



Exploring the Lived Experiences and Social Implications of Cyberbullying among Young Adults in the Mkhuhlu Community, Mpumalanga Province.

**by
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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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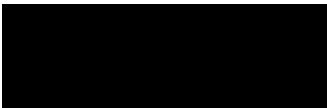
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the implications of cyberbullying on young adults in the Mkhuhlu community of Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. While cyberbullying has become a global concern, rural communities remain underrepresented in research, particularly in understanding how young people experience and respond to its effects. Drawing on Symbolic Interaction Theory, the study examines how cyberbullying influence's identity, academic experiences, and social relationships. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged 18 to 20 who had firsthand experiences of cyberbullying. The findings indicate that participants experienced a range of emotional responses, including feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, and frustration. Some participants reported withdrawing from social interactions as a coping strategy, while others described changes in how they engaged with peers and online spaces. The study also found that cyberbullying was associated with challenges in academic engagement, such as difficulty concentrating and reduced participation, although these experiences varied across participants. In terms of support, most participants described family as a source of support, while a few indicated limited support or hesitation in seeking help due to fear of stigma. Overall, the study highlights the varied ways in which cyberbullying is experienced in a rural context. It contributes to the growing body of research on cyberbullying in under-resourced communities and provides insights for developing contextually relevant support strategies.

Key words: Cyberbullying; Young adults; Identity disruption; Academic performance; Social relationships and Symbolic Interaction Theory

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

1.1 Introduction

Technological advancements have transformed how people interact and access information, particularly through social media and digital communication platforms. While these tools offer many benefits, they have also facilitated new forms of harm, notably cyberbullying, which has become a global concern (Ahmed, Ahmad, Ahmad and Zakaria, 2019, p. 73). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying occurs in virtual spaces such as messaging apps and social media, allowing perpetrators to remain anonymous and persist in their actions beyond physical boundaries (Li et al., 2024, p. 2896). The constant connectivity and lack of immediate accountability on these platforms amplify the emotional impact on victims and make it difficult for them to disengage from abuse. Although much of the literature related to this phenomenon originates from Western contexts, the insights that are elucidated remain transferable to South Africa, where digital media usage among the youth is similarly high and under-regulated (Masiphephe Network Implementing Partners [MNIP], 2023, p. 2).

In recent years, young adults' internet participation has surged. For instance, global social media usage rose from approximately 49% in 2020 to over 60% by 2023 (Statista, 2023). While increased screen time and reduced supervision are often linked to rising cyberbullying rates (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021; Throuvala et al., 2021, p. 2), this relationship is more correlative than causal. The accessibility of digital platforms creates opportunities for harmful behaviours, but deeper social, emotional, and psychological factors often drive cyberbullying itself. For instance, power dynamics, peer pressure, and unresolved trauma may be key motivators masked by the convenience of anonymity online. Although research on Western youth dominates the field, evidence suggests that African youth may experience cyberbullying differently due to variations in digital literacy, cultural norms, and access to support systems (Mabaso, 2020; Radebe and Kyobe, 2021). Shin and Choi (2021, p. 4) highlight how social media is often used by young adults for self-expression and connection, yet this same reliance also exposes them to cyber aggression. Thus, social media is not merely a cause, but a tool through which deeper social issues are enacted in the digital space.

Slonje, Smith, and Friséen (2013, p. 29) define cyberbullying as an aggressive act carried out through electronic means repeatedly over time. Li (2010, p. 373) identifies various forms of

cyberbullying, including flaming, harassment, cyberstalking, exclusion, outing, and deceit. Research indicates that victims of cyberbullying often experience significant social consequences, such as damage to their social identity, exclusion from peer groups, and disruption of their roles within educational and community settings. Gordon (2016) further notes that victims may develop altered self-concepts and disrupted social interactions, which can result in marginalization and social isolation. These experiences frequently lead to withdrawal, a diminished sense of belonging, and disengagement from educational environments.

Cyberbullying is a growing problem in South Africa, particularly among school-aged children and young people. According to MNIP (2023, p. 2), this is a global issue that South Africa shares. An Ipsos (2018) poll found that 51% of South African youth had experienced cyberbullying, exceeding the global average of 37%. Woudstra et al. (2018, p. 5) further highlight that cyberbullying has become a serious concern in South African schools, affecting both students and teachers. Instances of online harassment, including public humiliation and impersonation, contribute to broader patterns of school-based violence and social harm.

South Africa's legal and institutional responses to cyberbullying remain inadequate. Reyneke and Jacobs (2018, p. 71) point out that although the Children's Act 38 of 2005 acknowledges bullying, it does not clearly define it, leading to inconsistencies in implementation. Similarly, the Protection from Harassment Act No. 17 of 2011 primarily addresses adult cases and may not fully apply to school-based cyberbullying. While the Cybercrimes Act No. 19 of 2021 represents progress by criminalizing certain online offences, its implementation remains challenging due to the anonymity afforded by digital platforms.

Furthermore, many victims do not report cyberbullying incidents due to fear of retaliation, lack of support, or uncertainty about reporting procedures (Radebe and Kyobe, 2021; Medina et al., 2020; Kowalski et al., 2019). Teachers may also hesitate to report such cases due to concerns about professional image or classroom control. As a result, cyberbullying often goes unnoticed, leaving victims to suffer emotional distress, low self-esteem, and declining academic performance. Sociocultural factors further complicate the issue. Swart and Bredekamp (2009) argue that social norms and cultural expectations can discourage open discussions about bullying, thereby silencing victims. Studies conducted in Spain (Cabrera et

al., 2024) and Nigeria (Owoade et al., 2023) similarly demonstrate how shame, stigma, and limited awareness prevent individuals from seeking help. These dynamics are particularly relevant in the South African context, where limited digital literacy, stigma, and unequal access to mental health resources may further inhibit reporting and intervention.

1.1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying globally and within South Africa, there remains a significant gap in understanding how young adults in under-researched rural contexts interpret and navigate their experiences of cyberbullying. Existing literature largely reflects Western perspectives and often overlooks the unique sociocultural and structural conditions shaping experiences in communities such as Mkhuhlu. Additionally, current legal frameworks, institutional support systems, and reporting mechanisms are either inadequate or unclear, while factors such as stigma, fear, and limited digital literacy further hinder effective responses. Consequently, victims continue to experience negative impacts on their identity, academic engagement, and social relationships. This highlights the need for context-specific, sociologically grounded research that explores the lived experiences of cyberbullying and informs more effective, culturally relevant interventions.

1.1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it focuses on the rural community of Mkhuhlu, Mpumalanga, a context that is underrepresented in existing cyberbullying research. By examining experiences within this specific setting, the study provides insight into how local social, cultural, and structural conditions shape the ways in which cyberbullying is experienced and understood. From a practical perspective, the findings may assist educators, families, and community stakeholders in developing more contextually relevant awareness and support strategies. By highlighting how young adults navigate cyberbullying in their everyday interactions, the study offers insight that may inform interventions aimed at improving support systems and responses within similar communities. Theoretically, the study contributes to the application of symbolic interactionism in cyberbullying research by demonstrating how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences through social interaction. In doing so, it strengthens the use of this theoretical framework in understanding the social processes underlying cyberbullying.

1.2 Key Research Questions

1. What changes do young adults perceive in themselves as a result of experiencing cyberbullying?
2. What are young adults' perceptions of the effects of cyberbullying on their academic achievements?
3. How do young adults describe and navigate their relationships with their peers, romantic partners, and family members in the face of cyberbullying?

1.3 Objectives

The study's objectives were to:

- 1) Explore the changes young adults perceive in themselves as a result of experiencing cyberbullying;
- 2) Investigate young adults' perceptions of how cyberbullying affects their academic achievements; and to
- 3) Examine how young adults describe and navigate their relationships with peers, romantic partners, and family in the face of cyberbullying.

1.4 Research Methodology

This study employed an in-depth qualitative research methodology to explore the impact of cyberbullying on young adults living in the Mkhuhlu community in Mpumalanga. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews involving 20 participants aged 18 to 20 who had first-hand experience of cyberbullying. The participants were selected using criterion sampling, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

1.5 Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter One: Introduction and Research Framework

This chapter provides an overview of cyberbullying and outlines the research problem.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter presents an in-depth review of existing empirical literature on cyberbullying.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation that was employed assisted the researcher to focus on the symbolic interaction theory and its significance in understanding cyberbullying.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

The fourth chapter outlines the research methodology and design that were employed in executing this study.

Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the data and the study findings that were generated by means of detailed thematic analysis.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter the key findings are summarized. The results emanating from the data are interpreted and their implications are discussed.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Communities worldwide have been impacted by the rapid advancement of digital technology in recent years, and this impact has been both positive and negative (Alotaibi, 2019, p. 2). One of the most severe negative impacts of technology is cyberbullying, which has been found to affect numerous young adults in a profound manner (Alotaibi, 2019, p. 2). The issues related to cyberbullying have escalated in communities across the world; hence, the literature review explored how people's perceptions and academic achievements have been impacted by cyberbullying. The outcomes of this review will provide readers with a thorough understanding of the extent and complexity of the problems associated with cyberbullying.

Given South Africa's rapid expansion of internet connectivity, especially in rural and semi-rural areas, research into cyberbullying in rural communities such as Mkhuhlu was deemed critical. By 2023, approximately 44 million South Africans had internet access, which was a significant increase from about 25 million people who had access in 2013. Notably, 78.7% of the population accessed the internet via mobile phones in 2022, and it is estimated that this figure will have exceeded 90% by 2027 (Statista, 2024). This increasing connectivity has extended into rural regions, where more and more young people are now engaging with others on digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram. While these platforms offer valuable educational and social opportunities, they also increase young people's exposure to online risks, with cyberbullying being one of the most prominent. Kehily (2009, p. 2), one's identity is one's sense of self, and this is developed through interactions with others and influenced by social groups and roles. Fearon (1999, p. 4) explains that identity formation involves incorporating values, beliefs, and goals into one's identity to develop a cohesive and solid persona.

Strøm, Thoresen, Wentzel-Larsen, and Dyb (2013, p. 246) argue that cyberbullying not only negatively affects students' academic performance, but also carries broader societal

implications, such as increased social isolation and strained peer relationships. Educational achievement often influences future socioeconomic status, and variables that negatively impact academic performance can have long-term effects on an individual's selfhood and a community's sense of well-being (Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless, 2001, p. 44). Cyberbullying has been linked to a decline in academic performance, an increase in school and tertiary dropout rates, and difficulty focusing in class (Smith et al., 2008, p. 382). The social alienation brought on by cyberbullying impairs academic performance as it lowers academic desire and blocks healthy social participation (Smith et al., 2008, p. 382).

2.2 Definitions

2.2.1 Young adults in the South African context

Van Der Byl (2024, p. 3) avers that the South Africa population between the ages of 15 and 24 should be referred to as the youth. This research concentrated on youths, namely young adults aged 18 to 20, as this age range is pivotal in identity formation. Syed and McLean (2017, p. 4) state that, by the age of 24, most individuals typically have solidified their identities, making this age group and older less suitable for this study's focus.

2.2.2 Perception

Perception refers to the process through which individuals interpret sensory information to make sense of their environment (Hendra, 2013, p. 70). It is shaped by past experiences and influences attitudes and behaviour, as individuals develop subjective lenses through which they understand the world (McDonald, 2011, p. 2). These interpretations are not neutral but are informed by sociocultural contexts and prior experiences (McDonald, 2011, p. 4). Rivai (2002) further explains that perception is influenced by both internal factors, such as attitudes and expectations, and external factors, such as environmental cues. As a result, individuals construct meanings differently, leading to varied responses to the same situation. Thus, perception is a subjective process that plays a significant role in shaping behaviour and social interaction.

2.2.3 Social media

Social media is broadly understood as Internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, and engage with content. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define it as applications built on Web 2.0 that facilitate the exchange of user-generated content. Similarly, Kietzmann

et al. (2011, p. 241) describe social media as collaborative spaces where users interact and modify shared content, structured around elements such as identity, relationships, and communication. While these definitions highlight interaction and content creation, Carr and Hayes (2015, p. 50) provide a more comprehensive perspective by emphasising selective self-presentation and audience engagement. This study adopts their definition, as it captures the dynamic and interactive nature of social media, where users actively construct identities and derive value from both content and perceived social interaction.

2.2.4 Traditional bullying

bullying is generally defined as repeated, intentional aggressive behaviour directed at individuals who are less able to defend themselves, often involving a clear power imbalance (Kallman et al., 2021; Sanders, 2004; Smith, 2016). This power imbalance may be physical, social, or psychological, making victims vulnerable to sustained harm (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). Traditional bullying includes physical, verbal, and relational forms. Physical bullying involves acts such as hitting or threatening, while verbal bullying includes name-calling and humiliation (Rigby, 2003, p. 584). Relational bullying is more subtle, involving social exclusion, rumours, and manipulation of relationships (Vanderbilt and Augustyn, 2010, p. 315). Importantly, bullying is not a once-off event but a repeated pattern of behaviour reinforced by power dynamics and social support from peers (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010).

2.2.5 Cyberbullying

The term cyberbullying emerged in the late 1990s to describe the digital extension of traditional bullying (Englander et al., 2017, p. 149). Hinduja and Patchin (2019, p. 334) define cyberbullying as “the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices”. This modern form of bullying involves the use of digital communication tools such as social media, messaging apps, and websites to harass, threaten, and/or humiliate others (Feinberg and Robey, 2009, p. 26). The shift to digital spaces has made bullying more pervasive, as harmful content can be shared instantly, anonymously, and repeatedly. Sanders (2004, p. 4) emphasises that clear and consistent definitions of cyberbullying are essential to inform research, guide victim support, develop legal responses, and implement effective prevention strategies. Flaming, harassment, defamation, impersonation, outing or deception, and exclusion are some forms of cyberbullying (see Table 1).

Table 1: Types of cyberbullying

Forms of Cyberbullying	Definitions
Flaming	Sending irate, unpleasant, obscene, or playful texts with the goal of upsetting and inflaming the victim's feelings and sensibilities is known as 'flaming' (Hinduja and Patchin, 2012, p. 101). These assaults aim to inflict emotional, psychological, and social harm on the victim while showcasing the bully's power.
Harassment	Feinberg and Robey (2009, p.15) explain that harassment, a form of cyberbullying, involves sending repeated messages intended to upset the recipient. It is considered cyberbullying due to its persistent nature and the frequent use of offensive language.
Impersonation	El Asam and Samara (2016, p. 128) state that impersonation is another type of cyberbullying in which the perpetrator assumes a false identity and interacts with others while pretending to be the victim. This can lead to the spread of false information, damage to the victim's reputation, and emotional distress. The anonymity and accessibility of the internet make it easy for individuals to impersonate others, particularly when they use social networking platforms like Facebook.
Outing or deception	El Asam and Samara (2016, p. 129) define 'outing' as a type of cyberbullying in which someone uses electronic means to divulge private or humiliating information about another person without that person's consent, while deception occurs when someone shares such information with someone else and then discovers that it has been shared with others without that person's consent.

Exclusion	According to Urbanski and Permuth (2009, p. 69), ostracism and exclusion are two types of cyberbullying that focus on purposefully keeping someone out of online communities, such as chat rooms, games, messaging apps, or social media groups.
Defamation	Feinberg and Robey (2009) state that defamation occurs when someone's reputation is damaged, or their friendships are destroyed by posting or sharing online information about them that consists of cruel gossip, hurtful lies, or rumours. Such actions can be executed by fabricating blogs, websites, or online profiles. El Asam and Samara, 2016, p. 129) agree with this view.

In brief, the definitions of cyberbullying collectively agree that it is the *deliberate* and *repetitive* infliction of harm by a perpetrator on a victim using computers, cell phones, and electronic devices. This definition is underpinned by the widely recognised concept of traditional bullying, which involves repeated hostile actions and purposeful harm that are marked by sustained duration and a notable power imbalance. The evolution of bullying into the digital realm, as highlighted by Feinberg and Robey (2019), underscores the need to address and combat this issue that occurs on various online platforms.

2.2.6 Identity and self-concept

A comprehensive understanding of identity requires understanding the interaction between ‘the self’ and society, where the self is influenced not just by societal structures, but also by social roles, relationships, and collective meanings inherent in a specific culture. According to Stets and Burke (2003, p. 1), the self affects society and helps shape it as it is instrumental in creating institutions, organisations, and networks. Reciprocally, society's common language and meanings help shape the self by enabling people to take on various roles, engage in social interactions, and view themselves as objects (Stryker, 1980, p. 383). Because the self evolves from and reflects society, the sociological approach to understanding the self and its components (i.e., identities) requires us to understand the society in which the self is acting. It is also important to remember that the self constantly acts in a social setting where others are present.

2.2.7 Academic performance

Wentzel and Wigfield (1998, p. 157) define academic performance as how well learners do academically at school and the associated activities, they engage in. Learners’ success and well-being are impacted by their confidence in their talents, control over outcomes, motivation, and accomplishment of objectives (Wentzel and Wigfield 1998, p. 158). Competence-related

attitudes, such as ability beliefs and success expectations, are associated with improved performance, while control beliefs, notably internal locus of control, promote more extraordinary accomplishments. However, subjective task values, such as interest and utility, impact learners' desire to participate in academic assignments. Achievement goal orientations, like mastery goals, promote deeper thinking and improve academic achievement. Thus, learners' beliefs, motives, and aspirations significantly impact their academic performance and emotional well-being (Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998, p. 159).

2.3 The Global Impact of Cyberbullying

It is critical to understand cyberbullying due to its widespread occurrence and serious global repercussions. Cyberbullying is universal since it affects people of all ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds. According to foundational studies by Smith et al. (2008, p. 380) and Kowalski et al. (2014, p. 1130), psychological effects like anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts are more important in illustrating the severity of the issue than prevalence data. However, more recent research expands on this understanding by highlighting the fact that cyberbullying should be seen as a wider social and structural issue shaped by digital environments and social inequalities, in addition to being an individual psychological problem (Kowalski et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying has become a worldwide issue due to technological developments, especially the growth of social media and internet connectivity. One in three young people have been the victim of cyberbullying, and one in five have missed school because of online harassment, according to a UNICEF report from 2019 that covered 30 countries. These figures demonstrate the scope of the issue, but they also show how commonplace cyberbullying has become in societies with internet access. According to recent research, platform design elements like anonymity, virality, and continuous connectivity, which facilitate the quick dissemination and durability of harmful content, enhance this normalization (Patchin and Hinduja, 2020; Livingstone and Stoilova, 2021). Therefore, in order to comprehend cyberbullying, one must look critically at how digital technologies enable and maintain victimization in various situations, going beyond prevalence figures (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008, p. 140).

2.3.1 Developed vs developing countries

Cyberbullying has become a widespread global issue, with its prevalence increasing alongside expanding access to digital technologies in both developed and developing countries. While statistical data demonstrate its prevalence, a more critical analysis is necessary to unpack the complexities underlying these figures. For example, Chi, Lan, Ngan, and Linh (2020, p. 4) found that 28.3% of adolescents had witnessed cyberbullying within a three-month period, while 11.6% reported being victims. These findings not only indicate the scale of the issue but also suggest its growing normalisation among young people in digital spaces. However, as recent scholarship argues, such figures must be interpreted cautiously, as increased reporting may reflect heightened awareness and evolving definitions of cyberbullying rather than a straightforward rise in incidents (Modecki et al., 2022).

Furthermore, significant variations exist across regions, raising questions about the influence of socioeconomic and technological inequalities on cyberbullying experiences. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, 13–17% of Argentine youths reported exposure to cyberbullying (Peprah et al., 2023, p. 4). While these findings demonstrate the cross-cultural nature of cyberbullying, they also suggest that increased internet access alone does not fully explain its prevalence. Instead, recent studies highlight the role of cultural norms, digital literacy, and regulatory frameworks in shaping how cyberbullying manifests and is addressed in different contexts (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2022).

Comparable trends have been observed across Africa. Ndiege, Okello, and Wamuyu (2020, p. 39) found that among Kenyan students, the most common forms of cyberbullying included dishonesty (75.8%) and malice (49.7%). While such findings provide valuable insights, they also raise critical questions regarding whether cyberbullying in these contexts reflects existing offline social inequalities or represents a distinct form of digital aggression. Recent African-based research suggests that cyberbullying often mirrors offline power relations, including gender inequalities, socioeconomic disparities, and community dynamics (Mabaso, 2020; Samara et al., 2021). Beyond prevalence, cyberbullying has far-reaching consequences, including anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, and suicidal ideation (Ngo et al., 2021). However, a limitation within existing literature is its strong focus on victims, often neglecting the motivations of perpetrators and the role of bystanders. As Chi (2020, p. 4) notes, perpetrators may be influenced by personal trauma or social pressures, while passive bystanders contribute to the persistence of cyberbullying through inaction. Recent studies

further emphasise that bystander behaviour is shaped by digital group dynamics and fear of social exclusion, particularly on social media platforms (Wachs et al., 2022).

In developed countries, the prevalence of cyberbullying remains equally concerning. According to UNICEF (2017), 54% of young people across 13 US states have experienced cyberbullying on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. While these figures demonstrate the scale of the problem, they also raise concerns about the effectiveness of platform governance and content moderation policies. The psychological consequences are particularly severe, with Kann (2018) linking cyberbullying to increased rates of adolescent suicide in the United States. Data from the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (YRBS, 2017) indicate that 17.2% of adolescents considered suicide, 13.6% made plans, and 7.4% attempted suicide, with victims of cyberbullying being nearly twice as likely to attempt suicide compared to non-victims (Peprah et al., 2023).

Taken together, these findings confirm that cyberbullying is a serious and pervasive global issue with potentially fatal consequences. However, the literature also reveals ongoing debates regarding effective intervention strategies, particularly in light of varying socioeconomic conditions, cultural contexts, and levels of digital regulation. Recent research suggests that addressing cyberbullying requires context-specific approaches that integrate policy, education, and digital platform accountability, rather than relying on universal solutions (Livingstone et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

2.3.2 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cyberbullying behaviour

Barlett, Simmers, Roth, and Gentile (2021, p. 409) state that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced patterns of cyberbullying by reshaping behaviours and trends across different demographics. Studies have revealed that Internet communication has increased as physical connections have declined due to lockdown and social distancing tactics, creating both possibilities and obstacles for cyberbullying among young people. Young people in particular spent a significant portion of their time online during this period, and this increased the risk of them being exposed to cyberbullying (Barlett et al., 2021; Kee, Al-Anesi, and Al-Anesi, 2022; Shin and Choi, 2021). Barlett et al. (2021, p. 413) argue that the pandemic altered the nature of cyberbullying as online aggressiveness increased and perpetrators showed an escalating disregard for boundaries in digital harassment. These findings are supported by Kee, Al-Anesi, and Al-Anesi (2022, p. 14), who link extended screen time and heightened stress to online

confrontations. However, the direction of causality remains uncertain: were students aggressive because of stress, or was cyberbullying itself a stressor. Shin and Choi (2021, p. 7) further highlight how isolation contributed to cyberbullying, yet they do not account for potential moderating factors such as parental supervision or digital literacy. Patchin and Hinduja (2023, p. 86) provide empirical support to demonstrate a notable increase in cyberbullying rates among the youth, particularly among Asian American teens, that escalated from 17 to 23% between 2019 and 2021, respectively. Although this demographic focus raises questions about generalisability, collectively these studies suggest a strong association between the pandemic and increased cyberbullying.

2.3.3 Social media as platforms for communication

Social media platforms have had a revolutionary effect on the way people interact and communicate. Sponcil and Gitimu (2013, p. 3) and Ortiz-Ospina and Roser (2024, p. 12) argue that these platforms enable immediate connections among individuals worldwide rather than merely altering our communication patterns.

2.3.3.1 The evolution of communication through social media

Social media platforms have changed communication by allowing for real-time participation and multimedia exchange. Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) suggest that social networking sites (SNS) are now essential for modern communication because they allow users to create profiles, interact with others, and explore both personal and extended networks. People may use these connections to rapidly exchange their experiences and information, resulting in a dynamic web of interaction. Thompson and Baruah (2012, p. 4) offer the notion of social proprioception, which compares social media to a digital awareness of friends and their activities, therefore expanding one's social reach without direct engagement. In this way, social media have become part of our socio-psychological composition rather than just communication tools (De Rosa, Bocci, Bonito, & Salvati, 2021, p. 1170).

2.3.3.2 The broad impact of social media on communication

Humphreys (2018, p. 14) argues that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have transformed communication by emphasizing constant connection and life-sharing. While these platforms offer social advantages, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) describe them as participatory places in which users consume and generate information. This participative

element promotes affiliation but potentially exposing people to hazardous encounters. Similarly, Kietzmann et al. (2011, p. 242) refer to social media as information ecosystems that democratize content transmission. However, this openness allows for difficulties such as disinformation and destructive trends, in which the viral transmission of content may change public opinion while also amplifying negative material.

2.3.3.3 The integration of social media into our daily lives

The blurring of online and offline boundaries influences how young people manage their relationships. Lenhart et al. (2015, p. 17) demonstrate that social media promotes connection and validation through regular feedback. Humphreys (2018, p. 17) sees it as a space for identity construction, while Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008, p. 1824) observe that users frequently display idealized selves, strengthening pressures to conform and subjecting them to censure or cyberbullying. Reliance on external validation may impair self-esteem and well-being, making social media a tool for expression as well as a cause of identity-related stress, especially among teens.

2.3.3.4 The future of social media communication

Jenkins (2006, p. 20) observes that digital media's convergent culture promotes more immersed communication. According to Papagiannis (2017, p. 20), while VR and AR integration improves engagement, it also raises concerns about digital addiction, online disinhibition, and blurring online-offline boundaries. With social media expected to have 4.41 billion users by 2025 (Statista, 2023, p. 5), its growth raises worries about regulation, digital literacy, and the psychological repercussions of hyperconnectivity. While these platforms provide dynamic opportunities for communication, they also need critical thinking about their societal and ethical implications. Social media has transformed everyday communication by allowing for real-time engagement, user-generated content, and what some term social proprioception. As its influence grows, it will affect how people connect in increasingly sophisticated ways.

2.4 The Evolving Landscape of Cyberbullying

In recent years, bullying has changed significantly, moving from traditional, physically confined confrontations to forms of aggression mediated by the internet. This shift has not only changed how bullying is perceived, comprehended, and dealt with, but it has also spread

outside of classroom settings into ongoing, private, networked virtual areas. Cyberbullying is a reflection of greater technological and social changes that have redefined human interactions, whereas prior kinds of bullying were primarily context-specific. According to recent research, this trend should be viewed as a shift in the character of social damage rather than just a change in medium, with digital environments increasing audience reach, visibility, and persistence (Kowalski et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2021).

2.4.1 Traditional versus cyberbullying

In the past, verbal and physical abuse were the main forms of bullying in schools and other physical settings (Burton, Leoschut, and Phyfer, 2016, p. 12). Although detrimental, these types of bullying were restricted in both space and time, frequently taking place in certain settings like classrooms or schoolyards (Burton et al., 2016, p. 12). Because the house served as a place of protection and recuperation, victims were able to find solace in other settings (Fegenbush and Olivier, 2009, p. 23). This division between areas of danger and protection gave sufferers the chance to heal emotionally. But the advent of digital technologies has completely changed this environment. Cyberbullying can take place via a variety of electronic channels, such as social media sites, emails, and messaging apps, which allow offenders to harass, threaten, or denigrate victims outside of physical bounds (Hinduja and Patchin, 2019, p. 334). In contrast to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is constant and unavoidable because it penetrates victims' personal devices and online spaces rather than being limited to particular times or places (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007, p. 566). Because of this continuous communication, victims might be targeted at any time, even in places that were once thought to be secure.

According to Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007, p. 566), people are more susceptible to harassment at home or in other places that were previously assumed to be safe because of the constant connection that computers and cell phones give, which blurs the lines between public and private areas (Slonje and Smith, 2008, p. 150). Digital harassment can have severe and enduring emotional and psychological effects due to its continuous nature. However, how young people view and react to cyberbullying can be influenced by variables like computer literacy, socioeconomic backgrounds, and parental supervision (Chua and Shorey, 2022, p. 133).

2.4.2 The prevalence and impact of cyberbullying

Approximately 70% of South African youngsters routinely use social media and the internet, showing a high level of digital engagement, according to Burton, Leoschut, and Phyfer (2016,

p. 12). Although the possibility of cyberbullying is frequently linked to this widespread use, the relationship is more complicated than a straightforward cause-and-effect dynamic. Recent research indicates that underlying social, psychological, and relational elements play a crucial role in creating such behaviors, even while increased exposure to digital platforms may generate opportunities for cyberbullying (Modecki et al., 2022; Kowalski et al., 2019). Fegenbush and Olivier (2009, p. 23) make comparisons between conventional forms of bullying and the detrimental effects that cyberbullying has on kids' academic achievement and general well-being. However, new research suggests that because cyberbullying is public and persistent, it may occasionally have more serious repercussions, exacerbating feelings of social disengagement, anxiety, and shame (Hamm et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2021). This implies that although cyberbullying and traditional bullying are comparable, the psychological and academic effects of cyberbullying may be exacerbated by its digital features.

2.4.3 Unique challenges and support systems

According to Slonje and Smith (2008, p. 150), the traits of cyberbullying set it apart from more conventional types of bullying, especially with regard to anonymity, persistence, and audience reach. Because dangerous content can spread widely, be hard to track down, and be always accessible, these characteristics present special obstacles for action. Because of this, traditional anti-bullying tactics that concentrate on physical settings might not be enough to effectively combat cyberbullying. McKennie (2017) highlights the necessity for comprehensive and ongoing intervention measures by emphasizing the long-term effects of both traditional and cyberbullying. However, more recent studies indicate that multi-level strategies involving schools, families, legislators, and digital platforms are necessary for effective responses to cyberbullying (Livingstone et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2023). This suggests that coordinated initiatives that take into consideration the complexity of digital environments is necessary to address cyberbullying rather than individual treatments. Additionally, Feinberg and Robey (2009, p. 30) list behavioral and social repercussions linked to cyberbullies, such as involvement in criminal activity, substance misuse, and school dropout. While these traits shed light on possible risk factors, recent research warns against personalizing the issue, contending that broader social dynamics like peer group norms, online disinhibition, and platform design also influence cyberbullying (Wachs et al., 2022; Nocentini et al., 2021). As a result,

comprehending cyberbullying necessitates looking at the social and technological environments that support and encourage such behavior in addition to recognizing individual behaviors.

2.4.4 Characteristics of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders

2.4.4.1 Perpetrators

Bullies frequently exhibit rage and act impulsively and aggressively without considering the consequences of their actions (Smith and Slonje, 2009, p. 252). Studies have revealed that bullies commonly have impaired empathy, hindering their capacity to comprehend or care how their behaviours affect others (Kowalski and Giumetti, 2017, p. 176). Bullies usually use violence to preserve their perceived superiority over their peers and to establish control and power over them (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010, p. 617). Systemic elements that influence bullying behaviour include societal injustice. Some people resort to bullying as a means of regaining their perceived social standing or to exert authority, frequently in reaction to challenges to their identity or self-concept (Barlett, Kowalewski, Kramer, and Helmstetter, 2019, p. 280). Bullying behaviour is also influenced by peer networks that support or normalise violent behaviour (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010, p. 618).

One characteristic that sets bullying apart from other forms of aggressiveness is an imbalance of power, usually as the bully feels inferior and must establish superiority (Smith et al., 2002, p. 1118). Similarly, Bekiari and Pachi (2017, p. 80) emphasise that bullying behaviours are rooted in a power imbalance, whether it be social, emotional, or physical, suggesting that power interactions are dynamic and context-dependent. In fact, as definitions of power imbalance might change over time, they depend on the context and can be disputed or temporary. Bullying is defined by Smith et al. (2002, p. 1120) as “the misuse of authority directed at those who are incapable of defending themselves verbally, physically, or socially”. However, this framing could unintentionally individualise the victim's experience while ignoring the larger institutional or cultural elements that underpin the perceived inequalities that lead to bullying.

Aggression may be a personality trait or it may stem from a challenging temperament (Reebye, 2005, p. 16). Rigby (2010, p. 7) states that young toddlers between 18 months and four years frequently behave aggressively but eventually learn to address their demands more appropriately and in a socially acceptable manner. It is estimated that 5% of children are

violence and aggression inclined, but bullies usually behave aggressively more consistently than other children (Rigby, 2010, p. 5).

Hoffman and Mitchell (2010), violent conduct in boys is more widespread and more normalised than in girls, and is based in wider societal constructs of masculinity and femininity. Merrell, Buchanan, and Tran (2006, p. 347), on the other hand, reject the notion that boys are inherently more aggressive than girls, arguing that cultural norms and socialization processes play an important role in influencing how aggression appears across genders. These social factors also extend to cyberbullying, with views and experiences varying not just by gender but also by developmental stage. According to research, younger adolescents frequently feel confused, powerless, and vulnerable as a result of their ongoing identity development and limited capacity to negotiate online hazards (Janse van Rensburg, 2022; Adeola & Mays, 2023). Older adolescents and young adults (late teens to early twenties) have more developed coping mechanisms, digital literacy, and self-awareness, allowing them to think critically about how cyberbullying affects their self-esteem and social identity (Ngubane & Mhlongo, 2024).

In South Africa, gender influences how cyberbullying is seen and the psychological implications. Female juveniles frequently report higher levels of psychological anguish, larger feelings of social isolation, and more profound effects on self-perception than their male counterparts, patterns reinforced by ingrained gender norms and societal expectations (Smit, 2019). While females often see cyberbullying as a direct threat to their social identity and feeling of belonging, guys are more likely to respond in ways that correlate with externalizing behaviors like conflict or revenge (Maree and Twigge, 2019; Bosch, 2009). These gendered inclinations mirror South Africa's wider cultural standards around emotional expression, identity, and interpersonal interactions.

Bullying behaviours can also emerge due to dysfunctional family dynamics, such as high levels of conflict and/or insufficient parental monitoring (Sticca and Perren, 2013). Furthermore, societal factors such as a poor social standing or personal instability may push people to bully others to compensate for their perceived or suppressed shortcomings (Nocentini and Menesini, 2016). Individuals' ages and developmental stages must also be considered when trying to understand bullying behaviours. For instance, due to their ongoing emotional and social development, adolescents and young adults may be highly vulnerable to bullying as they work through social hierarchies or personal fears (Hong and Espelage, 2012). Mishna et al. (2009)

argue that social constraints and developmental obstacles make younger people more susceptible to bullying than older people.

2.4.4.2 Victims

Bullying victims often face marginalization, stigma, and disrupted peer connections (Yoo, 2021; Campfield, 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). These impacts are modified by the victim's social network status and peer group dynamics. Perpetrators commonly choose targets based on observable differences or perceived weaknesses, demonstrating that existing social divisions impact who is victimized (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Individuals' reactions to cyberbullying differ; some retreat from online environments, while others seek assistance from friends or trusted adults (Ang, 2015). Social environment has an important impact. The availability or lack of supporting connections, as well as peer solidarity, heavily influences how victims deal with cyberbullying.

Yoo (2021) and Kowalski et al. (2014) identify exclusion as a frequent trend, but additional study is needed to understand how group affiliation, status, and availability to social support influence responses. De Wet (2022) defines cyberbullying as a breach in social ties in which victims are pressured or excluded from important peer and community networks. This weakens social capital, which Bourdieu (1986) defined as the relationships that offer resources, recognition, and social support for integration and identity. Victims who lose access to these networks feel marginalized and lonely. This isolation is exacerbated in modern, individualistic societies, where long-term social bonds are already unstable. Digital peer networks, which are frequently unpredictable and competitive, exacerbate this susceptibility (Rogers, Pazzaglia, & Pinotti, 2020).

Cyberbullying takes advantage of these weak ties by targeting people who are disadvantaged or perceived as different, strengthening existing power dynamics. The "we-sense" that emerges in online communities typically relies on excluding others, a process that normalizes dehumanization and makes exclusion easier (Rogers, Pazzaglia, & Pinotti, 2020). Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1982) provides insight into this dynamic: group membership changes identity, and belonging generates in-group preference and out-group prejudice. Victims get alienated when cyberbullies attack outsiders to legitimize their in-group position (Hellsten et

al., 2021). Online anonymity exacerbates this process by decreasing empathy and allowing offenders and onlookers to disconnect morally (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2024).

Similarly, Elias' (1965) notion of Established and Outsider relations emphasizes how powerful groups retain their standing by excluding weaker members, viewing cyberbullying as a means of preserving social supremacy (Corliss, 2016). Victims face serious penalties. Exclusion and isolation impair social links that are critical for young people's development, resulting in social anxiety, retreat, and difficulty interacting with both online and offline places (De Wet, 2022; Rogers, Pazzaglia, & Pinotti, 2020). These ruptures impede identity formation and belonging at a time when digital engagement is critical to socialization. The consequences include not just acute psychological injury, but also long-term difficulties in developing trust, self-worth, and meaningful social connections.

2.4.4.3 Bystanders

In the context of cyberbullying, bystanders play a pivotal role, as their actions often influence whether the situation escalates or is diffused. Salmivalli (2010) avers that the involvement of observers can either reinforce harmful behaviour or contribute to its interruption, depending on whether they support the perpetrator, remain passive, or intervene. While Pozzoli and Gini (2010) note that passive witnesses may experience guilt or unease, the focus on individual feelings overlooks the social dynamics that shape inaction. O'Connell et al. (1999) argue that bystanders often hesitate to intervene due to peer pressure and the fear of social repercussions, revealing how group norms and fear of exclusion constrain individual agency. On social media, these dynamics become even more pronounced as likes, shares, and comments serve as visible cues of social approval or disapproval. Users may refrain from defending a victim out of fear of being targeted themselves, losing followers, or disrupting their online image. Group chats, reposts, and subtweets can reinforce bullying by creating an echo chamber of ridicule or silence. These patterns reveal that the behaviour of witnesses is deeply embedded in digital peer group structures where loyalty, fear, and the desire for acceptance shape responses. Therefore, rather than treating bystanders as isolated decision-makers, it is essential to view them as participants in the wider network of online social influence that sustains or challenges harmful behaviours.

2.4.5 The disruption of a self-concept and identity formation in victims

2.4.5.1 Identity and social identity

According to Stets and Burke (2003, p. 1), identity refers to the understanding individuals have of themselves, and this understanding is shaped by social interactions that are sustained over time. Social identity is formed through group affiliations that define one's status and determine one's inclusion and recognition within a community (Brown, 2020, p. 6). These identities are not fixed but develop through repeated interactions and feedback from peers, institutions, and social structures.

2.4.5.2 Adolescents' identity formation

Adolescence is a crucial stage for identity development as it is marked by increased sensitivity to social expectations and group positioning. Patchin and Hinduja (2010, p. 615) note that social signals, such as stereotyping and approval, play a central role during this period. Young people seek out contexts that affirm their values and they avoid those that undermine their sense of self. This process of selective interaction shapes both personal and social identity and influences future personal and professional trajectories (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010, p. 616). However, bullying disrupts identity development as it relegates individuals to negative positions within social hierarchies. Victims of exclusion, ridicule, and public shaming often internalise these roles, leading to diminished self-confidence and a persistent sense of marginalisation (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010; Espelage and Swearer, 2003; Albdour, El-Masri, and Hong, 2020). These effects frequently continue into adulthood. Nixon (2014, p. 144) explains that cyberbullying intensifies such outcomes through its wide reach, anonymity, and constant visibility, making it more difficult for individuals to reframe their self-image or escape harmful social categorisation. These experiences are sustained by broader environments such as a peer culture that rewards dominance and institutional inaction, as well as online platforms that allow limited or no accountability.

2.4.5.3 Self-concept

Self-esteem, or a lack thereof, has been described as “a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the self” (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 31), but its development is deeply embedded in social interaction. MacDonald and Leary (2012, p. 356), a person's perception of acceptance or exclusion from their social surroundings is reflected in their level of self-esteem, which is influenced by how others view their acceptance or rejection. These conceptualizations show

how experiences and interactions within peer groups and larger social institutions shape one's sense of self rather than developing in a vacuum. Experiences of exclusion or marginalization can have a big impact on how people see their place in a group, especially when bullying is involved and power dynamics and social hierarchies are at work. The process of evaluation of feeling accepted or rejected is therefore closely tied to the norms, expectations, and feedback received from others in one's social world.

Young people who are subjected to cyberbullying frequently report notable changes in their self-perception, emotional control, and social behaviour, according to research conducted both internationally and in South Africa. For instance, victims report lower self-esteem, more emotions of shame and guilt, and social disengagement, according to a study conducted among university students in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa (Cilliers, 2018). According to international research, survivors of cyberbullying also experience personality changes that suggest a withdrawal from social interaction and increased emotional vulnerability, including lower extraversion and agreeableness, increased neuroticism, and heightened social anxiety (Bai, Lang, Yue, Li, and Chen, 2025). Feelings of helplessness and diminished self-worth frequently accompany these shifts in self-perception, especially when victims perceive cyberbullying as an assault on their moral standing and social identity (Bai et al., 2025; Wanjohi, 2018).

Harrison (2015) and Wanjohi (2018), South African teenagers also believe that cyberbullying has a detrimental effect on their feeling of social acceptability and belonging, two important aspects of self-esteem. More than half of the children in rural school surveys reported being victims of cyberbullying, which is linked to higher levels of anxiety, sadness, and suicide ideation (Taiwo & Goldstein, 2006; Mlisa, Ward, Flisher, and Lombard, 2008). Because cyberbullying intersects with larger societal gender-based discrimination, young women in South Africa are disproportionately harmed, suffering from greater levels of emotional distress and a decline in self-esteem (Smit, 2019).

2.4.5.4 Peer relationships and social positioning

Adolescents' identity construction is heavily influenced by their peer interactions. According to Holdren (2020, p. 22), peer contacts on a daily basis influence sentiments of self-worth and belonging. While negative experiences like bullying perpetuate marginalization, positive

relationships offer support and affirmation. Adolescence is a critical period in identity formation that is influenced by outside acknowledgment, according to Erikson (1968). This perspective is expanded by Bronfenbrenner (1979), who points out that peer dynamics are a part of larger systems of cultural norms, schools, and families. The harm is exacerbated when these systems do not address bullying. Peer support, on the other hand, does more than just reduce distress; it also establishes forums for youth to discuss issues of visibility, inclusion, and identity.

Peer relationships in adolescence and young adulthood are consequently very important for how people perceive and react to cyberbullying as well as for their social integration. According to research, supportive peer interactions can lessen the negative impacts of peer rejection and exclusion, even while these behaviors increase victims' feelings of loneliness and psychological suffering (De Wet, 2022; Maree & Twigge, 2019). However, the quality and character of peer interactions are significantly influenced by socioeconomic circumstances, cultural norms, and community dynamics in South African environments. According to Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2009), these interrelated factors affect young people's susceptibility to online victimization.

For example, teenagers in rural Limpopo who experienced cyberbullying described strained peer relationships accompanied by isolation and stigmatisation. They felt more alone and less confident in social situations as a result of this isolation (Mlisa et al., 2008). These events impede the development of healthy social skills and identity formation, both of which are critical for the transition to adulthood (Barker & Rodgers, 2020). Furthermore, while there is little data that explicitly connects cyberbullying to romantic relationships among South African teenagers, what is known indicates that it erodes openness and trust in intimate partnerships. Online abuse and public humiliation can breed worries and insecurities that strain relationships and cause conflict or retreat (Smit, 2019).

2.4.5.5 Access to support

Brown and Larson (2019) contend that since some adolescents get constant validation while others are excluded, differential access to peer support reinforces the unequal distribution of social capital and leads to differences in resilience, confidence, and social competence. According to Smith et al. (2021), a sense of belonging influences broader outcomes, as

evidenced by the fact that young people with robust peer networks are better equipped to handle social and academic challenges than their marginalized peers. Peer pressure may promote both prosocial and risk-taking behavior based on group norms, which are seldom neutral, according to Steinberg (2020), who highlights the importance of peer influence in forming long-term behaviors and identity orientation. youths who are marginalized. These dynamics are exacerbated on social media, where Huang and Levitt (2022) contend that online platforms frequently mirror offline disparities because algorithmic visibility, performance-based comparison, and cyberbullying exacerbate exclusion and reduce self-worth, especially for marginalized youths.

Family dynamics have a significant impact on how young people in South Africa perceive and react to cyberbullying. While a lack of parental supervision or support is linked to a higher risk of cyberbullying and psychological distress, positive parent-child relationships have been demonstrated to mitigate negative emotional effects and lower the likelihood of victimization (Bayaga & Nungu, 2025). Research from Mpumalanga and other rural regions highlights the value of family-based, culturally aware interventions that improve digital literacy and communication between parents and adolescents (Njenga & Mugambi, 2023). In addition, victims may be empowered by family involvement and locally tailored school policies, which provide them with emotional support and useful coping strategies (Cilliers, 2018; Smit, 2019).

2.4.6 The relationship between social media and academic performance

2.4.6.1 The benefits of social media in educational settings

The use of social networks has become embedded in contemporary educational environments as they serve not only as tools for accessing information, but also as platforms for communication and peer interaction. Azizi, Soroush, and Khatony (2019, p. 2) conducted their study in Iran, and highlight that social media facilitate student communication and offer a form of social support that can extend learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries. These platforms lower barriers to participation, promote collaboration, and support both group-based and independent learning. Similarly, Sampasa-Kanyinga, Chaput, and Hamilton (2019, p. 190) observe that, in the Canadian context, student engagement can be improved through increased interaction between peers and instructors via social media.

Social media has emerged as a transformational tool in South African educational contexts, improving learning by extending engagement outside the classroom and encouraging cooperation between students and instructors (Colbert, 2023; Bosch, 2009). These platforms also help to encourage creativity and digital literacy by allowing students to create and share multimedia material, which enhances communication and critical thinking skills required in the modern workforce (Janse van Rensburg, 2022; Kuhudza, 2021). Furthermore, social media enhances contact between students and professors, allowing for timely support and establishing engaged learning communities (Letsapa, 2024; Maharaj, 2020). Importantly, social media helps to overcome educational gaps by offering resources and fostering relationships in underprivileged and rural regions, hence increasing digital inclusion and equitable learning opportunities (Maree & Le Roux, 2023; Ravhengani, 2023.).

2.4.6.2 The drawbacks of the use of social media on academic performance

Although social networking platforms have the potential to benefit education, mounting data shows that they can potentially hamper academic attainment. Al-Menayes (2014, p. 27), who performed research in Saudi Arabia, contends that social media use has a substantial unfavorable link with academic achievement as assessed by grade point average (GPA). This relationship raises issues about how students focus their attention and manage their time, especially when online activities replace formal academic work. Similarly, Junco (2012, p. 189) claims that excessive social media use disrupts academic routines by redirecting attention away from prolonged intellectual work and toward fragmented, screen-based interactions. These trends point to deeper structural contradictions between rising digital habits and established educational aspirations.

In a study of American college students, Junco (2012, p. 191) discovered a negative association between time spent on Facebook and academic achievement, with users studying fewer hours and obtaining poorer grades. This data calls into question the narrative of social media as an educational tool, highlighting its propensity to undermine discipline-based study routines. Kirschner and Karpinski (2010, p. 1242) relate Facebook use to decreased study time and academic underperformance. Rather than discounting these results as individual flaws, they argue that social media may promote a culture of distraction that is incompatible with the needs of formal learning environments.

In addition to academic distraction, the social dynamics of online platforms can have a negative impact on youth. According to Balakrishnan and Fernandez (2018, p. 2030), kids who are cyberbullied not only suffer academically, but also face social retreat and disturbances in identity development. These effects highlight the multifaceted ways in which digital environments influence educational results, not just through their ability to enlighten and connect, but also by increasing exclusion, surveillance, and interpersonal conflict. These findings highlight crucial considerations regarding how institutional contexts and instructional approaches might be modified to successfully react to the ubiquitous influence of social media.

2.4.7 Learners' perception of social media and cyberbullying

Smith et al. (2008, p. 378) investigated the experiences of students aged 11 to 16 in London to examine distinctions between cyberbullying and more traditional forms of bullying. Their findings indicate that phone-based and visual forms of cyberbullying may be more harmful than conventional bullying. This comparison reveals more than superficial differences in media as it points to shifting power relations enabled by technology, where perpetrators can extend their reach beyond physical spaces and act with relative anonymity and impunity. Such changes disrupt established social boundaries, making it difficult for institutions like schools and families to intervene effectively.

Although cyberbullying may occur over a shorter time span than traditional face-to-face bullying, Smith et al. (2008) argue that its psychological impact can be equally, if not more, severe. A key factor is the persistent visibility of digital content. For instance, a harmful post or image shared on a public platform like Facebook or WhatsApp can be viewed, reshared, or commented on repeatedly even long after the original incident. This creates a cycle of ongoing exposure, unlike verbal or physical bullying that is usually confined to a specific setting or moment. Such repetition reinforces feelings of helplessness and shame in victims, particularly when the audience includes not only classmates, but wider school communities or even strangers. In the South African context where mobile phone access is widespread among the youth but where digital literacy is uneven, victims may lack the technical knowledge or institutional support needed to remove harmful content. Kowalski and Limber (2007) and Patchin and Hinduja (2006) note that this permanency exacerbates distress, as victims often have no control over the spread and exposure of their victimisation. This loss of control reflects the broader issues of digital surveillance and power inequality as users, especially young people, are vulnerable to online scrutiny without effective means of protection or recourse.

2.5 Factors that Drive the Motivation to Engage in Cyberbullying

Understanding the motivations behind cyberbullying requires moving beyond individual explanations to examine how social and digital environments shape group dynamics and behavioural norms. In their study on adolescent behaviours, Varjas et al. (2010, p. 271) found that participants justified their actions by referring to both personal grievances and social pressures. A key driver is that online spaces often lack clear oversight, which can make harmful behaviours appear more acceptable. The normalisation of online aggression, such as mocking peers in group chats or spreading rumours via status updates, creates a digital culture where hostility becomes routine. In the South African context, young adults who navigate school and university life are exposed to similar dynamics due to limited institutional regulation of online behaviour and the social validation that sometimes comes with public online confrontations.

Willard (2007) and Hinduja and Patchin (2008) highlight the role of anonymity and perceived impunity as enabling factors. These features of digital platforms allow users to circumvent the moral and institutional constraints that typically govern face-to-face interaction. The dissociation from real-world accountability not only lowers the threshold for harmful behaviour, but also reflects a broader shift in how social responsibility is distributed and often deflected online. Wilton and Campbell (2011, p. 10) add that young people often attribute cyberbullying to attempts at managing self-worth and navigating peer hierarchies, rather than merely seeking attention or targeting those who are different. This reflects the increasing pressure to perform identity online, where social validation is tied to visibility and digital engagement. Such motivations are rooted in competitive peer dynamics that are shaped by surveillance, comparison, and status-seeking behaviours that are endemic to social media platforms. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) and Mishna et al. (2012) similarly argue that the prevalence of cyberbullying reflects the intersection of individual vulnerabilities with systemic conditions that reduce perceived social risk. Bullying thus becomes a tool to reassert control, gain recognition, and/or shield one's own insecurities, all within a context that minimises accountability and encourages social stratification.

2.6 Chapter Conclusion

To create an appropriate foundation for exploring cyberbullying in the Mkhuhlu community in South Africa, this chapter examined the complex nature of this phenomenon and its significant effects on young people's identity development and ability to achieve academically. The discourse specifically looked at local and global aspects of cyberbullying and highlighted how the surge in Internet and mobile phone usage has contributed to its escalating prevalence among the youth in rural and semi-rural regions. Understanding how cyberbullying impacts young people's development is crucial, as effective therapies need to be developed because technology has become increasingly ingrained in everyday life, particularly in the Mkhuhlu community where people with unique social and economic identities live.

The literature argues that power differences, deliberate injury, and persistent violent actions are characteristics of both conventional and cyberbullying. The discourse exposed the difficulty of curbing cyberbullying because of the anonymity of perpetrators and the widespread use of online platforms, which make it challenging for victims to get help or to flee. The literature avers that there is a strong link between poor academic achievement and cyberbullying because, due to the detrimental effects of cyberbullying, victims frequently manifest diminished academic success and decreased motivation. These factors make it difficult for them to concentrate and participate in learning. Because future socioeconomic results are significantly influenced by academic performance, the effects of cyberbullying go beyond the victim and have an impact on the larger community.

The chapter also explored the sociological background of bullying by focusing on how gender and power dynamics as well as cultural norms shape the characteristics of conventional and cyberbullying. The review showed that although girls are more likely than boys to experience bullying in the form of relational violence, it is less obvious but no less harmful when girls are targeted. The discourse emphasised that, to be effective, intervention methods must be guided by a culturally informed understanding of bullying behaviours.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

Symbolic interactionism provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals construct meaning through social interaction and how these meanings influence identity, behaviour, and social relationships. The theory is relevant to this study because cyberbullying occurs within social interactions where communication, interpretation, and shared symbols shape how young adults understand their experiences. Applying symbolic interactionism in this study made it possible to explore how cyberbullying influences participants' self-perception, academic experiences, and relationships within their social environments.

3.2 The Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interactionism, developed from the work of George Herbert Mead, explains that human behaviour is shaped through social interaction in which individuals assign meanings to symbols, actions, and situations (Mead, 1934). This study adopts symbolic interactionism because it focuses on how individuals interpret their experiences, rather than assuming fixed behavioural or psychological outcomes. While theories such as Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) explain behaviour, they do not sufficiently account for how meaning is constructed through interaction, which is central to understanding cyberbullying.

Mead (1934) explains the self through the concepts of the "I" and the "Me." The "I" refers to the active, responding self, while the "Me" represents how individuals see themselves based on the perceived attitudes of others. In simple terms, the "Me" is shaped by how others are believed to see the individual, and the "I" is how the individual responds to that perception. In cyberbullying, repeated negative online feedback may shape the "Me," influencing how individuals see themselves, while the "I" reflects how they respond, for example through withdrawal or behavioural change. This process is further explained by Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking-glass self, which suggests that individuals form their self-concept by imagining how they appear to others, interpreting others' judgements, and developing feelings based on those interpretations. In offline settings, this occurs through face-to-face interaction, while in online spaces, it is intensified because interactions are public, visible, and can be

repeatedly accessed. As a result, cyberbullying may influence self-perception depending on how individuals interpret these interactions.

Herbert Blumer (1986) further explains that human action is guided by meanings that emerge through interaction and are continuously interpreted and modified. In digital contexts, comments, images, and posts function as symbols whose meanings are shaped within peer groups. For example, a comment may symbolise rejection or humiliation depending on its interpretation. These processes may also lead to role redefinition, where individuals reinterpret their social roles based on interaction. For instance, a young adult who previously viewed themselves as socially confident may begin to see themselves as withdrawn after repeated negative interactions. This shift develops through ongoing interpretation of social feedback. Erving Goffman (1959) further argues that individuals actively manage how they present themselves to others. While this concept is not fully developed here, it is important for later discussion, as digital platforms intensify self-presentation through constant visibility and audience feedback. Overall, symbolic interactionism provides a relevant framework for understanding how cyberbullying is interpreted and how these interpretations shape identity, behaviour, and social relationships.

3.3 Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism

Building upon Blumer's (1986) three core principles, recent scholars have expanded on and interpreted these foundational ideas into more specific analytical categories. For example, Wicaksono (2018, p. 482) summarises four interrelated themes (see Table 2):

Table 2: Factors that drive symbolic interactionism

Meaning	Explanation
Actions Based on Meaning	People behave in ways that are determined by the meanings they attach to things and experiences.
Social and Cultural Contexts	People interact in particular social and cultural contexts that influence their interpretations of their experiences.
Meaning Development through Interaction	Meanings change throughout time due to continual communication among social groups.

Continuous Interpretation and Meaning Change	Meaning constantly changes based on personal perceptions and interactions.
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Source: Wicaksono, 2018

The structure of this study used these four analytically valuable aspects. For example, “actions based on meaning” clarified why individuals might withdraw from peer groups after repeated symbolic humiliation; “social and cultural contexts” highlighted how community standards could shape reactions to online shaming; “meaning development through interaction” illustrated how meanings of bullying can change over time; and “continuous interpretation” showed how young adults might reinterpret their identities after both harmful and supportive online conversations.

3.4 Online Symbols as Tools of Social Influence

Symbolic interactionism views human interaction as a process mediated through symbols, where individuals interpret meanings before responding to social situations. Fay, Walker, Swoboda, and Garrod (2018, p. 241) describe human beings as fundamentally symbolic because they rely on language, signs, and shared systems of meaning to communicate and navigate social life. Blumer (1986, p. 2) explains that symbols only become meaningful through social interaction, as people assign meanings to actions, words, and objects based on shared understanding within a group.

In digital spaces, these symbolic processes remain active but occur through online forms such as text messages, comments, images, emojis, memes, and hashtags. In the context of cyberbullying, such digital expressions carry meanings that often extend beyond their literal content. A message, image, or emoji may symbolise rejection, humiliation, ridicule, or exclusion depending on how it is interpreted within a social context. Because social media interactions are often public, immediate, and visible to wider audiences, these meanings can be intensified. For example, derogatory comments, public ridicule, or exclusion from online conversations may symbolise the withdrawal of social approval and communicate marginalisation within peer groups. Patchin and Hinduja (2010, p. 619) argue that cyberbullying often affects how young people are positioned socially because harmful online interactions influence peer status and belonging. In this way, symbols become tools through which group boundaries are created and maintained.

Symbolic interactionism further suggests that individuals respond not simply to actions

themselves, but to the meanings attached to those actions (Blumer, 1986). Thus, positive online feedback such as supportive comments or likes may reinforce belonging and recognition, while repeated negative feedback may contribute to feelings of exclusion and lowered self-worth. Burchardt, Le Grand, and Piachaud (2002) define social exclusion as a process through which individuals experience limited access to social participation and belonging, affecting their quality of life and social integration. Cyberbullies may therefore use digital symbols such as humiliating memes, insulting captions, exclusionary hashtags, or dismissive comments to assert social power and reinforce hierarchy within peer groups (Gunaretnam, 2021). These symbolic exchanges are important because they influence how victims interpret themselves and their position within their social environment.

3.5 Understanding Cyberbullying through the Lens of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism offers a useful framework for understanding cyberbullying because it explains how identity and behaviour are shaped through repeated social interactions and shared meanings. According to Mead (1934), the self develops through interaction with others, as individuals learn to view themselves from the perspective of those around them. Blumer (1986) extends this by arguing that people act toward situations based on the meanings they assign to them, and these meanings emerge through interaction and interpretation.

In cyberbullying, online communication becomes a space where meanings are constantly negotiated through digital symbols such as words, emojis, memes, images, and comments. These symbols communicate approval, rejection, ridicule, or exclusion. Because online content can be repeatedly shared, viewed, and preserved, harmful meanings may become reinforced over time. Forsberg and Thornberg (2016) note that repeated harmful interaction influences how individuals understand themselves and their social position. For example, derogatory labels or mocking comments may become socially powerful symbols that communicate humiliation. Repeated exposure to such symbols may influence how victims interpret their identity, their peer relationships, and their participation in school and community life. Symbolic interactionism is therefore important in this study because it helps explain how cyberbullying affects young adults beyond immediate emotional harm by shaping self-perception and social belonging.

3.5.1 Self-perception and identity

Within symbolic interactionism, identity is understood as socially constructed through interaction. Mead (1934) distinguishes between the “I,” which represents the spontaneous self, and the “Me,” which reflects how individuals see themselves through the attitudes of others. Cyberbullying can disrupt this process when repeated negative feedback becomes part of how individuals define themselves. Negative online comments, ridicule, exclusion, or public humiliation may function as social mirrors through which victims begin to interpret themselves negatively. Goffman (1959) explains that social life involves constant self-presentation, where individuals manage how they are viewed by others. In digital spaces, this becomes more complex because interactions are visible to wider audiences and remain accessible over time. As a result, cyberbullying may intensify feelings of shame, self-doubt, and reduced confidence because harmful meanings are repeatedly reinforced through online interaction. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how victims may internalise these meanings and experience changes in self-concept.

3.5.2 Academic achievement

Symbolic interactionism also helps explain how cyberbullying affects academic life by altering how learners interpret school environments. When online victimisation is associated with classmates, peer groups, or school networks, school may gradually lose its meaning as a safe learning space. Forsberg and Thornberg (2016) argue that repeated hostile interactions can reshape learners’ interpretations of social settings. In this case, students may begin to associate classrooms, school events, or peer engagement with judgement, embarrassment, or fear. This may weaken classroom participation, concentration, and academic motivation. Giddens (1984) further explains that modern communication reduces the boundaries between physical and digital spaces, meaning online experiences can easily affect school life. Thus, cyberbullying does not remain confined to digital platforms but can influence educational participation and academic confidence.

3.5.3 Social relationships and community integration

Cyberbullying also affects how young adults interpret relationships and belonging within their social environments. Patchin and Hinduja (2010, p. 616) note that cyberbullying often contributes to social withdrawal and reduced trust in peer relationships. Within symbolic interactionism, social relationships are built through shared meanings and repeated interaction. Negative digital experiences may alter these meanings, leading individuals to interpret friendships, peer groups, and community interactions differently. Wicaksono (2018, p. 482)

explains that repeated harmful interaction can weaken feelings of belonging and social trust. For young adults in communities such as Mkhuhlu, where social relationships are highly valued, cyberbullying may affect both online and offline interactions. Coelho, Marchante, and Romao (2022, p. 2) observe that victims often withdraw from communal participation after repeated victimisation. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how these experiences reshape social identity, as individuals may begin to see themselves as socially distant or excluded. Giddens (1984) further highlights those digital interactions extend beyond local boundaries, allowing social meanings formed online to influence face-to-face relationships within communities.

3.6 Chapter Conclusion

Symbolic interactionism provided the theoretical foundation for understanding how cyberbullying affects young adults in this study. The theory explains that meanings are formed through interaction and that these meanings influence identity, behaviour, and social relationships. Applied to cyberbullying, symbolic interactionism shows how harmful online symbols such as insults, ridicule, exclusion, and public humiliation can shape self-perception, academic participation, and social belonging. Through repeated interaction, these symbolic experiences may influence how young adults understand themselves and their place within peer groups, schools, and communities. This theoretical framework therefore supports the study by explaining how cyberbullying extends beyond immediate emotional harm to affect broader social and developmental processes.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore young adults' experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying within their social context. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how participants interpreted and made meaning of their experiences rather than to measure the frequency or prevalence of cyberbullying. By engaging closely with participants' narratives, the study was able to generate rich and detailed insights into how cyberbullying influenced their identities, academic engagement, and social relationships. Quantitative approaches may not have captured these complex and subjective experiences (Aspers and Corte, 2019). This chapter outlines the methodological approach that guided the study. It discusses the research paradigm, research approach, research design, study location, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the methodology.

4.2 Research Paradigm

This study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding the meanings individuals attach to their social experiences (Ryan, 2018, p. 18). Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and that individuals interpret events based on their social contexts and interactions (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This paradigm was therefore appropriate for the study because it allowed the researcher to explore how young adults in the Mkhuhlu community understood and interpreted their experiences of cyberbullying. The interpretivist perspective was particularly relevant to this research because cyberbullying is experienced differently by individuals depending on their social relationships, personal identities, and community contexts. By adopting this paradigm, the study focused on understanding participants' subjective meanings and interpretations rather than attempting to establish objective or universal explanations of cyberbullying.

The interpretivist paradigm also aligned with the symbolic interactionist theoretical framework used in this study. Symbolic interactionism emphasises how individuals construct meaning through social interactions (Blumer, 1986). In the context of this research, the paradigm helped

explain how participants interpreted cyberbullying experiences and how these interactions influenced their identities, relationships, and perceptions of themselves within the community. The use of open-ended interview questions allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, ensuring that the findings reflected their interpretations rather than the researcher's assumptions.

4.3 Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how young adults perceived and responded to cyberbullying within their social environments. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research questions focused on understanding personal experiences, perceptions, and social meanings associated with cyberbullying. According to Tenny, Brannan, and Brannan (2017), qualitative research is particularly useful for exploring patterns of human behaviour and social processes that cannot easily be quantified. Similarly, Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020, p. 1) describe qualitative research as the study of phenomena in terms of how individuals experience and interpret them within their specific contexts. In this study, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to examine how cyberbullying affected participants' identities, academic experiences, and relationships within the Mkhuhlu community. The qualitative approach also aligned with the study's symbolic interactionist framework, which emphasises that social meanings are constructed through interaction. By allowing participants to share their experiences in detail, the study was able to capture how cyberbullying shaped their perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others.

4.4 Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design, which is a specific qualitative approach that aims to understand how individuals experience and interpret particular phenomena in their everyday lives (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009; Eberle, 2014, p. 190). In the context of this study, phenomenology was appropriate for this investigation that explored how young people in Mkhuhlu made sense of the social and emotional dimensions of cyberbullying. This design enabled the collection of detailed narratives and allowed the researcher to focus on the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences rather than on external interpretations.

Practically, the phenomenological design was applied through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that created a space for the participants to share their perspectives in their own words based on their own interpretations and the meanings they attached to cyberbullying. This approach also allowed the integration of shared meanings across the various accounts while preserving the uniqueness of each individual's experiences. It also aligned with the study's theoretical foundation as facilitated by symbolic interactionism, which posits that individuals construct meaning through social interaction (Blumer, 1986). By prioritising the participants' subjective accounts, the phenomenological method provided a structured framework to understand how cyberbullying shaped the participants' unique self-concepts, relationships, and sense of belonging within the community under study. Since cyberbullying is a sensitive and painful topic, the researcher had to carefully strike a balance between analytical distance and empathy. It was necessary to bear the burden of these stories in addition to listening to the participants' suffering in order to really engage with their distress. This interaction was seen as an emotional challenge that called for the researcher to be reflective and take care of themselves, as well as a methodological strength that increased trust and openness.

4.5 Study Location

The study was conducted in Mkhuhlu, which is a semi-urban township located in the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. The 2022 Census determined that Bushbuckridge had a population of 750 821, reflecting significant growth from 538 593 in 2011. The youth population forms a large proportion of the area's residents. It was noted that access to basic services had improved over time. At the time of the study, 98.5% of households had access to electricity and 81.3% had access to piped water (Stats SA, 2024). However, according to the General Household Survey (2023), the municipality continues to experience high levels of unemployment, with the youth unemployment rate being above 59%. The average annual household income in the area remains below the national average. The school selected for the study draws learners from the surrounding community, where socioeconomic conditions and digital access and facilities vary.

4.6 Study Population and Sampling

A study sample of 20 participants aged 18 to 20, who had experienced cyberbullying, was recruited. This age group was selected because, as Syed and McLean (2017, p. 4) explain,

individuals in their late adolescence years and emerging adulthood are in a critical developmental stage where cyberbullying may significantly influence their social interactions, academic achievement, and identity formation. A criterion sampling strategy was employed to ensure that the selected participants met specific inclusion requirements directly aligned with the study's objectives. The inclusion criteria required that participants:

- were aged between 18 and 20;
- had personally experienced cyberbullying within the past two years; and
- resided in the Mkhuhlu area during the time of the incident.
- were currently enrolled at ML Nkuna High School

Table 3: Sample inclusion criteria

Criteria	Details
Age	Participants were between 18 and 20 years old.
Experience of Cyberbullying	Participants self-identified whether they had experienced cyberbullying first-hand.
Demographic Diversity	Participants of both genders and diverse backgrounds.
Exclusion from Support Services	Participants had not or were not receiving any support services for cyberbullying, such as counselling or intervention programs.
Participation	Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and a participant could withdraw at any time without penalty.
Location	Participants resided in Mkhuhlu, Mpumalanga, at the time of the cyberbullying experience.
School Status	Participants were still enrolled in the selected high school at the time of the study.

A senior teacher, appointed by the school administration, assisted with recruitment by identifying students who fit the inclusion requirements. Although this made access easier, it also introduced the possibility of selection bias, as students more noticeable to teachers might have been overrepresented. To mitigate this, a general call was issued to all eligible participants, enabling self-selection to supplement teacher recommendations. A group of participants volunteered, and after brief screening interviews, 20 participants were recruited. The decision to enlist 20 participants was guided by the concept of data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes emerge (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). Recurring

themes began to appear after 18 interviews, with saturation confirmed during the final two. This sample size was therefore appropriate for a phenomenological study of this scale.

4.7 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data (Husband, 2020, p. 6). This technique enabled participants to reflect on their experiences of cyberbullying, while the flexible structure allowed the researcher to probe further into emerging topics and clarify responses (Potter and Hepburn, 2005, p. 291). A total of 20 interviews were conducted with participants who met the inclusion criteria (see Table 3), guided by an interview schedule containing open-ended questions. Each interview began with a casual discussion to build rapport and reassure participants of confidentiality, fostering trust and openness. Participants were reminded that their involvement was entirely voluntary, that they could skip any question, and that they retained the right to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, the researcher's shared community ties with the participants helped to establish transparency and reduce potential power imbalances. This method was therefore appropriate for gaining in-depth insights into how cyberbullying was perceived, navigated, and interpreted by young adults across different social and academic backgrounds.

4.8 Data Analysis Process

The data analysis followed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was selected because it provides a clear and systematic method for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Familiarisation involved verbatim transcription and repeated reading of the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. Manual coding was then used to identify meaningful segments of the data, which were grouped into broader categories and developed into themes.

These themes captured patterns related to participants' experiences of cyberbullying, their emotional responses, social interactions, and coping strategies. Themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. To enhance credibility, member checking and peer review were conducted, and an audit trail was maintained to

document coding decisions and theme development. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, and field notes were used to capture contextual details. Analysis also began during data collection, as emerging patterns were noted during interviews. Overall, this process ensured that the analysis was systematic and grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Table 4: Summary of the data analysis process

Process	Purpose
Becoming familiar with the data (familiarisation):	This entailed repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain an overall perspective of the participants' views and interpretations of cyberbullying
Generating initial codes:	Patterns in the responses were identified and extracted as key words
Theme search:	The codes were categorised, resulting in the reduction of a large body of data into themes.
Theme review:	This was done to ensure consistency and coherence in the data.
Defining and naming themes:	Thematic categories were finalised to facilitate a manageable body of themes for analysis and discussion.
Producing the report:	This entailed writing a narrative interpretation of the results.

4.9 Strengths and Limitations of the Methodology

One of the primary strengths of this study was its use of a qualitative, phenomenological design that allowed an in-depth, scholarly exploration of the participants' lived experiences of cyberbullying. This approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed narratives. The study was grounded in the symbolic interaction theory which provided a strong foundation for understanding how social interactions shaped the participants' perceptions, experiences, and

identities. Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews ensured flexibility that allowed the participants to express themselves freely while keeping the discussion aligned with the research objectives. All ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and access to counselling services, were carefully observed to ensure that the participants' rights and well-being were protected.

However, the study also had limitations. The findings were drawn from a small group of young adults recruited from a single school in the Mkhuhlu community. As a result, the scope of the study was limited, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other contexts or populations. Furthermore, the face-to-face nature of the interviews may have led some participants to withhold sensitive information due to feelings of discomfort or social pressures. As the researcher, I also recognise that my presence and interpretations may have influenced the research process. Although efforts were made to remain reflexive and to prioritise the participants' voices during data collection and analysis, the researcher's positionality may have shaped how participants shared their experiences and how the data were interpreted. Lastly, because the study focused on young people who had not accessed formal support services, the absence of these perspectives may have limited understanding of how institutional support systems could influence young adults' experiences of cyberbullying.

4.10 Trustworthiness

The study ensured trustworthiness by practically applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln (1985, p. 43) and Stahl and King (2020, p. 26).

- Credibility was established by grounding the research in current literature on cyberbullying and using member checking after the interviews. This means that after the participants had shared their experiences, they were asked to verify or clarify their responses to ensure that their views had been accurately captured (Lincoln, 1985, p. 315).
- Transferability was enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of each participant's background, the local context of Mkhuhlu, and by recording the participants' narratives that reflected their authentic lived experiences. This allows the reader to assess whether the findings may be relevant in similar settings. Cross-case comparisons were also

conducted to highlight both shared and unique themes that emerged from the data elicited from the 20 young adults' narratives.

- Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail that included verbatim transcripts, audio recordings, field notes, and signed consent forms (Korstjens and Moser, 2018, p. 121). These materials provided transparency and consistency throughout the research process.
- To ensure confirmability, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to document personal thoughts, emotional responses, and evolving perspectives during the study. This helped to identify and reflect on potential biases.
- While efforts were made to remain neutral and let the participants' voices shape the findings (Abrams, 2010, p. 8), it is acknowledged that complete objectivity was unattainable. However, peer debriefing and regular engagement with existing literature helped minimise the influence of personal assumptions (Korstjens and Moser, 2018, p. 122).

4.10.1 Researcher Positionality

The researcher acknowledges that personal background and social position influenced this study. Having a connection to the Mkhuhlu community allowed for easier access to participants and helped build trust, as shared cultural understanding encouraged participants to speak openly about their experiences. However, this insider position also required reflexivity to avoid assumptions and bias. Prior to the study, the researcher held the view that cyberbullying mainly leads to negative psychological and academic outcomes. Throughout the research process, care was taken to remain open to participants' diverse experiences and perspectives.

Power dynamics between the researcher and participants were considered, as participants may have viewed the researcher as an authority figure. To minimize this, interviews were conducted in a respectful and non-judgmental manner, emphasizing confidentiality and voluntary participation. Bias was managed through continuous self-reflection during data collection and analysis, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts rather than personal assumptions. Additionally, the emotional nature of discussing cyberbullying required sensitivity, as participants shared experiences of distress and trauma. The researcher remained empathetic while maintaining professional boundaries.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Broom (2006) argues that, for a research study to be considered ethical, the first considerations must be the participant's rights, safety, well-being, humanity, and dignity. The study thus rigorously adhered to the following ethical considerations:

4.11.1 Informed consent

Before data collection, the participants received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participation was voluntary and written informed consent was obtained from each individual (Arifin, 2018, p. 30; Nijhawan et al., 2013, p. 134). The consent form is attached as **Appendix C**. As the participants were all above the age of 18, no parental approval was required.

4.11.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

The participants' privacy was protected by conducting the interviews in a private room with only the participant and the researcher present (Kang and Hwang, 2023, p. 4). They had the freedom to choose how much they wished to disclose about their experiences (Kang and Hwang, 2023, p. 6), and to maintain confidentiality, no personal identifiers such as names or addresses were collected. While complete anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the face-to-face nature of the interviews, each participant was assigned a pseudonym to safeguard their identity, and all data were securely stored and handled with due care. In addition, the researcher maintained a notebook throughout the research process to record personal ideas, feelings, and changing viewpoints, thereby ensuring confirmability. This was particularly important when engaging with the participants' accounts of suffering, as it allowed the researcher to prioritize their authentic voices while simultaneously acknowledging their own emotional involvement.

4.11.3 Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study

Participation in the research was voluntary as none of the participants were coerced or pressured to participate. The participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw during the procedures without giving a reason or experiencing any negative repercussions (Gordon and Prochaska, 2006, p. 10).

4.11.4 Minimising harm

The researcher adhered to the nonmaleficence and beneficence requirements by not causing harm or exposing the participants to any unjustifiable risks. The study was carried out in

compliance with all relevant ethical requirements to protect the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of the participants (Berkovic, 2023). Their rights, best interests, and all ethical norms were therefore prioritised (Sim, 2010, p. 81). Because cyberbullying is a delicate subject, safeguards were put in place to prevent emotional trauma. Before the semi-structured interviews were conducted, the participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, restrictions, and potential dangers. Gordon and Prochaska (2006, p. 10), Berkovic (2023), and Sim (2010, p. 81) state that if a subject suffers distress, they must be allowed to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants who needed assistance following the interviews were also given access to a counsellor. This person's services were also available to participants who withdrew from the trial.

4.11.5 Ethical clearance and institutional approval

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee to ensure compliance with all ethics standards. In addition, permission to conduct the study at the study site in Mkhuhlu was sought and granted in a gatekeeper's letter issued by the principal of the school (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016, p. 43). A copy of each letter is included as **Appendix A** and **Appendix B**, respectively.

4.12 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter detailed the methodological approaches that this study utilised, while the decision to utilise the interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative research design was justified. The study site, study population, the sampling procedure, and the data collection methods were discussed in depth, and the step-by-step data analysis process was also clearly explained. The researcher acknowledged the limitations of the study methodology and clarified the steps that were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The measures that were taken to adhere to the ethical requirements that guide a study of this nature were also elucidated. The next chapter will present the data and the findings that emerged.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the researcher's analyses of the participants' experiences of cyberbullying in the Mkhuhlu community. The discourse focuses on how cyberbullying affected these young people's self-perception, academic performance, and social relationships. After a brief overview of the participants' biographical details, the chapter discusses the key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the semi-structured interview data. The researcher examines victims' coping strategies and evaluates the efficacy of current interventions and support systems, including those provided by family members, peers, and the school.

5.2 Profile of the Participants

Table 5: Summary of the participants' profiles

Participant number	Gender	Age	Social Media platforms used	Estimated time spent online before cyberbullying occurred
1	Female	18	Facebook, WhatsApp	10+ hours
2	Female	18	Facebook, WhatsApp	10+ hours
3	Female	18	WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook	8+ hours
4	Male	20	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram	5+ hours
5	Female	18	WhatsApp, Facebook	10+ hours
6	Female	18	Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram	8+ hours
7	Female	18	Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok	Not specified
8	Male	20	Facebook, WhatsApp	12+ hours
9	Female	20	Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok	10 +hours
10	Female	18	Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram	Not specified
11	Female	18	WhatsApp, Facebook,	Not specified
12	Male	18	WhatsApp, Facebook	Not specified
13	Male	19	Facebook, WhatsApp	8+ hours

14	Female	20	Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp	10+ hours
15	Female	18	Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram	9+ hours
16	Male	19	Instagram, WhatsApp	7+ hours
17	Female	20	WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook	12+ hours
18	Male	18	WhatsApp, Facebook	6+ hours
19	Female	19	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp	10+ hours
20	Male	20	WhatsApp, Twitter	9+ hours

In total, 7 male and 13 female learners participated in the study.

5.3 Themes and Sub-themes

5.3.1 Lived experiences of cyberbullying and identity disruption

5.3.1.1 Embarrassment and humiliation

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, meaning is constructed through social interaction as individuals interpret social symbols such as online comments, rumours, and public posts (Blumer, 1986).

“I felt so humiliated. I didn’t even want to go to school anymore because I knew people were talking about me. It felt like everyone was judging me.” Participant 6

Participants reported experiencing various forms of public shaming, including false rumours, gossip, emotional distress, and social isolation (Participants 4, 6, 7, 8, and 14). The rapid spread of harmful content among peers intensified their emotional distress and made it difficult for some participants to engage comfortably with others in their social environments. Many participants described how upsetting and damaging it was to see false or harmful information about them circulating online. This demonstrates how participants constructed negative self-meanings by interpreting public humiliation as a reflection of their social worth and belonging within their peer groups.

Research indicates that such forms of digital abuse, particularly the sharing of harmful texts and images, can significantly affect an individual’s emotional well-being (Feinberg and Robey, 2009). Similarly, El Asam and Samara (2016) highlight those cyberbullying behaviours such as impersonation and outing create opportunities for targeted embarrassment when private or

humiliating content becomes publicly visible. The rapid dissemination of this content among peers can further intensify victims' distress and affect their ability to interact socially or maintain a positive sense of self.

In addition, Nixon (2014) and Slonje and Smith (2008) explain that the broad reach and permanence of online content can amplify feelings of shame and humiliation because the material may remain accessible and can be repeatedly shared without the victim's control. In relation to the research question on identity, participants' narratives suggest that such experiences disrupted their self-concept and sense of belonging. For some participants, the humiliation associated with cyberbullying contributed to social withdrawal and thoughts of disengaging from school activities. These findings are consistent with Strom et al. (2013), who argue that online humiliation can have negative social and academic consequences, including strained peer relationships and reduced academic engagement.

5.3.1.2 Anxiety

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, meanings are continuously interpreted and reshaped through social interaction, influencing how individuals understand and respond to their social environments (Blumer, 1986).

“Even now, I’m careful about what I post because I don’t want to go through that again.” Participant 18

As a result of believing that others were continuously criticising them or talking about their circumstances online, several participants experienced anxiety (Participants 11, 12, and 18). As a result, these participants had become cautious and some lost interest in using social media. They reported a sense of heightened anxiety stemming from the belief that others were constantly criticising them or discussing their circumstances online (Participants 11, 12, and 18). This illustrates how cyberbullying can lead to hypervigilance and digital withdrawal.

According to Patchin and Hinduja (2010), repeated online harassment alters how victims perceive digital spaces, turning platforms once used for connection into sources of stress and risk. Smith et al. (2008) also emphasise that fear of repeated exposure contributes to emotional distress and avoidance behaviour, with victims limiting their online presence as a protective strategy. The symbolic interaction theory suggests that the meaning of online interaction is reshaped through negative social experiences such as derogatory posts, exclusion from group chats, or the absence of supportive responses, which then become enduring markers of social

position and marginalisation (Wicaksono, 2018). In this context, the participants began to associate social media use with symbols of surveillance, judgement, and potential harm, leading to anxiety, social withdrawal, and a diminished sense of digital agency

Anxiety also changed individuals' overall self-perception. Participant 12 acknowledged being more wary in general, saying they *“didn't trust people the same way anymore,”* implying that cyberbullying caused long-term mistrust that stretched beyond social media. For others, such as Participant 18, hypervigilance about online activities permeated their everyday routines, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability and decreasing their desire to explore socially. These tales show how fear evolved from an emotional state to a permanent identity orientation characterized by caution and mistrust.

5.3.1.3 Anger and frustration

“They made a fake account pretending to be me. I was furious!” Participant 7

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, emotional responses emerge from the meanings individuals attach to social symbols and interactions within their social contexts (Blumer, 1986). Whenever harassment was motivated by jealousy or betrayal by close friends, the participants exhibited rage (Participants 3, 5, 7, 15, and 19). When their personal information was exposed online or they were falsely accused, the participants felt powerless and unable to restore their sense of self-worth. For instance, the emotional distress experienced by Participant 7 reflects the common theme of rage and helplessness experienced when one's identity is violated through impersonation. This aligns with El Asam and Samara's (2016, p. 128) view that impersonation is a form of cyberbullying where attackers create false identities to mislead others, often damaging the victim's reputation. Such violations, especially when perpetrated by those perceived as close or trustworthy, intensify negative emotional responses.

Radebe and Kyobe (2021) highlight that victim often avoid reporting cyberbullying due to fear of retaliation, a lack of clear and supportive reporting structures, and limited institutional intervention. The absence of effective institutional support contributes to a structural form of powerlessness as victims have no formal channels to address the harm they experience. Slonje, Smith, and Frisé (2013, p. 28) affirm that repeated negative digital interactions can severely affect one's self-perception and sense of identity. Symbolic interactionism highlights that such emotional reactions stem from the meanings attached to social symbols such as personal photos

and online accounts (Blumer, 1986, p. 3; Fay et al., 2018, p. 243). The impersonation the participants were exposed to thus became more than a simple digital act, as they experienced it as social betrayal and a symbolic attack that disrupted their identities, social belonging, and emotional well-being. Forsberg and Thornberg (2016, p. 15) explain that such harmful interactions can erode one's self-concept, causing both frustration and social withdrawal.

Anger also influenced the self-concept. Participant 7 stated that the impersonation made them *"realise I couldn't trust even close friends,"* leading to a more resentful and distrustful view in their offline life. In contrast, Participant 3 used anger as a motivator for self-assertion, confronting peers directly. These diverse paths demonstrate that, while anger can undermine trust and breed animosity, it can also motivate people to reassert agency and regain control of their identities.

5.3.1.4 Behavioural changes in response to cyberbullying

Withdrawal:

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, individuals act based on the meanings they assign to social situations through interaction (Blumer, 1986).

"I feel like, the moment I put something online, someone will use it against me. It's better to stay invisible than to be laughed at." Participant 14

Participants (2, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 14) described withdrawing from online spaces to protect their mental health. Social media, once a platform for expression, became a site of fear and harm. Slonje, Smith, and Frisé (2013) argue that withdrawal is a common coping mechanism to avoid repeated humiliation. For Participant 14, social media's meaning shifted from self-expression to a threat, reflecting Blumer's (1986) idea that individuals act on meanings derived from interaction. Withdrawal was more than simply a temporary strategy; it became an integral part of their personality. Participant 14 stated, *"It's better to stay invisible,"* indicating that invisibility has become a long-standing self-definition. This demonstrates how participants reconstructed the meaning of social media from a space of self-expression into a threat, leading to withdrawal as a protective response.

Peer avoidance:

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, social relationships are shaped through shared meanings developed in interaction, particularly trust and belonging (Blumer, 1986).

“It hurt because the people I trusted were the ones talking badly about me [on social media].” Participant 1

Many participants (1, 3, 5, 13, and 17) described experiencing trust difficulties and social disengagement following cyberbullying, particularly when the perpetrators were individuals, they had previously considered friends. As a result, some participants avoided social situations where they might encounter further bullying, while others chose to distance themselves from former friends. Participant 1, for example, expressed a strong sense of betrayal after discovering that people they trusted were speaking negatively about them online. This led to emotional distancing and reduced interaction with peers.

These experiences align with findings by Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009), who note that cyberbullying can disrupt peer relationships and contribute to feelings of exclusion and mistrust. When cyberbullying originates within close social circles, the emotional impact may be more profound because of the personal nature of the betrayal. In such situations, victims may disengage from friendships and avoid social settings as a way of protecting themselves from further harm (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010, p. 619).

From a theoretical perspective, Giddens’s (1991) concept of time–space distancing helps explain how cyberbullying experiences extend beyond digital platforms. Modern communication technologies compress time and space, allowing interactions that occur online to quickly influence offline environments such as schools or community spaces. In this context, negative online experiences can shape face-to-face relationships and contribute to social withdrawal. As illustrated by Participant 1’s account, the erosion of trust in online interactions also affected offline relationships, reinforcing avoidance of previously trusted peers. These findings highlight how cyberbullying can disrupt social connections and influence participants’ sense of belonging within their peer networks.

Confrontation and defiance:

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, individuals actively interpret and redefine meanings through interaction, allowing for agency and identity reconstruction (Blumer, 1986).

“I looked them in the eye and told them how much it hurt. It didn’t fix everything, but at least I didn’t feel so powerless anymore.” Participant 3

Unlike those who shunned their peers, some resisted. Participant 3 faced bullies directly, recovering agency and moving away from passive victimhood to active self-definition. Sanders (2004) and Patchin and Hinduja (2010) argue that confrontation disturbs power dynamics in bullying. Stets and Burke (2003) add that identity is established through interaction, so that defiance might assist redefine self-perceptions. These data show that behavioural reactions ranged greatly, from retreat to vigorous confrontation, with each having unique implications for identity rebuilding and social membership.

5.3.2 Coping strategies

5.3.2.1 Family support (finding comfort in loved ones):

“My mom told me not to let what people say get to me, I still felt hurt, but knowing my mom had my back made it easier to deal with. I knew I wasn’t alone.” Participant 15

For some individuals, the family offered a strong emotional foundation that helped them cope with the psychological effects of cyberbullying. Some participants (3, 6, 20, and 15) found comfort in the presence of loved ones who listened without judgement and reminded them of their worth.

This illustrates how participants challenged and redefined negative meanings by asserting control, transforming their identity from passive victims to active agents. Holdren (2020) and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979), family relationships form part of the immediate social environment that profoundly influences an individual’s development of self-concept and resilience. Chapter 2 of this study elaborates on how peer and family support structures provide essential sources of validation and inclusion, helping victims counter a sense of social exclusion and reinforcing their sense of identity. Furthermore, Raza et al. (2020) emphasise that parental involvement serves as a protective barrier that helps to mitigate emotional distress and academic difficulties associated with cyberbullying. Together, these findings affirm that family support can foster a secure environment where young people will feel valued and less isolated regardless of their traumatic experiences. However, some people found it difficult to seek familial support. Participant 5 acknowledged to avoiding family interactions, feeling *“trapped at home.”* This contrast demonstrates that, while family may be protective, a lack of understanding can exacerbate isolation.

5.3.2.2 Self-affirmation and writing therapy to rebuild confidence

“I told myself that I am not what other people think of me, I can decompress and stop

keeping things within thanks to it.” Participant 11

Participant 11 described turning inward by using self-affirmation, journaling, and reflection as coping strategies to manage the emotional impact of cyberbullying. These practices provided a way for the participant to process their experiences and regain a sense of personal control.

From a theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism provides insight into how individuals interpret and reconstruct their identities following negative social interactions. Blumer (1986) and Mead (1934) explain that identity develops through ongoing social interactions and the meanings individuals attach to those interactions. When cyberbullying occurs, these meanings may challenge an individual’s self-esteem and sense of identity. However, reflective practices such as journaling may allow individuals to reinterpret these experiences and resist negative labels imposed by others.

Existing research supports the role of self-reflection in coping with cyberbullying. Patchin and Hinduja (2010) and Albdour et al. (2020) suggest that self-affirmation and reflective writing can help victims manage emotional distress and rebuild confidence. In this context, writing functions not only as an emotional outlet but also as a means of reframing experiences of social rejection. Through this process, Participant 11 was able to question the negative perceptions associated with the bullying and develop a more positive understanding of themselves. This illustrates how identity, although shaped through social interaction, can also be actively reinterpreted by individuals in response to challenging experiences.

5.3.2.3 Seeking institutional support

“...she assisted me in reporting it. At least I felt like I had someone on my side, even though it didn't stop everything.” Participant 5

Although not all the participants found formal support systems effective, one participant received meaningful assistance from one of the teachers at the school. The literature emphasises that institutional responses to cyberbullying critically affect how victims interpret and cope with their experiences. Slonje and Smith (2008) argue that a lack of intervention by school authorities can exacerbate victims’ sense of isolation and helplessness. Conversely, teacher involvement, even when it does not entirely stop bullying, provides important emotional validation and a sense of being supported, which can empower victims and lessen their social alienation. Theoretical insights from Forsberg and Thornberg (2016) and Blumer

(1986) suggest that symbolic validation from institutional figures reinforces the legitimacy of the victim's experience and positively influences such a person's self-perception. Additionally, Thorvaldsen et al. (2016) propose that support by schools contributes to the reconstruction of educational spaces as safe and inclusive environments, thereby facilitating victims' resilience and social reintegration. This shows that institutional assistance, however limited, has major symbolic value in changing how victims view their experiences.

5.3.3 The effects of cyberbullying on learners' academic achievement

5.3.3.1 Absenteeism

"I stopped participating in school events because I was scared of being mocked again."

Participant 16

Some participants (6, 8, 11 and 16) expressed how the emotional distress caused by cyberbullying led them to avoid school. Faryadi (2011, p. 25) found that 95% of cyberbullying victims reported classroom anxiety and difficulty focusing. This finding corroborates Participant 16's narrative that emotional distractions may impact negatively on cognitive performance. The symbolic interactionist lens (Blumer, 1986) shows how repeated negative social interactions shape how students perceive academic spaces and transform them from supportive environments to threatening ones.

5.3.3.2 Withdrawal from class participation

"Every time I considered raising my hand and asking questions in class, I thought of the hurtful remarks people had written about me online." Participant 8

Some participants (6, 11 and 8) also described how bullying caused them to disengage during lessons. The literature affirms that cyberbullying negatively affects students' self-esteem and goal orientation. For instance, Wentzel and Wigfield (1998, p. 158) highlight those beliefs about competence and motivation are core predictors of academic success; yet, victimisation disrupts these beliefs and results in academic withdrawal. Similarly, Patchin and Hinduja (2010, p. 619) assert that cyberbullying can redefine students' social identities, leading them to disengage from both social and academic goals.

5.3.3.3 Difficulty in concentration and lack of motivation

Loss of focus:

“It was difficult for me to concentrate on what the teacher was saying because I couldn't stop thinking about what others were writing about me online” Participant 5

Several participants (5, 6, 8, and 11) reported that they lost focus at school as a result of cyberbullying. Participant 5's narrative reveals that cyberbullying caused persistent distractions, making it difficult for them to concentrate in class. This aligns with Faryadi's (2011, p. 25) findings, which show that many victims experience anxiety and classroom distress directly linked to online bullying. From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1986), educational environments are interpreted through the lens of personal experience. If school is repeatedly associated with shame or anxiety associated with cyberbullying, then students begin to associate learning spaces with emotional discomfort, which disrupts their ability to focus. Apparently, the classroom that was traditionally seen as a place of growth and security has been transformed into a psychological battleground where self-worth is constantly questioned. Over time, this shift can severely impede both cognitive engagement and academic achievement.

Diminished motivation:

“I didn't see the point in trying anymore.” Participant 11

Participants 5, 6, and 11 reported experiencing a decline in motivation. The loss of motivation emerged as a common outcome of cyberbullying, particularly evident in Participant 11, who expressed that they no longer saw the point of trying. This emotional fatigue was rooted in feelings of hopelessness and a lack of social validation. Wentzel and Wigfield (1998, p. 159) argue that academic motivation depends on the belief that one's efforts can lead to success, but this belief dissipates when students feel targeted, marginalised, and unsupported. Patchin and Hinduja (2010, p. 619) explains that cyberbullying causes harmful outcomes as it is characterised by repeated negative feedback that distorts targeted students' academic self-concept and reduces their willingness to persist. When young people are constantly humiliated online, their self-esteem declines, and school performance becomes a secondary concern. This withdrawal from learning is not rooted in laziness, but in the deeper crisis of a lack of identity and self-worth.

Focus on academics as a coping mechanism:

“I chose to focus on my schoolwork more after the incident. It was the only place I felt in control and could forget about the other things.” Participant 2

Not all the reactions were negative, Participant 2 and 6 redefined academics as a coping tool. This is underpinned by Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, which posits that individuals, despite structural constraints (e.g., bullying), exert agency by choosing to reframe and act differently in their environments. Farhangpour et al. (2019) also describe students in rural Limpopo who focused on academics to resist victimhood and reclaim their identities.

5.3.4 Navigating romantic and family relationships as a result of cyberbullying

5.3.4.1 Impact on romantic relationships

Relationship breakdowns:

“My girlfriend broke up with me because of the things people were saying about me online. I attempted to clarify, but the harm had already been done.” Participant 8

Cyberbullying often disrupts romantic relationships, particularly when rumours, harassment, or public humiliation are involved. Reed, Tolman, and Ward (2016, p. 1558) argue that cyber-violence between current or former romantic partners can lead to significant trust issues, misunderstandings, and emotional pain. Victims may find themselves trying to repair their image in the eyes of their partners. However, this is often unsuccessful as public online narratives can overpower personal clarification, leading to breakups and lasting emotional trauma.

Avoiding any romantic involvement:

“After what happened to me, I couldn't imagine putting myself out there again, I was afraid of being humiliated or injured.” Participant 17

The fear of further humiliation discourages victims from forming new romantic bonds. Reed et al. (2016, p. 1558) discuss how previous experiences of cyber victimisation, especially in intimate contexts, can trigger anxiety, emotional disengagement, and reluctance to pursue future relationships. The emotional residue of past experiences of bullying often manifests as low self-esteem and fear of judgment, creating barriers to romantic involvement and perpetuating the cycle of loneliness and distrust.

5.3.4.2 Family assistance and conflict

Family support during/after emotional harm:

“My family really lifted me up. They stood by me and encouraged me to rebuild my confidence.” Participant 20

Participants 1, 3, 6, 14, 15, and 20 illustrate how strong family ties can serve as a buffer against the damaging effects of cyberbullying. Nixon (2014, p. 147) and Larrañaga et al. (2016, p. 2) assert that family support plays a crucial role in mitigating psychological harm and fostering resilience. Emotional validation from family members provides victims with a secure environment where they feel heard and protected. In moments where social circles and school systems fail, the home becomes a primary source of comfort and stability. These accounts demonstrate that identity formation was inextricably linked to the quality of familial contact. Family validation strengthened Participant 20's sense of worth, but Participant 5's alienation at home left them feeling *“trapped”* and unsupported, resulting in a more fragile sense of self. These stories demonstrate that cyberbullying not only impacts participants' emotional states, but also changes how they perceive themselves in connection to their closest social situations.

Withdrawal from family interactions:

“I just couldn’t talk to anyone from home. It was like I couldn’t even be in the same room as my family without feeling trapped.” Participant 5

While family can be a source of strength, it can also become a space of silence and disconnection. Some victims may avoid family conversations due to shame, fear of being misunderstood, or feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Nixon (2014) notes that the presence of family does not automatically translate into support for victims who do not receive understanding from family members. Such victims may seek support elsewhere, particularly from a trusted teacher. Larrañaga et al. (2016) add that miscommunication or emotional unavailability within the family can contribute to withdrawal and worsen the victim's sense of isolation.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter looked at the participants' lived experiences with cyberbullying, concentrating on identity disturbance, coping techniques, academic repercussions, and relationship dynamics. In response to the study questions, the findings show that, while cyberbullying frequently

resulted in shame, fear, anger, and withdrawal, participants also displayed a variety of coping techniques that altered their identities and social functioning. Importantly, not all individuals responded the same way. For example, Participant 14 completely avoided social media, but Participant 3 resisted by direct contact. Participant 8 became disconnected intellectually, whereas Participant 2 turned the experience into renewed academic emphasis. Similarly, Participant 1 faced betrayal and isolation from peers, but Participant 20 found strength in family support. These opposing micro-narratives demonstrate that cyberbullying is a complicated phenomenon with many identity outcomes. Overall, the data show that cyberbullying has a dramatic impact on how young people view themselves and others, with implications for emotional well-being, social connections, and academic engagement. At the same time, individuals demonstrated resilience by reframing their experiences with family support, writing therapy, or academic emphasis. These insights prepare the way for the following chapter, which will expand on the significance of these findings and generalize them across all participants in order to provide a more thorough solution to the primary study issues.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter further illuminates and interprets the findings that were presented in Chapter Five, with particular emphasis on the study's objectives, research questions, and theoretical framework. The analysis drew on the symbolic interaction theory to explain how young adults in Mkhuhlu perceived the personal, academic, and relational changes elicited by experiences of cyberbullying. The discussion situates the participants' narratives within broad social, cultural, and institutional contexts and links their lived experiences to existing literature by highlighting points of convergence and divergence.

6.2 Key Research Questions

The following questions were posed to give direction to the study:

1. What changes do young adults perceive in themselves as a result of experiencing cyberbullying?
2. What are young adults' perceptions of the effects of cyberbullying on their academic achievements?
3. How do young adults describe and navigate their relationships with their peers, romantic partners, and family members in the face of cyberbullying?

6.3 Interpretation of the Key Findings

6.3.1 Changes in self-perception and identity

Twelve participants reported experiencing humiliation, shame, and low self-esteem as a result of cyberbullying. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these emotional responses can be understood as the outcome of repeated negative social interactions occurring through social media posts, insulting comments, and digital exclusion. These interactions functioned as symbolic messages that communicated rejection and reduced social worth. As a result, several participants began to perceive themselves as less acceptable members of their peer groups. The findings further indicate that participants attempted to manage these negative experiences by blocking perpetrators or avoiding certain online spaces. However, the persistent and visible nature of harmful online content made it difficult for them to fully escape these interactions, and the impact on their self-perception often remained. In a context where social networks are closely connected, participants described how these experiences continued to influence how they viewed themselves. These findings are consistent with

previous research (Nixon, 2014; Patchin and Hinduja, 2010), which shows that cyberbullying can have lasting effects on young people's self-perceptions. Some participants also expressed fear of forming new relationships, suggesting that the impact of cyberbullying extended beyond immediate incidents and influenced their future social interactions.

6.3.2 The impact of cyberbullying on academic achievement

Several participants reported decreased academic motivation, difficulty concentrating, and occasional absenteeism following experiences of cyberbullying. Symbolic interactionism helps explain these outcomes by highlighting how identities are shaped through social interactions in everyday environments such as schools. When participants felt that their online reputations had been damaged, they also felt exposed or judged in the classroom environment. In line with Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management, the classroom became a social setting where participants feared embarrassment or negative attention from peers who were aware of the cyberbullying incidents. This often reduced their willingness to participate in class discussions or engage fully in academic activities.

Participants also indicated that schools sometimes responded inadequately to reports of cyberbullying. Many felt that teachers or administrators underestimated the emotional impact of online harassment, which further contributed to feelings of isolation. However, a small number of participants described receiving emotional support from individual teachers, which helped them cope and remain engaged academically. Although none of the participants reported dropping out of school, several expressed concern that cyberbullying could negatively influence their long-term academic aspirations.

6.3.3 Navigating relationships with peers, romantic partners, and family members

Participants described significant changes in their relationships with peers, romantic partners, and family members after experiencing cyberbullying. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, relationships are shaped by shared meanings that individuals attach to their interactions with others. When participants were bullied online, the meanings associated with their social relationships were often altered. Many participants reported losing trust in friends who had either participated in or failed to intervene in bullying incidents. As a result, some became more cautious about forming new friendships. Romantic relationships were also affected, with some participants reporting difficulties with trust and communication due to the emotional impact of online harassment. Family relationships produced mixed experiences. Some participants received emotional support from parents or siblings, which helped them cope with the situation. Others felt misunderstood or blamed by family members, which intensified feelings of isolation. These findings

demonstrate how cyberbullying can reshape social roles and expectations within different types of relationships, leading to long-term challenges in rebuilding trust and maintaining social connections.

6.3.4 Coping mechanisms and support systems

Participants adopted various coping strategies in response to cyberbullying. These included blocking perpetrators, deactivating social media accounts, and avoiding online interactions. Others relied on close friends or family members for emotional support. Support systems were experienced differently among participants. Some reported that schools provided limited responses to cyberbullying incidents, while others highlighted the positive role of individual teachers. Family support was generally described as helpful, although one participant reported negative experiences. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the nature of these interactions influenced how participants interpreted their experiences and reconstructed their sense of self. Participants who received validation and encouragement were better able to maintain a positive sense of identity, while those who experienced negative or limited support were more likely to internalise feelings of isolation. These findings demonstrate the importance of supportive social interactions in mitigating the effects of cyberbullying.

6.4 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate the usefulness of symbolic interactionism in understanding cyberbullying as a social process that shapes identity and relationships. Rather than being limited to individual harm, cyberbullying involves ongoing interactions in which meanings about individuals are constructed and reinforced through digital communication. Through repeated online interactions such as insults, rumours, and exclusion, victims may internalise negative labels that influence how they perceive themselves and how they interact with others. In this way, cyberbullying becomes a process through which identities and social roles are negotiated and sometimes damaged.

The findings also highlight how digital spaces intensify these processes. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, online interactions can remain visible for extended periods and reach wider audiences, making it difficult for victims to escape the social meanings attached to them. In close-knit communities such as Mkhuhlu, where social networks overlap across school and community life, these meanings may persist and continue to shape social relationships over time. Overall, the study contributes to symbolic interactionist perspectives by demonstrating how identity formation and social meaning-making are increasingly influenced by digital

interactions. Cyberbullying therefore represents not only a technological issue but also a social process that affects how young people understand themselves and their relationships within their communities

6.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could extend to scope of the study as follows:

- Explore the effects of cyberbullying on younger adolescents or older youths in different rural or urban settings in South Africa.
- Investigate the experiences of bystanders and perpetrators to understand the impact of cyberbullying across broader social dynamics.
- Examine the long-term impact of cyberbullying on educational trajectories and community involvement.
- Adopt a comparative approach across multiple communities to assess how cultural norms shape the meaning and impact of cyberbullying.

6.7 Conclusion

This study illuminated the nuanced ways cyberbullying affects young adults in Mkhuhlu's rural community, influencing not only individual self-concept but also academic engagement and the quality of social relationships. Participants' accounts illustrated how cyberbullying fosters shame, diminished self-esteem, and emotional distress, disrupting identity and social roles within peer and family networks. Academically, effects manifested as reduced motivation and concentration, compounded by limited institutional support from schools and teachers. Socially, cyberbullying fractured trust and belonging, with differing impacts across peers, romantic partners, and family. Coping strategies varied, but were often constrained by social stigma and inadequate formal interventions.

Importantly, the findings reveal that cyberbullying is deeply embedded in local social hierarchies and community values, which influence both its prevalence and victims' responses. This underscores the need for culturally informed, community-based approaches to prevention and support that engage educators, parents, and policymakers collaboratively. Limitations: This study's findings are based on a purposive sample of young adults from a single rural village, which may limit generalizability. Future research could expand samples and incorporate longitudinal methods to capture evolving impacts and recovery processes. Together, these insights contribute to a more holistic understanding of cyberbullying in under-resourced rural contexts and highlight the urgent need for multi-level interventions that

consider both online and offline social environments.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



11 December 2024

Tact Makgabane (218014024)
School of Social Sciences
Howard College Campus

Dear T Makgabane,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008029/2024

Project title: Exploring the implications of cyberbullying on young adults in the Mkhuhlu community, Mpumalanga province.

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 22 November 2024 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.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 11 December 2025.

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 sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

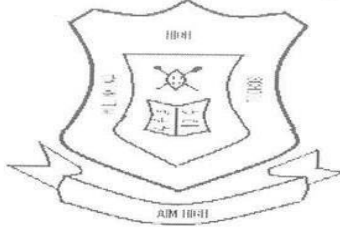
Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B: APPROVAL TO CONDUCT THE STUDY IN NKUNA HIGH

M.L. Nkuna High School

**P. O. BOX 2202
Mkhuhlu 1246**



**Calcutta C
Stand no. 001
Mkhuhlu 1246
EMIS: 800035098
CENTRE: 6436608**



PAYPOINT: 501029 MPUMALANGA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION email address: lukasnkua@gmail.com

Inquiries: Mashego T



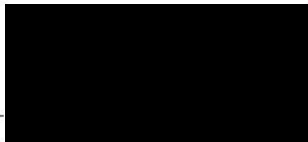
To: Makgabane T

This matter bears references

This letter serves to acknowledge your request and to officially allow you to conduct the research as indicated in the above mentioned institution.

Hoping that you will find this in order

Sincerely yours



School Principal



APPENDIX C: APPROVAL TO CONDUCT THE STUDY



health

MPUMALANGA PROVINCE
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

MATIKWANA HOSPITAL/

Stand No:413c Main street,R536 Hazyview/Skukuza Road, Mkhuhlu,1246

Private Bag x3007,Mkhuhlu,1246

Tel I: +27 (13) 708 6024, Fax: +27 (13) 708 6117

Litiko Letemphilo

Departement van Gesondheid

UmNyango WezeMaphilo

ENQ : Mr Khoza M.C
TEL : 013 708 6024

Mr Makgabane Tact
Student Number: 218014024
School of Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Dear Sir

RE: LETTER OF ENDORSEMENT ON THE STUDY - EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF CYBERBULLYING ON YOUNG ADULTS IN THE MKHUHLU COMMUNITY, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

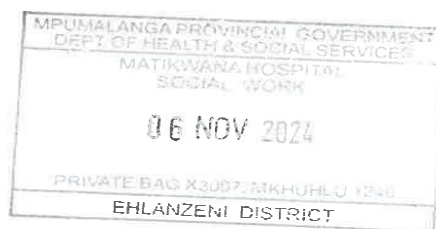
This letter serves to acknowledge your request to endorse your research study mentioned above.

Our office will earnestly provide psychosocial support to all participants who may be adversely triggered as a result of the data collection processes.

We wish you all the best in your academic endeavours.

Kind regards,

Mr M.C Khoza
(Social Worker)



APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent Document

Dear Participant,

My name is Tact Makgabane I am a Masters candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College. The title of my research is: Investigating the Impact of Cyberbullying on the Experiences of Young Adults Who Have Been Cyberbullied in the Mkhuhlu Community, Mpumalanga Province. The aim of the study is to provide insights into the individual experiences and the impact it has on identity. By understanding how young adults perceive themselves in the context of cyberbullying and its effects on their academic achievements and relationships within the community is crucial in today's digital landscape. I am interested in interviewing you so as to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about 30-45 minutes long
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate, please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

THE RESEARCHER CAN BE CONTACTED AT

Tact Makgabane

The School of Social Sciences,

University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Howard College Campus, Durban.

Contact Details

Email: 218014024@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Phone Number: (031) 260 1111

THE SUPERVISOR CAN BE CONTACTED AT

Dr Moya Bydowell
The School of Social Sciences,
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus.

Contact Details

Email: BydowellM@ukzn.ac.za Phone Number: 0332605358

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001 Durban 4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview **YES / NO**

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

APPENDIX E: USE OF DIGITAL WRITING TOOLS

In the preparation of this thesis, I made use of the following digital tools:

ChatGPT (OpenAI): This tool was used to assist with language refinement, restructuring sentences for clarity, summarising content, and improving the flow of academic writing. It was not used to generate original arguments, findings, or data but rather as a support tool to enhance readability and coherence.

Grammarly: This tool was employed for grammar checking, spelling correction, punctuation consistency, and minor stylistic improvements to ensure technical accuracy in academic writing.

The intellectual contributions, analysis, interpretation of data, and arguments presented in this thesis remain entirely my own. These tools were supplementary aids to improve the technical presentation of the written work.