.2 Phase two

The second phase, the initiation, was when the participants narrated their stories. The interviewer encouraged participants to narrate freely by using non-verbal language (e.g. nodding the head) this was done by the interviewer to encourage the participant to share more of their story. This process was adhered to until the conclusion of the interview. Disruptions and interjections from the interviewer were kept to a minimum (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2017).

1.7.4.3 Phase three

This questioning phase involved the interviewer asking questions, whilst paying attention to the voice (tone) and gestures of the participants. To avoid gaps in the research, the researcher (interviewer) ensured that questions were framed in the participants' home or preferred language. Before the commencement of the interview, the interviewer reviewed the core principles of interviewing via the narrative method by means of using open ended questions, avoiding leading questions, creating a safe and non judgemental space for the participant (Espedal, 2022).

1.7.4.4 Phase four

This last phase of the interview process involved the generating of data. As a researcher, the concluding phase is critical because it is when participants share the narratives on the issue being investigated. The interviewer should provide feedback at this stage (Jovchelovitch & Brauner, 2000).

1.8 DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used in this study, thematic analysis is a qualitative research method utilized to identify, analyse and interpret patterns and themes emerged during data generation (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Analysing the generated data is a significant process during research. According to Durcevic (2020), this is where generated data is extracted to provide vital information to support the study's findings and conclusions in line with the aim, objectives and research questions. Furthermore, through the thematic analysis approach, themes and patterns emerge from analysing and interpreting the data (Zhang, 2023; McGuire & Delahunt, 2017). Data is presented in a manner that reveals what participants believe as their story in addressing an issue through interpretation and

finding solutions. The narrative responses form data, themes are likely to be picked up when reading and re-reading the narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Riessman, 2008). This expands the research's overall importance by strengthening reliability and authenticity such that the study may be understood in wider contexts (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Participants in this study were sampled selected from the group of learners who had experienced social media bullying, this was done purposefully for richer data purposes. Data was collected using narrative interviews which were audio recorded after the permission from participants parents was granted. Later data was transcribed by the research writing down participants responses from the audio categoring them according to themes.

1.9 PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Purposive sampling is non probability sampling technique utilized by the researcher to select participants that are relevant to research objectives Ryen (2020). Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who had experience of social media bullying to gain in-depth insight of rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying. Those who showed interest in participating in this study, were preferred (Hayes, 2019). Five learners were selected as participants as they were victims who directly experienced social media bullying in their rural school and granted an opportunity to share their narratives. Learners who were approached, parents and guidanian's were sent consent form. School disciplinary committee book assisted as a pool of potential participants

1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is significant for any researcher to consider ethics when planning to conduct research. The researcher first obtained the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, reference number HSSREC/00005969/2023 This is a process of considering what is right and wrong during research processes (Webster, 2013). Permission from gatekeepers was also obtained prior to entry into the school to gain access to interact with the learners who were selected to narrate their experiences of begin bullied. Moreover, since this study involved rural school learners, it was mandatory to obtain permission from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZN, DOE). Further, parents of the five learner-participants were asked to read and sign the assent form which the researcher scanned and stored (together with all collected information) in a password protected file. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by assigning pseudonyms

to protect identities and the collected information. The researcher ensured the validity of the findings by personally double-checking and inviting a member -checking of the results against the collected data for accuracy. All mistakes regarding the data and results were rectified. Participants were not coerced to participate in the study – participation was voluntary. There was no known physical and/or psychological risk in participating in this study. To ensure that learners were emotionally stable to share their personal stories of social media bullying a psychiatrist assisted in providing pre and post counselling to the participants.

1.11 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness describes the calibre and verifiability of qualitative research findings. Readers must trust and accept the results as being authentic and valid. Findings of the current study may be trusted because study was conducted with an objective mind set and personal biaseness was minimized also researcher followed a structured research process including data collection, analysis and interpretation . To confirm trustworthiness a researcher needs to consider aspects of creditability, transferability, reliability, and conformability when conducting a qualitative study (Noble & Smith, 2015). Participants were competent to verify their transcribed responses because they were recorded and participants are familiar with their voices and speech patterns .The current study utilised triangulation to strengthen credibility through member-checks, repetitive reading, and verifying of the data. Creditability is characterised as elements which participants' assist in to identify the correctness of what occurs in the research through verifying their own responses in the datasets (Meriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Transferability refers to the process of transferring one's research's findings to another similar setting. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), transferability and external validity are interchangeable. The study ensured transferability by providing demographic details of the selected participants, defining the phenomenon, and promoting transparency by explaining all the details of the research processes, verbal and in writing (assent form). The factors mentioned like demographic was considered because it was crucial for the researcher to ensure that the selected participants represented learners from rural school.

For this study, dependability was measured by ensuring the validity and consistency of the findings gleaned from the generated data (Padget, 2016). To ensure dependability the researcher had a

standardized data collection procedure across all participants. Same questions were asked and all participants were recorded.

Confirmability is an instrument used to determine that data generated was from participants was the truth, and not influenced by the researcher's bias to manipulate the results (Padgetts, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study ensured confirmability by not only checking the verbatim responses of the participants which were audio-recorded, but also verified the transcriptions before the thematic analysis process.

1.12 LAYOUT OF CHAPTERS

Chapter one presents the aim, problem statement, objectives and research questions. It also outlined the methodology, the theoretical framework, data analysis, literature review, ethical considerations, and aspects of trustworthiness.

Chapter two provides the literature review and theoretical framework.

Chapter three discuss the research methodology and data analysis processes.

Chapter four presents the data analysis and the discussion thereof.

Chapter five outlines the findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

1.13 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter one introduced the research topic and the details of how the research would be conducted. The research aim, objectives, and questions were mentioned as guides to the study. The research methodology and design were outlined. In addition, the interpretivist research paradigm was chosen and explained. The data generation method of narrative interviewing, and the thematic analysis approach were described. Lastly, trustworthiness and ethical considerations were outlined. The next chapter (2) discusses the literature review and theoretical framework of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter unpacks the literature related to rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying. The perusal of previous relevant literature is significant as this sheds light on what other scholars have explored. Books, surveys, and scholarly articles, among others, may be used to dissect the topic under study). This study adopted the ecological systems theory to frame the research processes.

Radebe and Kyobe (2021) observe that in comparison to other countries, South Africa has one of the highest rates of social media bullying cases that increase drastically annually, which remains a huge concern for teachers and learners in rural schools. This chapter reviews national and international scholarly literature based on rural learners' firsthand experiences, familiarity, and understanding of social media bullying. The literature review analyses and questions the different experiences and understandings of social media bullying in rural schools. Moreover, it seeks to investigate the roots that lead to incidents of social media bullying. Lastly, the chapter aims to examine different measures that can be possibly implemented to minimise or eradicate the habit and widespread effects of social media bullying in rural schools.

Since teachers and learners have been compelled to adhere to changes engendered by the advent of new technology to meet 4IR standards, it is imperative that they become au fait with the use of social media platforms like WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube to enhance teaching and learning as well as to access information outside of the school (Greenhow et al., 2019). However, limitless access to social media 'without boundaries' has given rise to a high rate of social media bullying (De Wee, 2022). Alarmingly, social media bullying (also closely linked to cyberbullying) is conducted online without a face or a trace which is so different to the much-known physical bullying in society which is easier to detect and control (*News 24*, 2020). To exacerbate the situation, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic escalated the use of social media as people spent most of their free time online, thus increasing the rate of social media bullying as compared to the period prior to the pandemic (Rajyalakshmi et al., 2019). The anonymity element and the complexity of social media bullying render victims helpless to report the crime; hence, most

incidents go unreported and unpunished, which encourages perpetrators to persist in cybercrime (Stop Bullying, 2019).

Social media may refer to mean comments or posters on different social media platforms like Facebook which are intending to harm others (Lous and Mohamed) . Social media bullying is widespread schools since access to online platforms is commonplace among learners of all ages; but when left unmonitored and without controls, this type of bullying can immensely affect learners directly or indirectly. Although educators have implemented measures like not allowing cellphone usage during school hours to curb cyberbullying due to its toxicity, it seems out of control. Fortunately, the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) to detect and halt the proliferation of sensitive and harmful sites is expected to protect learners from social media bullies (Thornberg & Delby, 2019).

2.2 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

2.2.1 Bullying

Bullying can be defined in various ways (Chang, 2020). However, it is imperative that the traditional bullying be fully comprehended as being different to social media bullying. In addition, Can and Alatos (2021) said that it is to be habitually cruel, insulting, and threatening to others who are perceived weaker and vulnerable. According to Karagian and Karabatzaki (2022), bullying is done deliberately by the perpetrator to show power and strength to the victims, and it is meant to cause physical and mental damage. Moreover, Drigas and Mitsea (2022) state that bullying is an ongoing and deliberate, yet conscious behaviour that resembles an aggressive and repeated power imbalance. It can occur over a short period of time, often, or over a long period of time. (Secki-Kapucu et al., 2021; Van Aalst, 2022). Bullying is an act of seeking to harm, intimidate or coerce someone who is perceived vulnerable to gain respect and status (Drigas & Chaid, 2022; Zhao, 2021).

2.2.2 Social Media

Social media is the term used to refer to online platforms that people use for communicative interaction (Eichner et al., 2021). It can be the collective internet site and applications created to help users to share information over their electronic devices to virtually discuss, plan, and observe without physically meeting.(Abaido, 2020; Plaisime et al., 2020). Social media is a name for all the interactive technologies that allow ideas, content, communication, and other numerous forms

of messages to be shared online. Social media platforms may be used negatively for example commenting badly on a facebook post shared by someone.

2.2.3 Social Media Bullying

Social media bullying is the practice of harassing people by utilising electronic communication devices (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2016; Kowalski & Limb, 2007). According to Chadi and Drigas (2022) and Lous and Mohamed (2024), social media bullying is electronic harassment where an individual is taunted on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp. Further, Doumas and Midget (2021) and Walters and Espelage (2020) state that social media bullying is characterised by a transition from traditional to digital bullying on different social media platforms. Moreover, Ansary (2020) defines social media bullying as a deliberate act intended to harm people who are unable to defend themselves on social media platforms. Harper's (2022) account of social media bullying includes the use of gadgets like smartphones and the internet. Unconventional tactics are practised by social media bullies to cause harm to individuals via online systems (Killer et al., 2019; Kowalski et al., 2019).

2.2.4 Learners

Mamali (2019) defines a learner as a specific person who obtains knowledge in a formal institution. These individuals access general education, training, and skills from educational institutions or other learning-related organisations (Fink, 2013; Liang 2020).

2.2.5 Rural School

According to Welsh (2024) and Burch and Stoeckel (2023), most rural schools are classified as quintile one schools which are in areas characterised by poor road conditions. These schools are smaller and under-resourced than urban schools they have low population, geographic isolation also referred to as quantile one school (Fagars, Malet & Bgley, 2023).

2.3 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.3.1 Rural School Learners' Experiences of Social Media Bullying

Urban schools have been found to have increased rates of social media bullying than rural schools (Ahmed et al, 2021). According to urban schools This finding may be related to learners' possession of sophisticated cell phones (Claussen, 2021). In the province of Limpopo, over half the number of learners in rural schools who experienced bullying on social media such as

Facebook, were victims of sexual offences. Thirty male and fifty female learners in Grades 8-10 from rural high schools participated in the study. The victims of social media bullying were chosen through a deliberate sampling process (Farhangpour et al., 2019).

Being a victim of social media bullying is linked to high levels of psychological distress, technostress (the perception of social media as invasive and addictive), and fatigue (Oksana, 2020). According to Rosenbaum (2020), social media bullying has effect on how people perceive social interactions, larger organisations, and educational institutions. Kee and Anesi (2022) state that bullying on social media can also have negative effects based on the degree of pressure involved when peers write or comment in a certain way online learners may find themselves in a trap of social media bullying as they may want to fit in. Zhu and Huang (2021) maintain that the debilitating consequences of cyberbullying increase in direct proportion to the quantity of stressors.

The issue of bullying on social media is a troubling worldwide phenomenon that has received significant attention in rural schools in South Africa (Graham, 2023). Also, there is a connection between the learners' age and the incidence of social media bullying in rural schools. Learners who are between 12 and 15 years of age are mainly on social networks as offenders, victims, and spectators (Cao & Khan, 2019). This is followed by learners between the ages of 16 and 20 which suggest that as learners get older, the interest of social media bullying decreases and younger learners are more likely to get involved in act of social media bullying (Nkwanyana & Nzima, 2022).

Due to easy access to social media platforms and devices, and the difficulty to halt bullying conduct, it is now evident that cyberbullying is occurring much more frequently than traditional bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). While physical wounds from a beating may heal, and the victim can flee, there is little one can do when someone is stalking and besmirching you online. According to Elana (2023) the majority of learners in rural schools experience peer bullying on social media, which causes the harassed learners to stop attending school out of fear.

Although young people in rural school utilise the internet to engage in social media to advance their education, there are spaces with technology that lead to them being victims of cyberattacks. According to Richard and Couchot-Shiex's (2021), research which engaged 1127 participants aged between 12 and 16, bullying on social media can take several forms such as stalking, humiliation,

rumours, exclusion, and coercion of helpless victims. A Swedish study by Johansson and Englund (2021) which examined the experiences of children between the ages of 10 and 12, found that in 98% of the cases there was a strong correlation between traditional bullying and online bullying – both are different types of unacceptable behaviours.

Further, the investigation by Matos et al. (2019) in Portugal confirmed that social media bullying is an act of violence perpetrated by offenders through persistent harassment of their victims who are at the increased risk of trauma which manifests in poor physical and mental health. According to Roderiguez-Castro et al. (2021) who conducted a study in Spain which engaged 993 participants, harassment and unsolicited sexual advances are common forms of cyberbullying that enable perpetrators to control and manipulate their victims. Teenagers attending remote schools encounter a different type of social media bullying acts like harassment. Mitchell and Stulhofer (2020) describe harassment as a common kind of online bullying that is displayed through unwanted sexual attention and emotional blackmail. According to Ringrose and Havey (2018), harassment unfairly singles out vulnerable individuals.

Learners who have been the victims of cyberbullying experience discriminatory language and sexual slurs, in addition to gender inequality. Cyberstalking, according to Roderigo-Castro et al. (2021), is a type of online bullying which originates from being harassed. Cyberstalking is the invasion of a victim's privacy by a perpetrator who uses fear and intimidation to gain control without the victim's permission to do particular acts. Also, Dobson (2016), use the term *sexting* - a combination of *sex* and *texting*. According to Roderigo-Castro et al. (2021) and Baiden et al. (2020), sexting is a form of cyberbullying where the victim is degraded through the private messaging of sexually suggestive texts, photographs, and videos, usually featuring nudity.

According to Ringrose et al. (2019), sexting is common in the UK where it is perceived as a form of expression when graphic sexual photographs are communicated through online conversations. Sexting is more popular among girls than boys (Setty, 2020; Baiden et al., 2020). According to Berndtsson and Odenbring (2021), girls made up 25% of teenagers in the adolescent stage between the ages of 12 and 16 who got texts or photographs through sexting; thus, these teenagers were more exposed to the harmful effects of sexting. According to Setty (2020), Setty (2020) defined hegemonic masculinity as a behavior that is projected onto girls, in which boys marginalize people they perceive to be in lower social ranks, such as gay boys and girls.

Additionally, Cultural structures maintain power disparities in which girls are devalued and boys are regarded as superior. According to Berndtsson and Odenbring (2021), other women in Sweden were subjected to sexual harassment because of a hegemonic environment that pushed them to disseminate sexually explicit content without obtaining authorisation. Naezer and Oosterhout's (2021) study conducted in the Netherlands claims that 'down-blousing' and 'up-skirting' which means taking a picture of someones shirt or blouse without their consent ,with the intention of humiliating them are types of image-based abuse in which women are displayed in pictures online without their permission. Women's agency and sexual autonomy were repeatedly violated by the illegal sharing and trading of these photographs.

According to Dobson (2016), girls who were harassed after sharing non-consensual images appeared to be the ones who started the 'trouble'. Issues with 'up-skirting' refer to when a man purposefully tucks a smartphone camera under a woman's skirt, while 'down-blousing' occurs when the device takes a picture of the woman's cleavage. Even though it's against the rules, the girl gets in trouble if these videos go viral.

2.3.2 Platforms for Social Media Bullying

Since there has been a noticeable increase in social media usage, the risk of social media bullying in many communication platforms has increased tenfold (Das et al., 2020). It became common that strangers might publish offensive content on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media platforms while 'hiding' behind their smartphones (Mathioudakis, 2020). According to Detective Sergeant Thomas Rich (2019), a certified New Jersey police officer, founder of *Always Connected* which is a programme designed to educate police officers, teachers, clerks, youth support groups, parents, and learners of all ages, technology in the right hands can be advantageous, but can be a lethal weapon in the hands of 'the unstable'.

2.3.2.1 Facebook

Facebook is a well-known social media platform founded in 2004 (TechTarget, 2023). It can be used to bully other people because of its popularity and easy accessibility. Learners post their images and messages anticipating positive comments from the viewers, but unexpectedly receive harsh comments that damage their self-esteem (Zola, 2021; Wang et al., 2019). It is disappointing that viewers' comments are negative as learners hope for affirming messages (Noipom et al., 2023).

This indicates that learners use social media platforms for various intentions other than educational (Abaido, 2020; Kwaah, 2004). This reveals that although Facebook is a platform of communication it can also be regarded as a platform for social media bullying.

2.3.2.2 Instagram

The growth in popularity of 'rate me' posts on Instagram can precipitate negative consequences. Learners in schools, particularly female learners, share photos of themselves with the hashtag #rateme so that they will possibly be invited to beauty pageants. However, this encourages sex pests who post hurtful and demeaning comments (Albayari & Abdallah, 2022). Moreover, learners use Instagram as a platform to ridicule others who are sharing messages (Pericherla & Ilavarasan, 2024; Nitya Harshitha et al., 2024). Learners who use various social media platforms are at risk of receiving social media bullying.

2.3.2.3 TikTok

The most widely used communication app worldwide is TikTok (Jaffar et al., 2019). This social media platform was created by Chinese inventor Zhang Yiming in September 2016, (Hallanan, 2018). This application is used for a social network that emphasises that users contribute to creativity while enabling free expression (Jiang et al., 2019). TikTok social networking which is accessible in more than 150 markets is translated into 75 languages (Jiang et al., 2019). However, it has aroused criticism due to several users abusing and 'body shaming' other users (Prestridge, 2019). *The Economic times newspaper*, documented multiple examples of learners and educators calling counsellors at different times to complain about harassment, bullying, and addiction they experienced through TikTok, demonstrating the app's negative effects, thus outweighing its advantages (Economic periods, 2019). Lamentably, TikTok has had such a detrimental effect on learners because of abuse that it has even led to self-harm and suicide (New Indian Express, 2019). TikTok may be viewed as the platform for improving lives for learners, the sharing of educational videos is commonplace, but some learners' post abusive and pornographic content which undervalues the worth of this application. In confirmation, Truell et al (2019) regards TikTok as a platform that contains pornographic and inappropriate content. Although it has generally offensive content, many users still persist in using it (Greenhow et al., 2019).

2.3.2.4 WhatsApp

WhatsApp is an application used to communicate with other people via messages and video calls with its vast user-base (Sherezade, 2021). WhatsApp does not exclude learners from educational institutions (Saputra et al., 2020) although there are increased instances of learners being bullied on this platform which include perpetrators from within schools (Cutbush et al., 2021). There are various ways of social media bullying on WhatsApp: learners may receive offensive and hurtful messages meant to intimidate, shame, and agitate them (Uswitch.com media, 2021). Voice notes, texts, and insults by using pictures with sexual connotations, race, gender, and physical attributes (Reed, 2020).

2.3.3 Factors Informing Social Media Bullying

Social media bullying is not predicted by age or gender (Mulvey et al, 2022). Many bullies were themselves bullied as kids (Bean, 2021). Gordon (2022) notes that bullies and victims could just as easily be well-liked and content individuals who have never faced bullying from their peers previously. Bullies who find fulfilment in their relationships with peers often display high self-esteem, even though bullying is generally linked to low self-esteem (Islam et al., 2020; Sabramani, 2021). Nonetheless, social media bullying is commonly linked to feelings of isolation and uneasiness at school (Menon & Meghana, 2021).

According to Liu and Xu (2019), the psychological components of social media bullying include narcissism, lack of self-esteem, no empathy, despair, and anxiety. Zhong et al (2021) claim that there is a correlation between social media bullying and a person's family socioeconomic position. Furthermore, it is disclosed that social media bullying is also influenced by poor parental supervision. Similarly, Souza et al. (2019) discovered a correlation between social media bullying and the atmosphere at schools, while Turanovic (2022) claimed that learners' poor relationships with teachers and low school recognition are risk factors that precipitate social media bullying. Additionally, significant elements influencing social media bullying include school culture, safety and legal measures, a feeling of community, and instruction and training in cybersecurity and mental health (Liang & Yeh 2020; Van de Beemt et al., 2020).

Furthermore, learners who check their social media accounts often display behaviours that are akin to reassurance-seeking, compensating for loneliness, low self-esteem, and boredom - all of which increase the likelihood of being bullied on social media (Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Ubaedillah et

al., 2021). In support, Sheldon and Newman (2019) maintain that learners who want their families to validate their "lovability and worth" take up reassurance-seeking behaviours both offline and online.

2.3.3.1 Peer pressure

The media and peer pressure both help (or hinder) people to develop their sense of self-worth. In Mabvurira and Machimbidza's (2022) study on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying among Zimbabwean high school learners, they discovered that the driving force behind learner-behaviour was their desire to have fun and avoid boredom as revealed in intimate connections and peer pressure being significant facilitators for learners to engage in cyberbullying. It was also evident that exposure to violence on media and low self-esteem were two less common reasons for social media bullying among high school learners. According to Nelson et al. (2019), social hierarchies and ongoing group dynamics influence social media bullying, thus leading learners to follow their peers to engage in similar conduct. One participant in the study acknowledged that social media bullying teaches learners in rural schools about cyberbullying from their loved ones and their circle of friends (Nelson et al., 2019).

Nelson et al. (2019) contend that social media bullying occurred when learners turned to online aggression in order to fit in with their classmates. This was because social media bullying was 'normalised' by continuing group dynamics and social hierarchies. Given that one of the perpetrators acknowledged harassing his sister, it became clear that bullying is frequently learned behaviour, which implies that cyberbullying may exist in families (Nelson et al., 2019).

2.3.3.2 Feeling of power

Bullying on social media can be interpreted as a social status or a power symbol, with prominent people regularly making fun of them (Varjas et al., 2010). For instance, children who are rich and good-looking label others as poor. Hence, they use social media to energise their meanness, boredom, and aggression (Barry et al., 2019).

On the other hand, learners who want attention, and who come from a poor family, will resort to bullying on social media in an effort to climb the social ladder at school to become influential. According to Gordon (2020), bullies may also intimidate fellow learners to crush them psychologically because of their high social standing, adding that a bully who is power-hungry pursues 'revenge' against those perceived to be stronger, thus they may use their incredible digital

skills to defame ‘strong’ learners online. Liu et al. (2021) agree that learners who are bullied physically or psychologically on social media, often want to exact revenge on their tormentor.

2.3.3.3 Family environment

Family dynamics play a significant role in social media bullying that occurs in rural schools (Shin & Choi, 2021; Hou, 2022). These dynamics may include inadequate family communication, dysfunctional relationships, and a lack of emotional support from parents (Qu et al., 2022). The lack of sound communication between parents and children can cause learners to frequently express themselves abusively online, which increases their chances of being bullied or indulging in the bullying others on social media (Martinez-Monteaudo, 2019; Jun, 2020). Moreover, studies have indicated a strong correlation between parents' use of mobile phones and social media bullying (Tintori et al., 2021). When parent-child communication decreases, making the child to feel abandoned, children compensate by expressing their feelings through posting or commenting on specific posts on social media, sometimes in negative ways (Qu et al., 2022). Lastly, family ideologies (e.g. authoritarianism and racism) may contribute to learners’ bullying behaviour on social media (Al-Enezi, 2021).

2.3.3.4 Boredom

According to Hornberg and Knutsen (2011), learners who feel like they have nothing to do eventually become bored, which leads to social media bullying (Varjas, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022). Boredom might result in hostile behaviour perpetrated on social media sites where one bullies other learners (Zahao et al., 2015). In other words, they target others to pass the time on social media (Fan et al., 2019). However, this release of boredom might cause trauma rather than provide entertainment (Kimberly, 2022). Stockdale and Coyne (2020) agree that using social media to abuse others to pass the time when one is bored is rife among learners in rural schools.

2.3.3.5 Revenge

Social media bullying may happen in a form of retaliating to someone who has done you wrong as revenge (Ngc et al., 2020). According to Santre (2022), social media bullying is also seen to be caused by a sense of retaliation, particularly in cases where the perpetrator had previously been subjected to social media bullying. Retaliation narratives powerfully illustrate the vindictive nature of individuals which is demonstrated through social media bullying (Ngoc et al., 2020; Morelli et al., 2020). Furthermore, it was suggested that bullying on social media may be the result of people's

resentment and desire to exact revenge on tormentors (Abdelaliem, 2024). Similarly, it is common for partners who have separated to express their resentment in an abusive manner on social media platforms as acts of revenge (Fumagalli et al., 2024; Blava et al., 2020).

2.3.4 Effects of Social Media Bullying

Numerous behavioural, socio-psychological, and mental health problems are precipitated by cyberbullying among learners in remote schools (Kwan et al., 2020). Bullying on social media has detrimental effects on learners in rural schools in numerous ways. The new norm for learners is to engage in discussions with other anonymous users frequently, give ‘thumbs up emoji which may suggest that the reader of the post on social media agrees on what is posted, and leave ‘likes’ on posts which may also indicate the the reader on social media commend what is posted. An addiction to social media use can set the foundation for deviant habits (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020) such that learners may experience more health and social issues (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2022; Beghin, 2020).

2.3.4.1 Emotional effects and Psychological effects

Bullying on social media negatively impacts the mental wellbeing of those who are targeted. Out of 80 participants, 21% stated that their experiences with bullying on social media made them lose confidence at school (Postuma et al., 2019). Loneliness appears to be a significant factor in contemplating suicide (Darawsheh, 2023; Bagasol et al., 2022). Similarly, Postuma et al. (2019) found that suicidal tendencies may be indirectly increased by social media bullying through depression, loneliness, stress, and psychological distress. Furthermore, when they were by themselves and thought about how they had been bullied on social media, 35% of respondents said they felt unhappy, 6% frustrated, 15% self-conscious, and 23% had suicidal thoughts (Farhangpour et al., 2019). Maftai et al. (2022) and Chua et al. (2020) agree that the act of bullying learners on social media might have negative effects including depression and hopelessness in victims.

According to research, school phobias, social anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and low self-esteem are among the psychological issues that rural school learners experience when they are bullied on social media platforms (Vehuland, 2019; Barry et al., 2019). Wang et al. (2019) claim that the likelihood of experiencing a rise in various depressive symptoms in response to anxiety brought on by cyberbullying can lead to suicidal thoughts. Additionally, Tantawi (2020) notes that there is a correlation between bullying and low self-esteem among learners who engage in social media

bullying. This means that when a learner engages in social media bullying, not only will the victim's self-esteem be impacted, but also that of the perpetrator (Aliyev & Gengec, 2019; Noreen & Iqbal, year).

Moreover, research conducted by Mandela Metropolitan University on behalf of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG, 2021), found that 37% of learners which sampled reported having been victimised via social media platforms (Ipsos, 2020). Just 37% of respondents sampled to a poll conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) claimed to be knowledgeable about how to deal with cyberbullying. The fact that many young people lack the skills necessary to deal with online harassment is contributing to this worrying trend (CJCP, 2019).

2.3.4.2 Physical effects

Cabrera et al. (2022) examined the differences between traditional and social media bullying in rural and urban contexts, and their findings indicated that traditional bullying and bullying on social media have a strong and statistically significant link (Beghim, 2020). The whole-school strategy for handling bullying on social media in South African schools which revealed that poor management of social media bullying (or cyberbullying) may lead to high dropout rates and dysfunctional learner relationships. Sinthumule and Ngonyama (2022) add that victims dropout of school while bullies enjoy being 'powerful' at school. Bullying learners can also affect learners academically (Beghin, 2020; Marciano et al., 2020); when learners' performance is affected negatively, the quality of their work deteriorates (Grant & Eisehofer, 2021; Shahzad &Zulfar, 2022).

Due to the harmful content posted by perpetrators about their victims, some learners tend to reject and isolate those who have been bullied on social media (Farhangpour et al., 2019). This has a negative impact on victims' interactions with their classmates .The physical effects of social media bullying on learners attending rural schools include weight gain (or loss), and irregular sleeping patterns (Kwan et al., 2022) which decreases learners' focus on class activities during instruction time. Learners who experience bullying on social media may also want to take drugs, miss classes, refuse to participate in class tasks, and indulge in crimes (Jogezai et al., 2021). These behaviours and attitudes are detrimental because they cause learners to lag behind in their academic work (Diaz & Fite, 2019).

2.3.5 Mitigating Social Media Bullying

2.3.5.1 Educators

Teachers play a critical role in ensuring the safety of learners both at home and at school (Sedgwick et al., 2019). The findings emanating from a study conducted on South African educators' understanding of social media bullying indicate that teachers were well-informed about the issue and knew how it affected children in the classroom (Hamuddin, 2023). However, even with their extensive training and intervention efforts, teachers are known to be ineffective in preventing bullying since parents do not get involved and learners do not report bullying incidents (Blumerifeld et al., 2023). Since teachers are learners' first line of defence when they are being bullied - similar to parents - teachers need to be more vigilant to quell this scourge (Wachs et al., 2019).

Eradicating social media bullying of rural school learners requires educators to model and encourage healthy connections to create pleasant classroom environments. Since learners must imbibe sound moral behaviour and social conversation etiquette for normal classroom interactions, it is imperative that educators also teach suitable values for online communication (Cassidy et al., 2012). Hence, “teaching learners morals and ethics in rural schools can help deter learners from engaging in cyberbullying” (Fredkove et al., 2019, p. 883). Moreover, tapping into the internal strengths of learners promotes their resilience on how to combat cyberbullying which increases individual self-esteem (Aliyev & Gengec, 2019; Castano et al., 2022).

2.3.5.2 Parents

Parents should ensure that their children feel safe when accessing social media platforms and take action if their children are victims of cyberbullying (Ahmad & Hassim, 2023), in addition to offering unwavering support through interacting kindly with them (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Since bullying occurs primarily when learners are at home with their parents, families must play a key role in helping to solve online bullying (Helfrich et al., 2020); for instance, by monitoring the use of their children's websites (Baldry et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2019).

According to Goyal et al. (2019), parents must display a sympathetic stance towards their children who have been bullied on social platforms by acting and speaking in a way that prevents further

trauma. This can be achieved by collaborating to enact a plan that both parties can agree upon. It is appropriate and crucial to obtain the child's opinion on potential solutions to quell the situation (Netshitagan, 2019). It is imperative that we validate their voices and viewpoints rather than discounting them (Krisnayana & Santika, 2022). Cyberbullying victims (as well as the silent onlookers) need to be confident that the adults they report to are decisively, sensibly, and not exacerbate the issue (Caccaro & Ridder, 2019). Harmonious parent-child communication aids in preventing the onset of anxiety and depression in children. Lastly, children who have experienced bullying on social media should always be supervised by an adult (Scardera et al., 2020; Wuryaningsih et al., 2022).

2.3.5.3 Learners

Mensah (2020) asserts that educating youths about proper online behaviour and the harmful consequences of social media bullying can help prevent this scourge. Pusey and William (2012) add that to guarantee that novice how educators use online communication platforms responsibly and ethically, educator professional growth programmes must prepare their in-service (and pre-service) teachers on the topic of social media security, its safe usage, and the consequences of cyber-abuse. Further, equipping learners with in-depth information allows them to understand how social media works in dealing with online bullying (Johanis et al., 2020; Muniandy et al., 2017). Lastly, District officials which may be school maangers,directors and department social workers must also intervene to curb cybercrimes at schools (Ginsburg et al., 2021; Islamoglu, 2019).

2.3.5.4 School

Bullying on social media has become a major problem in South African schools, with more incidents being reported annually. Although numerous strategies have been proposed to deal with this issue, cyberbullying persists. According to Zola (2021), learners in rural schools usually deal with cyberbullying attacks in private and quietly. Therefore, the first step in minimising social media bullying is perpetrators' recognising and confessing their social media bullying habits through dialogue with relevant professionals (AbiJaoude et al., 2020). For those learners who have experienced bullying on social media, protection measures are imperatives (Collins, 2024). However, rural schools may not be in a position of accessing specialist and counselling services, although some educators have learnt how to assist in cases of social media bullying (Midgett & Dumas, 2021).

Combating the causes of cyberbullying in South African schools will require a multifaceted approach that combines education, awareness-raising, and assistance for the victims (Tinstaman et al., 2019; Huang, 2019). It has been suggested that the Department of Basic Education (2021) conduct workshops to train educators on preventing cyberbullying. During these workshops, educators can gain the necessary knowledge and skills to reduce instances of cyberbullying in their schools and communities (Blumenfeld et al., 2023).

Some international studies have explored how parents manage the detrimental effects of social media bullying (Rasanen et al., 2020). Three primary conceptual themes emerged from the study which included communication, monitoring, and professional resources. Studies have indicated that helping children gain self-assurance and helping bullies understand the possible repercussions of their actions may help lessen the negative impact of social media bullying on victims' self-esteem (Helfritch et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). It is imperative that classrooms and schools transform into spaces that embrace a diverse range of learners and viewpoints to prevent bullying on social media. Diversity among learners must be incorporated into the classroom to sustain positive and varied peer interactions (Mishna et al., 2019, p. 577; Hindutch & Patchin, 2019).

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 refers to bullying on social media as 'abuse' (*RSA Constitution*, 1996). This Act explains the responsibilities of South African learners and their obligations in relation to the constitutional responsibility to preserve the right to freedom and security, specifically prohibiting bullying on social media. The South African Government has social workers who have expertise in providing treatment to learners who have experienced cyberbullying (Zastrow, 2017, p. 90). In addition, the Department of Social Services works closely with the schools to address cases of bullying, but this calls for good communication between all relevant stakeholders (Chassiakos et al., 2020). Where there is effective liaison between Government Departments and schools, various strategies are implemented to minimise cases of cyberbullying (Mthethwa, 2016, p. 49; Thomberg & Delby, 2019). Regarding the social work casework technique, a social worker engages in one-on-one intervention with a learner. According to Zastrow (2017), the casework strategy can help learners work through personal and social problems with the help of a professional social worker who provides therapy to 're-empower' a learner who has experienced cyberbullying. As such, the ecosystem plays a critical role in helping social workers navigate the intervention process by providing a thorough understanding of the

effects of social media bullying on both the victim and the bully. According to Swank et al. (2019), school counsellors are also intensely involved in the prevention and intervention of bullying within school communities. As a result, learners who have been the victims of social media bullying meet with school counsellors on a regular basis who are in a unique position to offer staff and learners advice and support (Jones et al., 2019). According to the ASCA (2019), school counsellors are armed with policy information to inform all stakeholders about social media bullying and its repercussions, thus creating widespread awareness. The problem is that not all schools are fortunate to have counsellors and this is high likely to be the case in rural schools. Learners may not get professional help when bullied at school.

Jiang et., al (2018) assert that learners spend most of their time on the internet communicating with peers and watching videos parents, teachers, and school officials expressed concerns about possible (and current) incidents of bullying on social media. According to the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (2019), 3% of learners reported being bullied on social media during the 2016-17 period, while 15%-16% of adolescents aged between 12-18 years reported being bullied in the social media while they were at school. According to Choi et al. (2019), schools are required to be vigilant concerning instances of social media bullying among learners. Although new technology that can identify certain posts as possibly engaging in social media bullying is being developed, it is highly controversial because it compromises learners' privacy (Potocnik et al, 2021).

Despite efforts by schools to restrict the use of personal electronic devices in the classroom, most learners still persist in using these devices for non-educational purposes (Potocnik, 2021). Rosa et al (2019) state that while technology is helpful on certain platforms, and works best when a learner's social media is private, algorithms to recognise social media bullying are still being developed. To combat bullying on social media in South Africa, the DBE (2012) has created E-Safety guidelines which inform learners about the various forms of bullying that occur on various online platforms. Learners are also urged to exercise caution when interacting online with others.

Every school is encouraged to be guided by anti-bullying policies of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) that offers parents and learners advice on how to handle bullying on social media (2019). Various strategies are presently being implemented to minimise bullying on social media such as providing direct programming to enhance digital and social-emotional learning. By

offering mental health services, explicit policies, and social media prevention efforts, reducing cyberbullying will become a reality (Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018). According to Patchin (2013), a learner acquires lessons from elders at home on how to utilise the internet. This is key to recognise and intercept social media bullying messages, and to create digital citizenship across the learner's experiences on the online system. To mitigate social media bullying, the South African Government has implemented a number of policies in state security Agency, that zealously monitor and regulate non-academic electronic activities, including guidelines that provide teenagers with advice on coping mechanisms to deal with social media bullying to halt the perpetuation of the cycle of online victimisation.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories are created to explain, predict, and understand events; they often question and expand on previous knowledge while adhering to important limiting assumptions (Gabriel, 2008). According to Varpia et al. (2019), a theoretical framework is a plan that a researcher uses in a proposed study. It can be used to determine the scope of the phenomenon and its analytical techniques; in other words, it is the framework that a study might use to reject or support its hypothesis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In support, Hussien (2018) agrees that the theoretical framework describes the theory that explains why the research problem under inquiry happens. This study's theoretical framework was underpinned by the ecological theory.

2.4.1 Origin of the Ecological Theory of Systems

The terms *ecology* and *ecosystem* are used interchangeably in the ecological theory of systems. The branch of biology known as ecology describes the interactions between the physical features of live species, surroundings, and living organisms themselves (Vans, 2014). According to Bronfenbrenner (1974), laboratory studies concentrated mainly on the influence of parents on their children rather than on the potential mutual influence of the child on a stranger or any other relationship that a child may have; hence, Bronfenbrenner (1974) criticised earlier studies as having no proper direction in terms of their aspects of research in labs which were not typical of the settings in which a child grows up.

The rise of the social constructivist theory of learning and teaching, especially among scholars in the field of education, engendered the utilisation of *ecology* as a way of describing the settings in which learning occurs. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed his fundamental nested ecological

systems model which has four layers: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Neal and Neal (2013) added another system which is the *chronosystem* which interrelates with what Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed.

2.4.2 Systems of the Ecological Theory

Since a child interacts with many different areas of development, his/her growth surpasses merely focusing on one or two areas; thus, we should consider all components that influence children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem are the five integrated categories that should be examined (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

2.4.2.1 Microsystem

The microsystem involves learners, instructors, and parents to understand (and combat) social media bullying in rural schools. It is the first system representing the local environment in which an individual has direct interaction with (Tsitley, 2022). They may want to be more active on social media platforms and post content that would attract other learners' attention which could result in them being bullied online (Fong Lam et al., 2015). A student may experience unpleasant feelings, and may thus retreat from their classmates if they feel excluded in a new setting (Pennell et al., 2022).

2.4.2.2 Mesosystem

The term *mesosystem* refers to the connections and interactions among several microsystems that influence a child's development. If children's parents are more engaged in their own social activities, they (children) will frequently invite their friends over to hang out, which may have a beneficial impact on the child's development through socialisation; however, a child will suffer disequilibrium if their parents/caregivers express distaste for their pals by publicly criticising them (Evans, 2020).

2.4.2.3 Exosystem

In ecological systems, the people and places that a child does not directly engage with but that nevertheless influence their development are referred to as the third level. According to Evans (2020), a child's extended family, the neighbourhood, and the parents' workplace are all excellent instances of exosystem. Whatever is happening in these settings could have a beneficial or

detrimental impact on the youngster. Evans (2020) suggests that a child's exosystem could be enlarged to include other forms of communication within ecological systems and the influences of social media. Expanding a theoretical framework for teenage mental health recovery through the application of the constructivist theory reveals several ties to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory of systems (Coughlan & Kelly, 2019). Media, social services, and general awareness and solutions to bullying on social media are all included in the exosystem (Allen et al., 2020).

2.4.2.4 Macrosystem

The social norms that constitute the macrosystem may have an impact on rural school learners' sense of belonging, particularly when they are enrolled at a new school. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), macrosystem is defined as regularities, the form of lower system that exist at a level of subculture together with a belief system a macrosystem consists of regularities,. Due to social norms that govern the development and breakdown of how people connect, social networks are significant when defining macrosystems (Neal and Neal, 2013). The way the macrosystem functions depends on the cultural setting of the individual. According to Reineth (2019), this is the largest and most significant group of people and events that affect a child's life. This includes the political, cultural, moral, and economic systems at both the micro and macro levels (Evans, 2020). For example, a child who grows up in a family that is financially stable will not experience the same developmental effects as a youngster from a family that is struggling financially. Rural school learners may be influenced by the attitude ideologies of the culture, it may determine how they should behave even when they are using social media platforms. For example in some cultures it is believed that a boy must not talk too much, therefore when they are bullied on social media platforms they may remain quiet because of the cultural ideologies.

2.4.2.5 Chronosystem

The *chronosystem* is the term used to describe the fifth level of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory. According to Neil and Neil (2013), the chronosystem is based on the observation of a sequence of events that occurs between people over a period of time. These events have an immediate effect on individuals' focus because of the various ecological systems that surround them. Paat (2013) simply states that the chronosystem considers how a person's life develops over time. This system consists of all the environmental changes that occur during a lifetime that affect development, including significant life transitions and historical events (Evans, 2020).

2.4.3 Basic Assumption of the Ecological Theory

The ecological theory is predicated on the notion that every child born in this universe becomes 'entangled' in an ecosystem, which progresses from the most personal and simple home to the more complex and expansive society or culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Evans (2020), stipulated that ecological theory of systems state that child that have a powerful and positive ecological system lack in development, although in some instances a lot of humans could still evolve into a rounded individuals unaccompanied by good influences from ecological systems..

2.4.4 Application of the Ecological Theory regarding Social Media Bullying

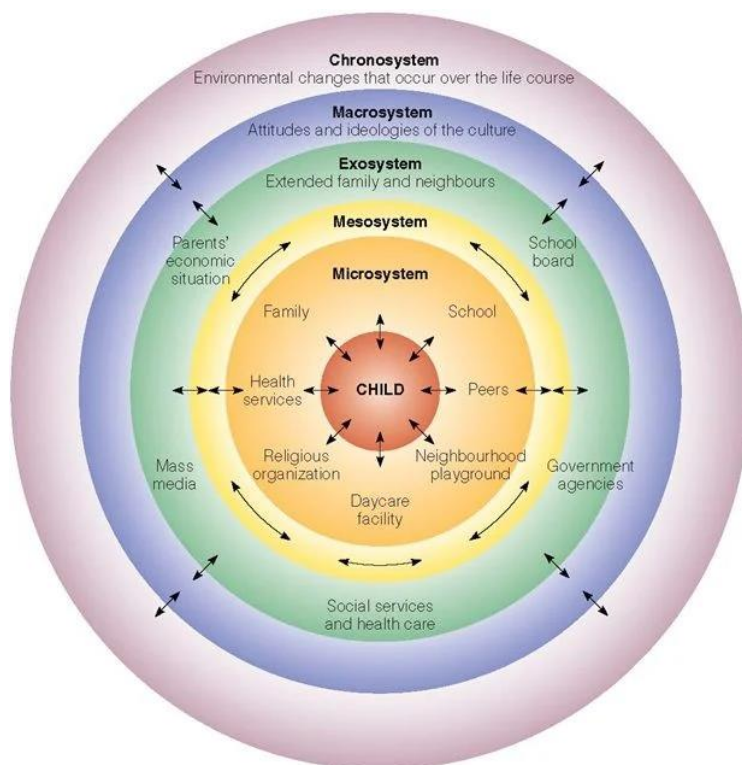


Figure 1.1: Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1980)

The impact of social media on rural school learners constitutes the *microsystem* (Green, 2020). In microsystems, parents of learners attending rural schools are critical agents since they are the ones who mainly introduce and teach their children about social media, including its risks and privacy implications (Graber, 2019). With reference to Figure 1 above, a microsystem encapsulates the learner's life (Price & Green, 2016). The mesosystem which is the second level of the ecological

theory of systems, helps us understand more about the interactions that occur between the home environment, social media platforms, school, and other learners. Learners from rural schools may be subjected to pressure from peers who enjoy making fun of other learners on social media as they believe that there is no harm done in publicly humiliating others on online platforms (Qodir et al., 2019).

Thirdly, the *exosystem* of learners in remote schools (Parent Magazine, 2023) is concerned with the child's psychological, rather than physical friendships. With reference to Figure 1 above, learners who have access to cell phones and WiFi are exposed to social media bullying through material they read online without their parents' consent. According to the fourth level of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) theory, the *macrosystem*, societal norms and cultures are what influence bullying on social media. For example, learners from one culture may harass learners from another culture through online systems by posting embarrassing texts that claim that their culture is superior to theirs (Mishna et al., 2022).

Figure 1 above also illustrates the *chronosystem* applicable to rural school learners who are subjected to the adverse effects of online bullying. A good scenario would be a child with parents who are separated - this may affect the child in a negative manner such that the child may vent his/her stress through bullying on social media (Mishna et al., 2022).

2.4.5 Justification for Adopting Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Theory

Examining various influences at different levels on learners' experiences is a key component of ecological theory. This would entail considering elements at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal levels in relation to social media bullying in rural schools. In addition to more general aspects like peer dynamics, social norms, and the presence of support networks in their areas, individual elements like digital literacy abilities or self-worth can also have an impact on rural learners' experiences of cyberbullying (Pieschl & Porsch, 2021). In sum, one's upbringing has an impact on all aspects of one's lives (Renn & Arnold, 2020).

2.4.6 Strengths and Limitations of the Ecological Theory

The ecological theory addresses the child's holistic growth and factors that affect it. It is not like other theories in science - it is more practical and useful to a researcher (Drew, 2021). It is said to have positive outcomes. However, its outcomes are blurry as dynamics interactions constantly

changing relationships between components (De Huun & Leuvin, 2019). The foreign language terminology calls on the researcher and the reader to look for proper translations; for example, words like *mesosystem* and *chronosystem* (Bailey et al., 2021).

2.5 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter combined the theoretical foundation with the review of the literature on cyberbullying. It outlined the key areas for investigating the phenomenon, including the experiences of rural school learners concerning cyberbullying. The literature review demonstrated that bullying on social media among learners in rural schools is widespread in South Africa and beyond. There is evidence that learners attending rural schools who experience cyberbullying suffer academically, cognitively, emotionally, and physically. The next chapter (3) deals with the study's methodology.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature overview and ecological theory of systems as theoretical framework for this study were provided in chapter two. In this chapter (3), the study investigates the experiences of rural school learners regarding cyberbullying. Accordingly, qualitative research methodologies were employed in this study. In addition, the interpretivist research paradigm was selected in this phase of the study. Narrative interviews were conducted as the data collection method, and thematic analysis was applied to dissect the collected data. Moreover, trustworthy aspects and ethical considerations were outlined. Lastly, the summary of the chapter (3) is presented.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study's research approach consists of the theoretical analysis stages that are used in this field of study (Kothari, 2004). A researcher may choose which research approach is best suited to the research topic from the beginning till the end of the research process (Topper, 2004). Interviews are conducted in qualitative research to gain richer data (Tenny et al., 2022). This qualitative research explored the experiences of rural school learners regarding the phenomenon of social media bullying (Tenny et al., 2022). This research approach assists in generating hypotheses and investigation, in a qualitative research view, behaviours and lived experiences of participants are put together. Similarly, Silverman (2020) stated this research approach can also assist in understanding what is crucial to humans. This was used to gain in-depth insight on rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying.

Learners from a rural school shared their social media bullying encounters through interviews. The researcher listened attentively to all narratives while simultaneously audio-recording to promote authentic transcriptions of data. In addition, to examine the different realities narrated by different participants on the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The narrative inquiry technique is utilised in this qualitative research as it focuses on real-life stories of human beings. It looks at the experiences of humans by using interviews, photo-voice,

or any other method where a human can participate (Emily, 2020). Narrative inquiry enables a reader to follow the story and make an evaluation by using his/her own views and experiences. According to Ormston et al. (2014), qualitative narrative research may be used to interpret, compare, and match humans' experiences. This was used to find a deeper understanding on social media bullying happening in rural school.

3.4 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The interpretivist research paradigm was suitable for this current investigation. Depending on the goals of studies, different researchers employ various paradigms. However, while employing a research paradigm, the study's aim, objectives, and research questions must be aligned to obtain authentic results. Lather (1986) adds that to create facts, social construction, language consciousness, and other research considerations are important. Berryman (2019, p. 273) elaborates that interpretivist researchers need to organise their questions around knowing *how* and *why* to obtain answers to a qualitative research topic. Moreover, Boas (1995) asserts that interpretivists have the erroneous belief that research on a people's culture can be used to understand their beliefs, ideas, and meanings, this is not so, unless explored in a holistic manner. The use of interpretivist paradigm was to understand experiences of rural school learners and emotions of participants who were affected by social media bullying.

To figure out the intricacies of the life of a human being, it may help to understand him/her from within because people's understanding of experiences is not the same because reality is differently interpreted in terms of types of thinking and behaviour. What one knows influences one's interpretation to make sense of the existing social world (Alharashel & Pius, 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2012). Therefore, an interpretivist may use a relative ontology in case there are various interpretations of facts (Cresswell, 2007). According to Webster et al (2013), ontology can be defined as the nature of being which focuses on the reality, and what people assume about reality (Biesta, 2010). In other words, reality is based on what a person knows about the reality (Killam, 2013). In addition, subjective epistemology is used in interpretivism which may connect with the research problem (Saunders et al., 2012). Furthermore, epistemology is based on the nature of knowledge, what people know, and what is possible (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). According to Killam (2013) and O'Leary (2014), a deeper connection between what exists and knowledge, should be investigated. Hence, all the elements of axiology are what a researcher should consider

before embarking on which were ethics ,moral values and principles that guide human behaviour (Best & Khan, 2014). What this implies is what axiology tries to address (Cohen et al., 2014). Lastly, the interpretivist paradigm enabled the researcher to interrogate behaviour encountered by participants to describe the phenomenon under study (Alharasheh & Pius, 2020). Rural school learners were interviewed to get their narratives of social media bullying.

3.5 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Ryen (2020) states that a population in research refers to the number of people interested in participating in the research. Using a larger population may be costlier and time-consuming, as it may not be possible for the researcher to engage everyone (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). All learners who had been bullied were invited when the study was presented to those who showed interest in participating in the current research then those who had been bullied on social media were selected, therefore, the presentation led to only selection of suitable participants. The Protection Of Personal Information Act Regulations (OPIA) ,was considered to protect participants' privacy,all fine details were communicated to participants verbally and in writing (in the assent form) without any concealment. They were also afforded opportunities to ask questions of clarity and elaboration, including aspects of confidentiality.

3.6 RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

During the recruitment process, there were a few challenges that arose, especially when participant-learners were recruited. Parents were sceptical at first to expose their children to telling their stories of cyberbullying, but after explaining that this research hoped to counter the attacks on social media, they conceded. Additionally, when a non-native language is used it may cause misunderstandings; therefore, the researcher engaged a translation service (Potocnik et al., 2021). Narrative interviews were conducted in English learner preferred like that since one of the school policy is that English must spoken throughout the day.As an English teacher it was easy for participants to share their stories in English as they are exposed in debates and talk shows. Lastly, focusing on the study's aim and objectives in order to answer the research questions (Razario et al., 2019) was taxing at times, but by reminding myself of the goal ahead I quickly focused on the importance of the task at hand (Potocnik et al., 2021). Sometimes during recruitment process population may claim to have all relevant data needed in the study and things change once the reasearcher focuses on the research objectives.

3.7 RESEARCH SITE

The study's research site was a secondary school situated in a deep rural area. It is located in the north coast of KwaZuluNatal, in a town called Shakaskraal. It is a quintile one school based on the fact that it is situated at the side of a rural gravel road and has limited resources. The school is surrounded by about hundred and fifty households which depend mostly on government social grants that is given the children under the age of eighteen years. There are also sugarcane plantations that surround the school area which provides seasonal employment for some residents, mostly the youth between the ages of twenty one and thirty five.

There are two secondary schools and three primary schools in the area which fall under the Ndwedwe Municipality. Children in the community are also taught cultural activities like reed dance and principles of Ubuntu. Learners who were chosen as research participants, had access to cellphones some of them needed cellphones so that they may communicate with parents who were working in faraway cities while they (learners) stayed with their grandparents. This research site was chosen because learners bring cellphone and there were cases of social media in the school.

About 90% of the learners in the school had access to smartphones and were active on social media this was taken from the school record ,it was easy to calculate since the school writes down names of the learners who bring cellphones to the school and keep them safe. Some were subjected to cyberbullying incidents since 2020. As an educator who sits on the disciplinary committee of the school, I dealt with many social media bullying cases, as I had the opportunity to observe hearings of such cases. According to Kemparaj and Chavan (2013), conducting a study requires a person to identify a suitable site to access adequate and relevant data – this was the case at the chosen school site. Also, educators were subjected to bullying at this school, and learners were suspected to be the ones who posted inappropriate information about them on social media for the community to see. They messaged fake incidents that allegedly transpired during teaching and learning sessions. I engaged participants from this research site who were either affected directly or indirectly by social media bullying. Figure 3.1 below is a map to illustrate the area in which the school research site is located.

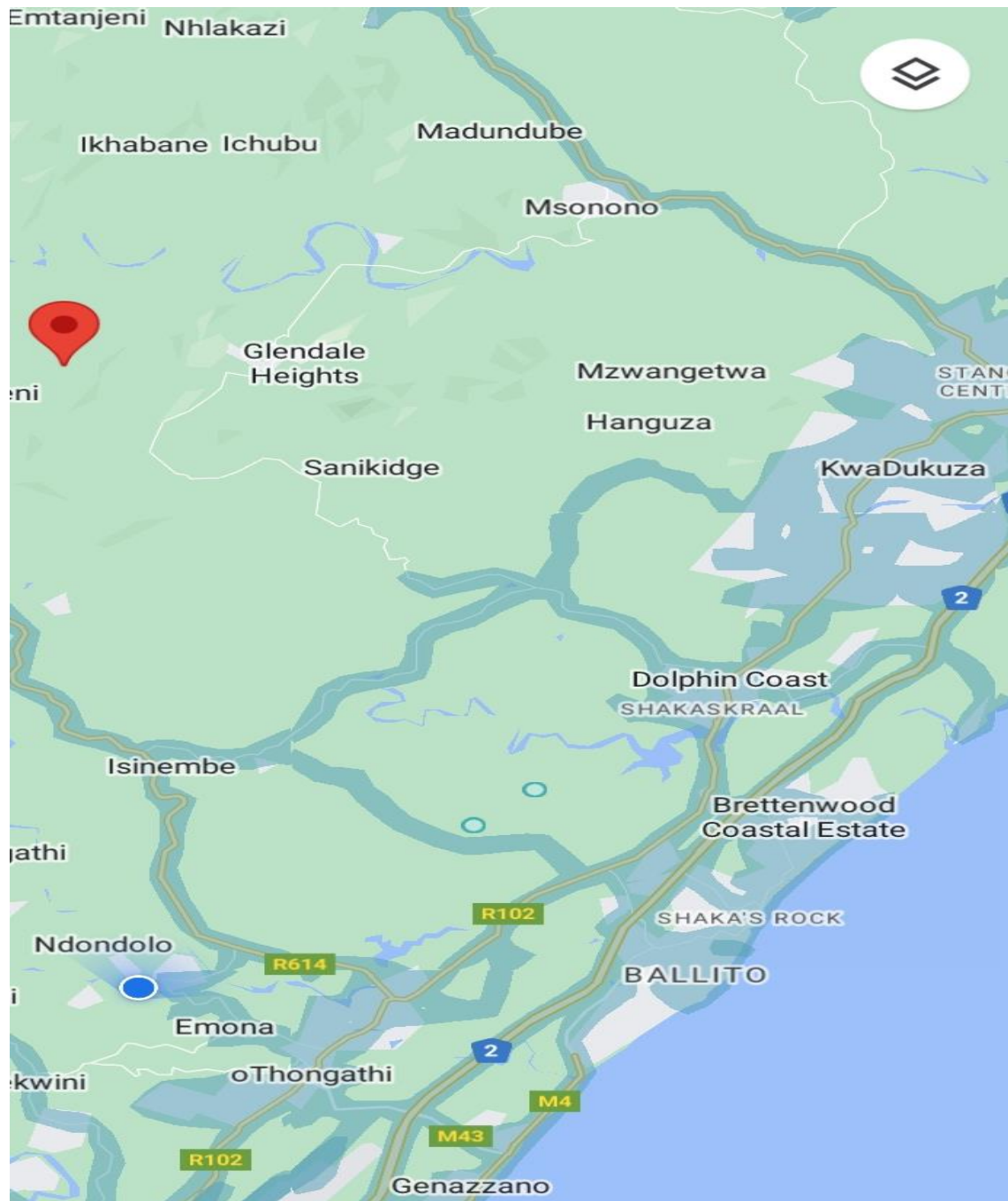


Figure 3.2: Map showing the proximity Secondary School in relation to the town of Shakaskraal (Google maps) .

Tables 3.1 to 3.5 below provide the learner-participants' profiles.

Table 3.1: Learner-participant 1 - Manxi Zwe

Participant's name and age	Manxi Zwe, fifteen years old
Current Grade	9
Stream	He is enrolled for all nine subjects in the GET Phase
Social media using	Facebook
Duration at school	2 years
Background	Zwe was born and bred in the Eastern Cape. He stays with his mother and two sisters. He would like to be a musician when he is older and uses Facebook

Table 3.2: Learner-participant 2 - Zoe Mokoena

Participant's name and age	Zoe Mokoena, fifteen years old
Current Grade	9
Stream	Enrolled for all subjects in the GET Phase
Social media using	TikTok, Facebook & WhatsApp
Duration at school	1 year
Background	Zoe lives in a rural area. She is from a family of five. When she finishes Grade 12 she hopes to pursue a medical career.

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Table 3.3: Learner-participant 3 - Owami Mqadi

Participant's name and age	Owami Mqadi, sixteen years old
Current Grade	11
Stream	Science
Social media	Facebook and WhatsApp
Duration at school	4 years
Background	She lives with her grandmother. She wants to become a nurse after finishing Grade 12.

Table 3.4: Learner-participant 4 - Thuthu Mthethwa

Participant's name and age	Thuthu Mthethwa, seventeen years
Current Grade	11
Stream	Commerce
Social media using	Facebook
Duration at school	4 years
Background	Thuthu grew up in rural area. She is not sure whether her family is stable or not. Her dream is to pursue a career in accounting.

Table 3.5: Learner-participant 5 - Thabo Mthembu

Participant's name and age	Thabo Mthembu, seventeen years
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Current Grade	11
Stream	Commerce
Social media using	Facebook and WhatsApp
Duration at school	Four years
Background	He lives in a rural area with his grandmother since his parents are not married. He anticipates being a lawyer when he finishes his studies. He is an outspoken learner.

3.8 DATA GENERATION

In narrative inquiry study human lives are of great significance especially when collecting data through the narration of lived-experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) used the narrative inquiry method to garner data when investigating views and personal stories of the teachers. Participants' stories enable the researcher to transition towards acquiring in-depth data to better understand the research problem (Gavidia et al., 2022). Moreover, one of the objectives of the narrative enquiry approach is to understand participants' experiences over a continuous period of time (Dewart et al., 2019).

The narrative inquiry technique was adopted for this study because it was suitable for the researcher to comprehend situations easily to draw meaningful conclusions from the stories they shared (West, 2019). By implementing the narrative inquiry approach, the aim was to expand on the knowledge gleaned from literature regarding understanding social media bullying in rural schools. In other words, narrative inquiry was beneficial as it allowed participants to share their stories in depth through interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this regard, this study was guided by the stages of narrative interviews: initiation, narration, questioning, and concluding (Jovchelovitch & Braun, 2000) Figure 3.2 below illustrates this:

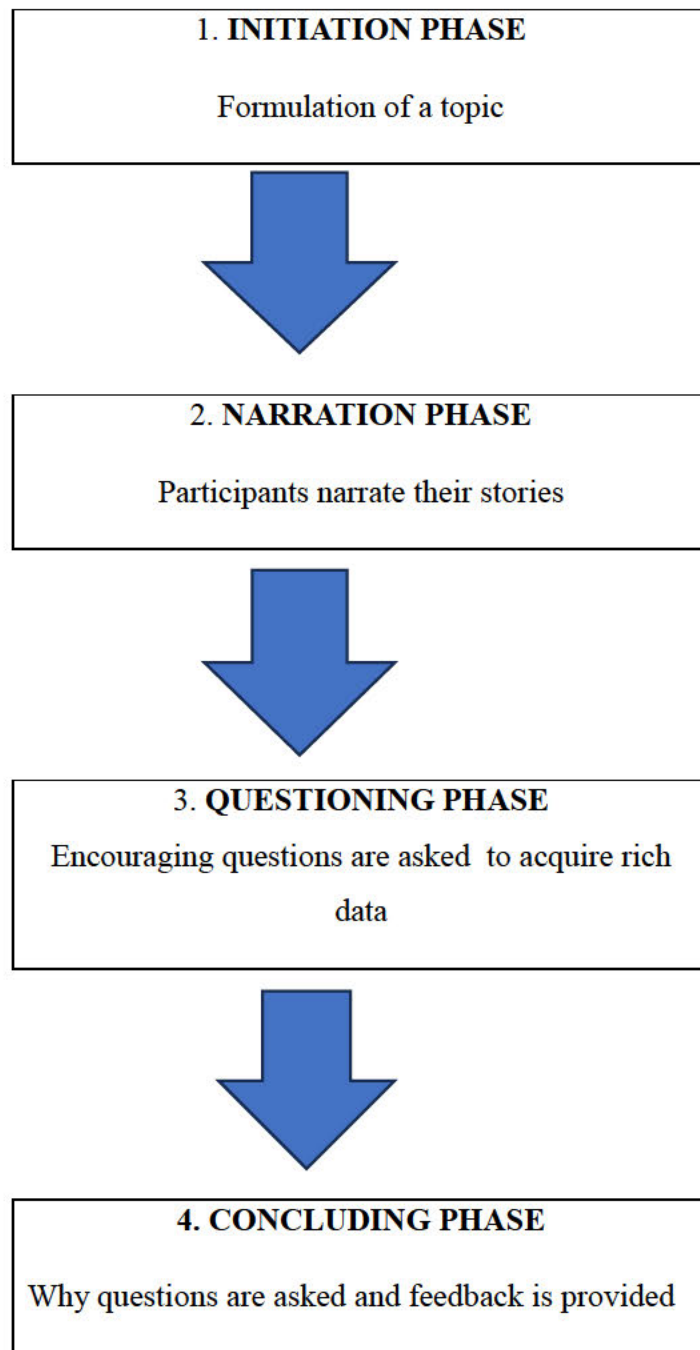


Figure 3.2: Narrative interview phases (Jovchelovitch & Brauner, 2000)

Conducting interviews is a well-known method for data generation. Participants are given time face-to-face to share their personal stories with the interviewer through narrative interviews. The interviewer is not allowed to have strict control over this process - besides probing for clarification

and elaboration, but the researcher is supposed to be unobtrusive. According to Bhat (2023), this is the recommended method to generate rich incisive data.

3.9 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is a common data analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). There are six steps that must be followed when using this type of analysis method:

- capturing generated data; writing down data generated.
- coding data; this is to apply coding framework to the entire data base, assigning codes to relevant segments.
- emerging with themes; taking out themes that appear from participants responses.
- reflect on the themes; relook the themes in order to group same responses together.
- deciding on the themes to be used; and
- organising responses according to themes.

Prior to data analysis, all responses must be transcribed (after audio-recording) so that the researcher ensures authenticity, member-checks, and formalisation of the data through relevant quotes, keywords, codes, and theme development (Liamputton, 2020). However, data analysis is a flexible process to meet the needs of the study to elicit rich data generation (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Liamputton, 2020).

This study applied the thematic analysis approach by identifying themes that emerged from participants' responses. The patterns which were identified were interpreted to promote meaning-making (Liebenberg et al., 2020; Xu & Zammit, 2020), thus it was necessary for the researcher to note important words and phrases (and repetitions) during the narrative interview process. Thematic analysis required the researcher to follow systematic procedures to structure a sequential order to interpret the collected data. It was 'systematic' as it followed a logical pattern to interpret the data. All stages of thematic analysis build on each other such that a comprehensive understanding of the data is obtained (Naeem, 2023).

Khanyase (2022), who applied thematic analysis of generated data, explored how violence on educators can be mitigated and this assisted in interpretation of participants views. Khanyase's study relates to the current study as it is also looking at the human behaviour which is violence . This type of analysis was found suitable to mitigate violence perpetrated by learners on teachers.

In this study, I explored the rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying through thematic analysis which proved the best way to elicit rich data. Lastly, Naeem (2023) supports the thematic analysis approach to generate in-depth data by using narrative interviews.

3.10 TRUSTWORTHINESS

When conducting a research study, it is imperative that the researcher observes trustworthiness principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A clear and logical procedure must be followed in qualitative research (Harrison et al., 2017) hence, the study's creditability, transferability, dependability, and conformability aspects must be adhered to at all times in ensuring that the study is trustworthy and consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To confirm whether data was credible and authentic is crucial to follow all the above mentioned steps (Adu, 2019). This current study engaged five learner-participants from a rural school who shared their personal experiences regarding social media bullying. Liamputton (2020) confirms that the first aspect of *creditability* in a study demonstrates the reliability of the study. Furthermore, other previous studies mention that creditability involves verifying the correctness of data collected (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Lobiondo-Wood & Haber, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

The second principle of *transferability* in qualitative research refers to findings that may be generalised or transferable to another similar study (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Vasileiou et al., 2018). The third criteria is *dependability* which means the trust between the researcher and participants in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability means that there is authenticity and reliability when reflecting at the findings of the study (Brink et al., 2016; Polit & Beck, 2017). Participant-learners in this study trusted the researcher, who was also their educator, because of the rapport they developed over time. Audio-recordings during the data generation process strengthened dependability and triangulation. Lastly, when all other mentioned criteria were applied, *confirmability* should be ensured by checking data (repetitive readings and member-checks) and verifying that findings were correctly extrapolated as per participants' narratives. This ensured that there was no manipulation or bias by the researcher, but only what participants narrated during the data generation process (Barbie & Mouton, 2020). All participants responses were audio recorded to ensure that there was no manipulation data.

3.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Firstly, generating data by engaging learners as participants was not easy as learners were sometimes busy with other tasks, especially when we had to meet out-of-school hours. Secondly, some participants were inhibited when we conducted one-on-one interviews, so I had to repeat instructions, in addition to introducing strategies that relax them, including confidentiality issues. One parent called me to voice his concern about his child who was a participant; she may have to exit the research process as it may trigger bad memories of cyberbullying, but I assured him that the interview climate would be cordial and welcoming, and that there was a psychiatrist on standby who will take care of her should there be a need.

3.12 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter presented the research design and methodology of this study. This qualitative study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm to explore the experiences of rural learners concerning social media bullying. The study was conducted in one rural school by utilising the narrative interview technique to generate data which was audio-recorded, and then transcribed. Prior to the interviews, there were consent forms sent to parents of learner-participants to ensure they understood what was going to transpire, in addition to holding meetings to clarify 'loose ends'.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter three presented the research methodology and the research design. This chapter (4) deals with the data presentation, data analysis, and interpretation. All participants' narratives were transcribed and coded according to the relevant theme. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identity and information of participants, and this was done with the permission of participants. Data was elicited by being guided by the interview questionnaire schedule. Themes and sub-themes emerged when thematic analysis was used (table 3.1 below). Participant-learners shared their personal experiences of social media bullying, its effects, and possible strategies for its mitigation.

Table 4.1: Themes and sub-themes extracted from the collected data

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
4.4.1 Theme 1 - Forms of social media bullying	Learners' experiences of social media bullying 4.4.1.1 Trolling 4.4.1.2 Flaming 4.4.1.3 Dissing 4.4.1.4 Impersonating
4.4.2 Theme 2 - Communication and social Networking	Platforms of social media bullying 4.4.2.1 Facebook 4.4.2.2 WhatsApp

4.4.3 Theme 3 - Social status and power dynamics	<p>What causes social media bullying in rural school?</p> <p>4.4.3.1 Jealousy</p> <p>4.4.3.2 Lack of social media education</p> <p>4.4.3.3 Boredom</p>
4.4.4 Theme 4 - Academic, physical and mental wellbeing	<p>Effect of social media bullying</p> <p>4.4.4.1 Sleeping problems</p> <p>4.4.4.2 Attempting using drugs</p> <p>4.4.4.3 Poor school performance</p> <p>4.4.4.4 Dropping out of school</p>
4.4.5 Theme 5 - Coping Mechanisms and Resilience	<p>Maladaptive (negative) and healthy (positive) strategies</p> <p>4.4.5.1 Substance abuse</p> <p>4.4.5.2 Talking to someone</p>
4.4.6 Theme 6 - Educating and supporting	<p>Mitigating social media bullying</p> <p>4.4.6.1 Education and awareness</p> <p>4.4.6.2 Learner-support</p> <p>4.4.6.3 Restrictions</p> <p>4.4.6.4 Sports</p>

4.4.1 Theme 1: Forms of social media bullying

Social media bullying occurs in different forms: trolling, dissing, flaming, and impersonating. Trolling is defined as bullying which occurs when a person posts hateful comments to cause harm to victims by making them feel bad or hurt (Bucaj & Haziri, 2014). Dissing may be like trolling and dissing is when a bully posts or shares bad/harmful information about a person which is done intentionally to damage the victim's character (Arisanty & Wiradharma, 2022). Flaming means labelling a person such that the victim is compelled to retaliate online (Bergman, 2022). Flaming may be influenced by spontaneous feelings which may be uncontrollable. According to Bergman (2022), impersonating is posting a naked picture by using someone else's face to cause defamation. The following excerpts are verbatim responses from the participants:

4.4.1.1 Trolling

Zoe: Someone I do not know posted on Facebook, after I passed maths exceptionally well, saying that I got higher marks than other because I slept with the teacher.

4.4.1.2 Flaming

Thuthu: I broke up with my boyfriend for some reason. Then another learner sent me a WhatsApp message making me a bad person. The WhatsApp was written that I am a bully, and why I dumped that boy who was then her boyfriend, why?

4.4.1.3 Dissing

Thabo: I fell asleep in class the whole period because I was tired at home on the previous day as there was a family gathering. So one learner from class took a video and pictures of me sleeping on my desk. After some few days I saw it circulating on the WhatsApp platform; meme was created, and they were calling me different names.

4.4.1.4 Impersonating

Zoe: As a bright learner I used to be active when it comes to debates, speeches and talk shows. I think other learners wanted to stop me. One day they took a picture of another person and put my face on it so that it looked as if it was me. They shared it on the social media platform called Facebook; it had 3000 likes and 150 comments.

Mathew (2023) noted that victims of bullying are labelled differently on social media, and supported by lies that may be posted about a person. Some learners leave social media groups

which they had created for focusing on learning or pure socialising. Based on the narratives of rural school learners, it was evident that social media bullying is indeed happening at some point which teachers may not be aware of. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the immediate environment may have an influence on a child - in this instance, school may be regarded as the learners' immediate environment where victimization may occur. What happened to Zoe, Thuthu and Owami may change their attitude towards other learners, social media, and the school. Furthermore, other learners who are active on social media with pure intentions may get to be influence or find themselves being bullied on these social media platforms. Data generated during narrative interviews indicated that social media platforms in rural areas were not only used for learning, but also for shaming other learners.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Communication and social networking

As the world is changing to meet that demands of the fifty industrial revolution, the increase in learners who own smartphones becomes more evident. There are different social media platforms that rural school learners engage with such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and many more. Rural school learners go as far as using their cell phones at school during teaching-learning hours. The following expresses participants' views:

4.4.2.1 Facebook

Manxi: In the year 2023, someone I do not know posted personal posts about girls, mentioning things they have done over the weekend. This included whom they slept with and mentioned that their boyfriends were on HIV medication.

Owami: There was a Facebook page called 'Imvana' that was created in my school. Learners were being discriminated against there and shamed. Every learner at school spoke of this page and its comments.

Participants highlighted that their rural school Facebook platform is used inappropriately to shame and discriminate against other learners as a form of bullying. Similarly, Zola (2021) and Wang et al (2019) maintain that learners on Facebook have very little respect for their peers as they post hurtful comments about their classmates.

4.4.2.2 WhatsApp

Thabo: *My videos and images were posted on WhatsApp, and I did not know how they got there since I slept during the time when our English teacher was busy teaching.*

Lamentably, rural school learners are active on WhatsApp even during teaching and learning sessions. This makes social media bullying to continue unabated in rural schools. According to Switch (2021), bullies on WhatsApp provoke innocent people to retaliate – and thus the vicious cycle of cyberbullying continues.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Social status and power dynamics

Jealousy is said to be a cause contributing to social media bullying in rural schools. When learners are bored they will do anything without considering the consequences of their actions. Nelson et al. (2019) indicate that peer pressure may ignite acts of social media bullying. From the data generated it was revealed that there are certain factors that lead to social media bullying. Bronfenbrenner (1980) indicated that peer pressure has a great influence on child-behaviour, which in this scenario was learners within the classroom who posted derogatory comments about their classmates. The following responses bear testimony to these acts:

4.4.3.1 Jealousy

Owami: *I believe whosoever posted comments about me on social media were pushed by jealousy, as this happened after mathematics marks were out. And I had had scored good marks.*

Manxi: *Jealousy is a pandemic. Jealousy towards other learners is a norm in my school. Learners turn to talk badly about learners who are doing well when it comes to their schoolwork. They even speak it out aloud that they want to humiliate others so that they will see if they were still going to do well and b praised by the teacher. This is all in the name of having more likes on comments in their social media page.*

Thuthu: *Others are pushed by jealousy when comparing themselves to the intelligent ones in the class. Therefore, they consider Facebook and WhatsApp as places to humiliate other learners.*

From the participants responses it appears that social media bullying may be associated with being jealousy of another person. This may result in badmouthing them or writing incorrect information in the name of jealous.

4.4.3.2 Lack of social media education

Thuthu: *Most of the learners don't understand the usage of social media ... not understanding what the dangers of social media are.*

Learners may need to be educated about social media bullying and how to use social media platforms without hurting other people.

4.4.3.3 Boredom

Manxi: *During break-time some learners get bored, some do not have friends. This is worse during sports day, especially those who are not participating in any sports code.*

The above evidence proves that boredom is an influential factor that contributes to social media bullying in rural schools.

4.4.4 Theme 4: The Academic, Mental, and Physical Wellbeing

Participants mentioned that they were traumatised by bullying on social media platforms such that they suffered from different mental effects. Some had thoughts of dropping out from school, insomnia, and drug abuse since they could not handle what had happened to them. Woden (2021) reiterates that social media bullying occurring in rural schools may lead to a high dropout rate. It may also instigate violence among learners at school. Therefore, this calls for rural school educators to be vigilant to eradicate this scourge.

4.4.4.1 Sleeping problem

Owami: *I remember after the incident of social media bullying, I had nightmares. I could not enjoy my eight hours of sleep.*

Thuthu: *There were times when I would think about it in the middle of the night.*

4.4.4.2 Attempting to use drugs

Owami: *The whole incident destroyed me. I was tempted to take drugs, but my loyal friend warned me telling me to take things easy.*

4.4.4.3 Poor school performance

Zoe: *My term two was a mess as I got low marks in my subjects.*

Thuthu: *My grades dropped a lot, after I was bullied online. During the examination I would think about the bullying incident and lose focus on what I was supposed to write.*

4.4.4.4 Dropping-out of school

Owami: *There were times when I thought of leaving school as I was the laughingstock of the school.*

Thuthu: *I think it is possible for learners who have been bullied to drop out at school.*

Bronfenbrenner (1980) suggested that the chronosystem deals with change that happens over a period. By reflecting on what participants Owami and Zoe mentioned in terms of the negative effects social media bullying imposed on their lives, it may be concluded that victims are likely to experience changes in their sleep patterns, thoughts, and desire to attend school.

4.4.5 Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Participants used different coping mechanisms after they experienced social media bullying. Coping can be influenced by the environment in which the incident occurred (Grothaus, 2024). After one has been bullied, one is likely to experience maladaptive coping strategies (Wojcik et al., 2021). Therefore, bullied learners may perceive themselves as being unpopular, unsafe, paranoid, and unhappy about schooling (Wojcik & Flack, 2019). They may also resort to unsavoury practices (e.g addiction to prescription pills) to cope with the trauma which may physically and/or mentally (Sun et al., 2019).

4.4.5.1 Substance abuse

Substance abuse may be the result of social media bullying.

Zoe: *I would steal my mother's cigarettes just to distract me from the thought of being bullied on social platforms. And that's how I ended up addicted to cigarettes. I used to sleep with pain killer and Benylin as I could not sleep on my own, after my picture was posted on Facebook using my face. I thought I was going to make it in life.*

4.4.5.2 Talking to someone

Tuthu: *I had sessions with the schoolteacher who was then a lay counsellor who created a safe space for me to vent out all my frustrations that I had. I must say that assisted me a lot in terms of finding myself again. The teachers talked to me regarding my experience and were checking up on me even when I was at home. Talking to my Life Orientation teacher made me to move forward.*

4.4.6 Theme 6: Education and Support

The scourge of online bullying among school learners can be addressed in collaboration with parents, the school, and health officials. Participants stressed that educators should make learners feel free to talk about their online platform experiences. Also, the Department of Health officials should be invited to address bullying issues regularly at school. The following extracts offer some strategies:

4.4.6.1 Education and awareness

Owami: *I do not see if there might be any strategy that can stop bullying taking place online; however, if educators start conversations around bullying with their learners, maybe it could help. Sometimes when something is repeated, it helps.*

Manxi: *I suggest that a talk with learners who are victims and bullies may assist in mitigating social media bullying. I swear that God will deal with those who are hurting others on social media platforms. School must not allow learners to bring cellphones at school.*

4.4.6.2 Learner-support

Thuthu: *There is a great need to help learners since they may be aware of social media bullying occurring in school premises. Teachers can organise campaigns that discourage the act of social media bullying. Also, learners should be educated about social media abuse.*

Thabo: *Educators may teach learners about social media bullying and its effects on learners academic and general wellbeing since rural school learners may lack information on bullying that occurs on social media. Inviting social workers to have one-on-one counselling sessions with victims and bullies may help.*

The significance of teaching all learners at school about this type of bullying emerged during the narrative interviews. According to Mkhize and Gopal (2021), programmes that encourage learners to avoid bullying are effective. Affording learners platforms (e.g. speeches and debates) to voice their thoughts on a social media bullying may decrease the rate of this phenomenon. Also, participants emphasised that educators should teach learners about safe ways of interacting on social media (UNICEF, 2021). The following excerpts demonstrate the need for professional assistance to deal with this issue:

Owami: *The school may ask psychiatrists to come and address learners on issues of bullying, among others. Learners doing this sometimes are pushed by the stress. This is normally done by learners who may have problems at home. I think they should see the psychiatrist or social worker, since we as learners have limited coping strategies.*

Zoe: *We need people who can talk to us. I think psychiatrists and social workers may deal with our mindset and give us more information on how to behave online. I feel it should be a norm that schools in rural areas are visited now and again by professionals.*

Zoe and Owami appeal for professional help from doctors and the Social Services Department. This means each rural school or cluster should have its own psychologist, Psychiatrist or counsellor. According to WHO (2023), there are fewer than ten experts who are dealing with all rural schools. The following responses refer to restrictions to be imposed on learners' usage of the internet:

4.4.6.3 Restrictions

Thuthu: *Our school may have to educate parents on how to restrict their children from using social media platforms, especially WhatsApp. This may ensure that there is no child that utilises online social platforms while they are young.*

Manxi: *A social media called Facebook must have a way of allowing a certain age group to utilise their services.*

4.4.6.4 Sports

Manxi: *There is a lot that can be done at a school level to fight social media bullying. The DoE may have to start introducing more sports codes to accommodate and occupy all learners. Chess is one of them. This may help because exercising is very important for the mind and body.*

The above evidence shows that having different extra-mural activities at school may assist in curbing this problem of cyberbullying. This may keep all learners busy so that no one has time to harass other learners on social media platforms. Since every learner may be pre-occupied in a chosen sports code, energy will be expended in the right direction. According to Eigeneschenk (2018), when the general wellbeing of learners is assured, it enables them to indulge in sound social interaction with other learners.

4.5 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

This chapter presented the verbatim narratives of participants selected for the study. Themes emerged from participants' narrative interviews which were categorised according to the type of responses. It was exposed by learner-participants that social media bullying in rural schools is a rampant phenomenon which needs to be remedied expeditiously. To do this, participants shared their experiences and challenges regarding the mitigation of social media bullying at school, home, and District levels. The next chapter (5) provides the findings and recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS, FUTURE RESEARCH, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explored rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying, factors which contributed to it, and its effects on learners. This chapter (5) recaps the objectives and research questions, discusses the findings and their implications, outlines the limitations, and lastly presents a conclusion to the study as a whole. The study's theoretical framework, literature review, research questions, and objectives were all connected to the findings:

5.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The current study is guided by the following research objectives and questions.

- To explore the narratives of rural school learners on social media bullying
- To understand what informs social media bullying in rural schools; and
- To explore how social media bullying can be mitigated in rural school learners

5.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the narratives of rural school learners who have experienced social media bullying?
- What is informing social media bullying in rural schools?
- How can social media bullying be mitigated in rural schools?

5.4 FINDINGS

During the analysis of data, six themes emerged from the narrative interviews with learner-participants. Participants' responses clearly indicated that social media bullying was rife in rural schools which had devastating effects on learners, physically and psychologically. The two social media platforms learners mostly utilise are Facebook and WhatsApp which allow unrestricted freedom to post and receive messages. In line with the research aim and objectives, participants suggested strategies (below) to deal with social media bullying.

5.4.1 Narratives of Learners from the Rural School

Participants reported that online bullying occurs in various forms. They mentioned impersonating, flaming, trolling, and dissing. Farhangpour et al. (2019) indicate that social media bullying may also occur in the form of sexual harassment. Problems associated with social media bullying were affirmed by participants who mentioned that other learners bully them on Facebook by mocking them through posting embarrassing comments. This disturbed learners' mental health and might directly or indirectly cause physical ailments. According to Zola (2021), suicidal attempts may occur when a learner is experiencing extreme social media bullying. Participants had thoughts of dropping out of school to avoid experiencing social media bullying (Elana, 2023). Although Facebook was mentioned as the most used online platform for rural school learners to indulge in cyberbullying, TikTok was the worst platform regarding the ease-of-access to indulge in social media bullying (Times, 2019). From the current study no Tik Tok usage was used to bully other learners online.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that trolling, flame-throwing, dissing, and impersonating were common forms of social media bullying. This calls for conversations and lessons on social media bullying in rural schools. This kind of bullying, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), falls under the exosystem level as it concerns mass media. It was clearly evident that learners meet on social media platforms to misbehave (Zola, 2021; Wang et al., 2020).

5.4.2 Causes of Bullying on Social Media Platforms

This current study revealed that there were certain elements contributing to online bullying. Learners may bully one another in the classroom because of boredom or lack of information on social media which may spread to the majority in the classroom. Sabramani (2021) states that when one is bored and lonely, one is likely to be tempted to resort to misbehavior on social media platforms. Moreover, social media bullying is perpetrated by people who are jealous of others (Aura et al., 2024). The issue of jealousy was also prominent in social media bullying amongst rural school where the study was conducted. Educators in schools should sit down to converse with their learners to hear from them what can be done to reduce bullying on social platforms. To deal with social media bullying in rural schools, there should be records kept of perpetrators and victims so that counselling can be provided to such learners. Also, school policies should be modified to include restrictions and penalties for those who are offenders.

5.4.3 Mitigating Social Media Bullying in Rural Schools

An education programme on social media could be beneficial in mitigating social media bullying in rural schools. According to Azagba et al (2020), learners need to be educated on acceptable behaviour when they are engaging with online applications. Since the school is authorised to shape learners' behaviour (falls under microsystem), educators should teach learners, and learners should teach each other as a strategy to mitigate bullying that occurs online.

Findings revealed that awareness campaigns at schools (and in public places) on social media bullying may assist in reducing cases of social media bullying. A school may run a poster campaign where learners may paint and design slogans to discourage social media bullying. Colleens (2004) maintains that when learners are taught virtual manners and moral habits, they can assist in creating a school environment that is free from social media bullying. The DoE can train educators to become experts in this area of social media bullying. Two participants suggested that there should be an ongoing conversation on social media bullying to quell this antisocial habit. Counselling conducted by professionals should be provided to the victims and perpetrators of social media bullying. Moreover, peer counselling and assistance must be encouraged so that learners assist each other when they experience social media bullying. Literature indicates that mental health services are always key in dealing with cases where a learner has been bullied on the social media platform (Teriba & Dawson, 2022). Additionally, professionals like psychiatrists and psychologists play a big role in implementing intervention strategies to eradicate incidents of online bullying (Swank et al., 2019). Schools located in rural areas may not possibly have a psychologist on site because of difficulty in attracting and retaining professionals in remote areas.

Furthermore, the effective collaboration of stakeholders may positively influence in mitigating this phenomenon of social media bullying. Age restriction on the use of social media platforms was raised by participants to reduce bullying each other online. Lastly, an increase in sporting codes to include all learners may be useful in curbing incidents of social media bullying.

In sum, and in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's (1980) notion of the macrosystem, this phenomenon of social media bullying relates to the values of the community which instils beliefs and actions in young learners which may influence how people behave when they are accessing online platforms. An inclusive community must be created through sound societal values to

promote the spirit of humanity which means treating others as you would love to be treated, as opposed to dysfunctional behaviour like cyberbullying.

5.6 IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the phenomenon at one rural school where there were common incidents of social media bullying. The study's results provide a clear picture on how and why social media bullying is occurring in rural schools. The current study will be beneficial to learners who are victims and bullies, educators, and DoE officials who should become aware of the damage that such dysfunctional behaviour inflicts. Findings imply that current policies are not effective and that new ones (or revised ones) should be structured and implemented expeditiously to curb further abuse. Lastly, research emphasises the significance of dealing with the root causes (e.g. no age restriction, parental apathy, and jealousy) of social media bullying.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS EMANATING FROM THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study's findings indicate that learners' performance at school can be affected negatively when there is social media bullying prevalent in their lives. Furthermore, the effects are not just temporary as they may impinge on learners' lives in the future for example, learners may struggle to trust others. Participants advocated that a strong support system be initiated by the DoE to monitor cyberbullying in schools such that professional help may become embedded as part of everyday service in schools to promote environments that are free from social media bullying. The following are recommendations that were suggested:

- Social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp should introduce controls to curb cyberbullying.
- Workshops on social media bullying and use of social media platforms should be held monthly at schools, depending on the rate of social media bullying at school. These workshops will assist bullies and victims of social media bullying to understand how social media bullying adversely affects many people's lives.
- Since the causes of social media bullying are jealousy, boredom, and lack of knowledge, counsellors at school should teach learners morals and ethics to mitigate this scourge.
- Each rural school should develop its own programmes that assist in eradicating social media bullying.

- Rural schools should increase the number of sports codes and train all teachers in indoor and outdoor sports to reach all learners so that learners engage in activities that keep them away from unsavoury behaviour.
- Schools' learner code of conduct should include penalties for those indulging in cyberbullying.
- Parents may buy cell phones for learners but social media apps should be disabled or monitored.

5.8 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Firstly, when a similar study is conducted, data must be generated from various schools from rural areas. A small sample, such as the one selected in this study, may limit generalisation.

Secondly, researchers in future, may explore security measures to curb social media bullying at all schools in the District? Lastly, future studies could explore how the DOE supports schools in preventing cyberbullying at all schools in the province?

5.9 CONCLUSION TO THE STUDY

This study explored the experiences of rural school learners regarding social media bullying. From the data generated, it was clear that rural school learners experience different types of social media bullying which affects them physically and/or psychologically. The findings emphasised that interventions be implemented expeditiously to curb this scourge before it becomes a national problem that spirals out of control. There was a great need for this study as it will conscientise all stakeholders to collaborate and analyse this issue of social media bullying lest it becomes a pandemic that hinders progress in all-round education.

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7 APPENDICES

Appendix 1 DBE approval letter



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1051

Email: Buyi.ntuli@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Mrs B.T. Ntuli

Ref.:2/4/8/7533

Mr Sphelele Ncebo Myeni

██████████
TONGAAT
4399

Dear Mr Myeni

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: "RURAL SCHOOL LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA BULLYING: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY.", in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 20th July 2023 to 31st December 2025.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

██████████
Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 20th July 2023

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix 2 Ethical clearance approval letter



24 October 2023

Sphelele Ncebo Myeni (221108226)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear SN Myeni,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00005969/2023

Project title: Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying: a narrative inquiry

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 21 October 2023 to our letter of 03 October 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**

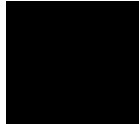
Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid for one year until 24 October 2024

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully



.....
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Appendix 3-Request letter to conduct a site
Letter for permission to the Principal

Dear :Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESARCH IN YOUR SCHOOL

I am a master's student at the university of KwaZulu-Natal, currently doing my research under supervision of prof Hlalele a senior lecture in the faculty of education, department of educationa psychology. My research is investigating rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying.

The aim this study sought to explore rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying through narratives and explore how social media bullying can be mitigated in rural school learners.

I am therefore asking for your permission to allow me to conduct research in your school, which will involve 4 learners. There will be narratives interviews that will take up to 30 minutes with the participants at the agreed location and convenient time.

Their participation will be voluntary, and they may withdraw at any point without consequences. All information provided by participants will be treated confidential and anonymous. Also, with your permission i will like to use a recorder to capture participants narratives. Kindly feel free to contact me and my supervisor using details below.

Yours sincerely

Date: 15 June 2023

Researcher: S.N Myeni

Tel : [REDACTED]

Email : [REDACTED]

Supervisor : Prof Hlalele

Tel : 031 260 3858

Email : hlaleled@ukzn.ac.za

Appendix 4 Approval letter from a research site

Att: S.N MYENI

[REDACTED]

TONGAAT

4399

RE: PERMISSSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I, [REDACTED] grants permission to Sphelele N Myeni to conduct research titled: "*Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying*" at Njubanjuba Secondary School.

This also serve as an assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Department of Basic Education and the institution will ensure that these requirements are adhered to during the process of conducting research.

We hope that your research will contribute positively to the knowledge and attitudes of teachers as well as learners.

Thank you.

[REDACTED]

Appendix 5 Request for parents permission

COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:6 august 2023

Dear Parent

My name is Sphelele N Myeni student number (221108226) a master's student in Educational Psychology at University of Kwazulu-Natal Department, Edgewood campus.

You are humbly invited to allow your child to participate in a study titled "Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying: a narrative inquiry. The aim and purpose of this research is to understand the rural learners' narratives of social media bullying and what shapes the narratives of rural school learners when it comes to social media bullying. The study is expected to enroll 4 participants from rural school called Njubanjuba secondary. It will involve the following procedure, the duration of your participation if you choose to enroll will be three sessions that will take 15-30 minutes each session, participants will share their narratives and they will be recorded. The study is not funded by anyone.

I request that you allow your child to participate in sharing their narratives of rural school social media bullying. Their narratives will contribute to a great value in this research project.

The information and responses which will be gained during the process will be guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and all results will be made available in an anonymous manner to protect your child's identity. The data collected will be kept in a secure place and destroyed after a period of five years. There is a psychiatrist which will provide counselling to the participants before and after the participation. Your participation is purely voluntary and that you may withdraw from at any point.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact my supervisor. Please complete the consent form attached should you be happy to allow your child to participate in the study.

Professor D Hlalele

Tel no: 031 260 3858

Email:HlaleleD@ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact the research office using the following details:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Appendix 6 Parents consent form

Consent for parents

I _____ (Name) have been informed about the study entitled (provide details) by (provide name of researcher/fieldworker).

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study (add these again if appropriate).

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if an injury occurs to me because of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at (provide details).

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Video-record my interview / focus group discussion YES / NO

Use of my photographs for research purposes YES / NO

Signature of Parent

Date

Signature of witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

Appendix 7 Participants consent form

Participants Consent form.

DECLARATION

(To be completed a learner)

I have been informed about the study about the study entitled: Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying. I here understand the purpose and procedures of the study and I consent to participate in study.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually entitled to.

I have been informed about any available medical treatment if any injury occurs to me because of this study related procedures.

If I have any further questions/ concerns of quires related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at () or call . There is a psychiatrist (Dr N Khumalo) from Osindisweni Hospital who will provide counselling to the participants before and after the participation. He is a qualified (Child and Adolescence Mental health Nurse specialist) Practice no: 149 179 26 and reachable to this phone number 032 541 9242.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researcher then I may contact Professor D Hlalele.

Tel no: 031 260 3858

Email:HlaleleD@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I here provide consent to:

Audio -record my interview YES/NO

Signature of participants Date

Ifomu lemvume yaba hlanganyeli

(Igcwaliswa umfundi)

Mina _____ ngazisiwe ngo cwangingo olumayelana nabafundi besikole sasemakhaya abahlangabezana nakuxhashazwa ezinkudleni zokuxhumana. Ngiya qonda inhloso nenqubo yalolu cwangingo futhi ngiyanikezela imvume yokubamba iqhaza kulolu cwangingo.

Ngiya misa ukuthi ukubamba iqhaza kwami kulolu cwangingo kungokuzithandela futhi nginga hoxa noma inini ngaphandle kokuthinta noma yiziphi zizinzuzo engivame ukuba nelungelo lokuzithola. Ngazisiwe ngosizo engingaluthola kudokodela we nqonqo uma kwenzeka ngihlangabezana nenkinga emqondweni ngenxa yalolucwangingo.

Uma nginemibuzo noma ngifisa ukwazi kabanzi ngalolu cwaningo, ngiyaqonda ukuthi ngingathintana nomcwaningi kule imeyili- [REDACTED] noma nginga fonela inombolo [REDACTED]. U Dokotela wezenqondo u M Khumalo osebenzela esibhedlela Osindisweni uzohlinzeka ngokweluka ngaphambili nangemuva koku bamba iqhaza kulolucwaningo. Ungumhlengikazi we nqondo oqeqeshiwe kwezabantwana nabasebasha. Inombolo yakhe yokusenza 149 179 26 futhi uyatholakal kule nombolo engu 032 541 9242.

Nganoma imiphi imibuzo nezinkathazo mayelana namalungelo ngengomhlangayeli walolu cwaningo ngingathintana no Solwazi D Hlalele kule neminingwane elandelayo.

Tel no: 031 260 3858

Email: HlaleleD@ukzn.ac.za

Imvume eyengeziwe, lapho kufanele

Nginikeza imvume yoku:

Irekhodi lokulalelwayo YEBO/CHA

Isiginesha yombambi qhaza Usuku

Appendix 8 Narrative interviews questions and schedule

Narrative interviews schedule

Title: Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying: a narrative inquiry

First session

- Briefly tell me more about your background, how old you are, where you grew up, your family structure, what you would like to do after matric, what do you like about school? Please tell me anything about yourself.
- Kindly share experiences of social media bullying that happened/happening in your school setting. You can share as many incidents as possible.
- Here are news reports about social media bullying. Kindly share what you think about it.

Learner is recovering from overdose after humiliating picture posted on Facebook (Times live, 2021).

Second session

1. Can you describe more details on your experience of social media bullying? How did it begin and how did it affect you?
2. How did you feel when you were bullied on social media? Can you explain your emotion?
3. What were some ways social media bullying that were affected your schoolwork and emotions? Give more details.
4. Elaborate more on what you think informs social media bullying in rural school learners? Use your own experience of social media bullying.

Third session

5. Did you acquire any help and support when you were facing social media bullying? Explain how others responded and provided some help?
6. Have you witnessed any educators or parents solving the case of social media bullying in rural schools? How effective do you think those interventions have been to give more details?

7. How do you think social media bullying affects the school setting? What were those effects and how they affected the school?

8. Are there any initiatives that you believe can be helpful in mitigating social media bullying in rural school learners? What kind of support would you like to see being implemented?

9. Can you share your personal advice for mitigating social media bullying in the rural school setting? Explain how it can be put into action.

10. What measures do you think the Department of Education can put in place to mitigate social media bullying in schools? Suggest & explain how they can assist learners to do away with social media bullying?

Appendix 9 Language Editor's certificate

Brian Naidoo (BA Hons. in English; BA Hons in TESOL; BEd Hons.
BA- English major; UDE [English]; UCT Cert. in Legal &
Business Writing; UCT Cert. in Copy-Editing; MA Coursework in Research
UFS. Assessor Cert. UFS; Umalusi Evaluator of Schools.

**SPECIALISING IN THE LANGUAGE EDITING OF THESES, DISSERTATIONS,
JOURNAL ARTICLES, PROPOSALS, BOOKS, POLICIES AND PUBLICATIONS**

**CERTIFICATE FOR EDITING A DRAFT MASTER'S DISSERTATION IN
EDUCATION**

**TOPIC: Rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying: a narrative
inquiry**

Sphelele Ncebo Myeni

MASTER'S IN EDUCATION

UKZN

B. Naidoo

ID [REDACTED]

15/07/2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This certificate confirms that the above-mentioned student submitted his draft master's dissertation to me for language editing, which included correcting in-text citations and the list of references. This was duly edited and returned to the student for revisions as per suggestions from me. I make no claim as to the accuracy of the research content. The text, as edited by me, is grammatically correct. After completion of the language editing, the student has the option to accept or reject suggestions/changes prior to re-submission to the supervisor. The editor is not accountable for any additional content and changes that may have been executed post-editing.



Brian Naidoo
Associate Member

Membership number: NAI001
Membership year: March 2024 to February 2025



www.editors.org.za

Appendix 10 Turn it in report

<h3>Turnitin Originality Report</h3> <p>Processed on: 22-Jun-2024 12:32 PM CAT ID: 2406673448 Word Count: 18479 Submitted: 1</p> <p>MY CLEAN WORK 21 JUNE 2024.docx By Sphelele Myeni</p>		<p>Similarity Index</p> <p>14%</p>	<p>Similarity by Source</p> <p>Internet Sources: 1% Publications: 0% Student Papers: 14%</p>
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13% match (student papers from 07-Jun-2024)
[Submitted to CTI Education Group on 2024-06-07](#)

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< 1% match (Julie Perry, Sherah K. Devore, Caroline Pellegrino, Arleigh J. Salce. "Social Media Usage and Its Effects on the Psychological Health of Adolescents", NASN School Nurse, 2023)
[Julie Perry, Sherah K. Devore, Caroline Pellegrino, Arleigh J. Salce. "Social Media Usage and Its Effects on the Psychological Health of Adolescents", NASN School Nurse, 2023](#)

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< 1% match (student papers from 27-Jan-2021)
[Submitted to Wawasan Open University on 2021-01-27](#)

< 1% match ()
[De Silva, Chamellé René. "The achievement of grade 3 learners' higher order reading skills on a children's literature-based reading programme", Cape Peninsula University of Technology, 2010](#)

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[Submitted to University of Salford on 2021-10-17](#)

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<https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/a462205e-6093-4c76-b53a-1fae7e72ada2/content>

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<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/voices-field/which-method-address-cyberbullying-does-your-school-district-use-most>

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[Submitted to University of Witwatersrand on 2022-10-10](#)

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<https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/28812/Complete.pdf?sequence=10>

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< 1% match (Internet from 12-Jan-2023)
http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S1560-683X2019000100007&script=sci_arttext

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND 1.1 IN TRODUCTION The current study explores the rural school learners' experiences of social media bullying