

**THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON GRADE 7 LEARNERS' ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE IN VHEMBE WEST DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE**

by

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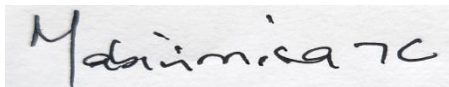
Title: The Effects of Cyberbullying on Grade 7 Learners' Academic Performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province.

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work, and all the sources I have used or quoted from have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality-checking software and that it meets the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

I take full responsibility for the content and conclusions presented in this work.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to read 'Mabirimisa TC'.

Signature

Date: 20/02/2026

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I am profoundly grateful to God for granting me the strength, wisdom, and unwavering fighting spirit that have sustained me throughout this academic journey.

In this respect, this work is a tribute to my late father, Tovhakale Vhulahani Sampson; to my late mother, Tovhakale Nyawasedza Rosinah; and to my late husband, Mbengeni Phillip Mabirimisa. In addition, it's a tribute to the love and encouragement of my parents, to their faith in me that is a source of motivation in my heart every morning. May their souls rest in eternal peace.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late parents, Mr. Vhulahani Sampson Tovhakale and Mrs. Nyawasedza Rosinah Tovhakale, for giving me life, comfort and making me the child I am today. This is also dedicated to my late husband Mr Mbengeni Phillip Mabirimisa, may God bless you wherever you are.

ABSTRACT (in English)

This study aimed to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province. Cyberbullying is an ongoing, deliberate act of aggression by an individual or group against a victim who is unable to defend themselves, utilising electronic modes of interaction. Despite cyberbullying being widespread in South Africa, there is limited research on the experiences of primary school learners, as existing studies focus mainly on high school learners. However, cyberbullying has detrimental effects on learner victims, particularly on their academic performance. The Department of Basic Education is also increasingly confronted with incidents of cyberbullying, as learners engage more with digital technologies. To understand this phenomenon, this study utilised a qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm, employing a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of learners' lived experiences of cyberbullying. The study population consisted of 24 purposively sampled participants from three primary schools: 9 Grade 7 learners, 9 school-based support team (SBST) members, 3 Grade 7 teachers, and 3 principals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals, focus group discussions with learners and SBST members, and document analysis. Bandura's social cognitive theory highlights how learners' behaviours and academic performance are influenced through interactions and by the environment.

Thematic analysis revealed that Grade 7 learners experience various forms of cyberbullying, including harassment, social exclusion, impersonation and dissemination of harmful digital content. Cyberbullying impacts learners' emotional well-being, self-esteem, concentration and classroom participation, often leading to poor academic performance. Learners frequently remain silent victims due to fear, stigma, and limited reporting mechanisms, resulting in emotional distress, psychological challenges, and behavioural difficulties that impair their academic performance. These findings indicate that cyberbullying poses a serious threat to both learners' academic performance and their general welfare. This study recommends implementing comprehensive school-based interventions, clear cyberbullying policies, digital citizenship education, and collaborative support to prevent and address cyberbullying.

Keywords: Academic performance, cyberbullying, effects of cyberbullying, primary school learners, social cognitive theory

ABSTRACT (in Tshivenda)

Masiandoitwa a u Tambudzwa nga Inthanethe kha Kushumele kwa Vhagudiswa vha Gireidi ya 7 Tshitiirikini tsha Vhukovhela ha Vhembe, Vunduni la Limpopo

Ngudo iyi yo tḱodisisa masiandoitwa a u tambudzwa nga inthanethe kha kushumele kwa vhagudiswa vha Gireidi ya 7 kha zwa pfunzo Tshitiirikini tsha Vhukovhela ha Vhembe, Vunduni la Limpopo. U tambudzwa nga inthanethe ndi nyito i bvelaho phanda, nga khole, ya vuhali nga muthu kana tshigwada kha mupondwa ane a sa kone u diimelela, hu tshi shumiswa ndila dza elekithironiki dza u tanganelana. Naho u tambudzwa nga inthanethe zwo phadalala Afrika Tshipembe, hu na thodisiso thukhu nga ha tshenzhemo dza vhagudiswa vha zwickolo zwa phuraimari, sa izwi ngudo dzi re hone dzi tshi sedza nga maanda kha vhagudiswa vha zwickolo zwa ntha. Naho zwo ralo, u tambudzwa nga inthanethe zwi na masiandoitwa a si a vhuḱi kha vha vhagudiswa, zwi huluhulu kha kushumele kwavho kwa pfunzo. Muhasho wa zwa pfunzo dza fhasi u khou ḱi tangana na zwiwo zwa u tambudzwa nga inthanethe musi vhagudiswa vha tshi khou tanganelana nga maanda na thekhinolodzhi dza didzhithala. U itela u pfesesa fhungo ili, ngudo iyi yo shumisa ndila ya thodisiso ya vhuimo nga ngomu ha paradigm ya thalutshedzo, i tshi shumisa nzudzanyo ya ngudo ya tsumbo u itela u kona u pfesesa tshenzhemo dza vhagudiswa dza u tambudzwa nga inthanethe. Tshivhalo tsha ngudo tsho vha tshi na vhatanganedzi vha 24 vho sampulwaho nga ndivho u bva kha zwickolo zwiraru zwa phuraimari: vhagudiswa vha 9 vha Gireidi ya 7, mirado ya thikhedzo ya tshikolo ya 9, vhadededzi vha 3 vha Gireidi ya 7 na thoho dza zwickolo 3. Datha yo kuvhanganywa nga kha inthavhiyu dzo dzudzanywaho nga tshipida na vhagudisi na thoho dza zwickolo, nyambedzano dza zwigwada zwo livhiswaho na vhagudi na tshigwada tsha thikhedzo ya Tshikolo na tsenguluso ya manwalo. Bandura's social cognitive theory yo sumbedza ndila ine vhuḱifari ha vhagudiswa na kushumele kwavho kha zwa pfunzo zwa tutuwedzwa ngayo nga u tanganelana na nga mupo.

Tsenguluso ya thero yo bvisela khagala uri vhagudiswa vha Gireidi ya 7 vha tshenzhela mifuda yo fhambanaho ya u tambudzwa nga inthanethe, hu tshi katelwa u holedza, u bviswa tshitshavhani, u diita muthu na u phadaladza zwithu zwi re khombo zwa didzhithala. U tambudzwa nga inthanethe zwi kwama vhuḱifari ha muhumbulo wa vhagudiswa, u dithonifha, u thogomela na u shela mulenzhe kilasini, kanzhi zwi ita uri vha sa shume zwavhuḱi kha zwa pfunzo. Vhagudiswa vha anzela u vha vhapondwa

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vho fhumulaho nga n̄wambo wa nyofho, u nyadziwa na maitete a u vhiga a si gathi, zwine zwa ita uri vha tsikeledzee kha muhumbulo, na vhuleme ha vhuḍifari vhune ha thithisa kushumele kwavho kwa pfunzo. Mawanwa o sumbedza uri u tambudzwa nga inthanethe zwi ḍisa khombo khulwane kha kushumele kwa vhagudiswa kha zwa pfunzo na kha vhuḍifari nga u angaredza. Ngudo iyi yo themendela u ḍivhadzwa ha u dzhenelela ho ḍisendekaho kha zwikolo, mbekanyamaitele dzi re khagala dza u tambudzwa nga inthanethe, pfunzo ya vhudzulapo ya didzhithala, na tshumisano vhukati ha zwikolo na zwiimiswa zwa thikhedzo u itela u thivhela na u langa u tambudzwa nga inthanethe.

Maipfi a ndeme: Kushumele kwa zwa pfunzo, u tambudzwa nga inthanethe, masiandoitwa a u tambudzwa nga inthanethe, vhagudiswa vha zwikolo zwa phuraimari, thyiori ya ḥhalukanyo ya matshilisano

ABSTRACT (in Sepedi)

Ditlamorago tša bomphenyašilo bja inthanete go mošomo wa baithuti ba Mphato wa 7 ka Seleteng sa Vhembe Bodikela, Profenseng ya Limpopo

KAKARETŠO

Nyakišišo ye e hlahloba ditlamorago tša bomphenyašilo bja inthanete go baithuti ba Mphato wa 7 ka Seleteng sa Vhembe Bodikela, Profenseng ya Limpopo. Bomphenyašilo bja inthanete ke tiro ye e tšwelago pele, ya ka boomo go tšwa go motho o tee goba sehlopha sa batho kgahlanong le mohlaselwa yo a sa kgonego go itšhireletša; batšwasehlabelo ba šomiša mekgwa ya tirišano ya elektroniki. Le ge bomphenyašilo bja inthanete bo atile ka Afrika Borwa, dinyakišišo tša maitemogelo a baithuti ba dikolo tša tlase dia hlokwa, ka ge dinyakišišo tše di lego gona di lebišitše kudu go baithuti ba dikolo tše di phagamego. Lega go le bjalo, bomphenyašilo bja inthaneteng bo na le ditlamorago tše kotsi go baithuti, kudu go tšwelopele kua dithutong tša bona. Kgoro ya Thuto ya Fase (elego DBE ka boripana) le yona e lebane kudu le ditiragalo tša bomphenyašilo bja inthanete ge baithuti ba tsenela kudu theknolotši ya titšithale. Go kwešiša tiragalo ye yabo mphenyašilo, nyakišišo ye e šomišitše mokgwa wa nyakišišo ya boleng ka gare ga mohlala wa tlhathollo, e šomiša tlhamo ya nyakišišo ya mohlala go hwetša kwešišo ye e tseneletšego ya maitemogelo a baithuti go ditlamorago tša bomphenyašilo bja inthanete. Batšeakarolo go nyakišišo ye ba akaretša baithuti ba masomepedi nne (24) bao ba tšerwego sampole ka nepo go tšwa dikolong tše tharo tša tlase: baithuti ba 9 ba Mphato wa 7, maloko a 9 a Sehlopha sa Thekgo ye e Theilwego Sekolong (SBST), barutiši ba 3 ba Mphato wa 7, le dihlogo tša dikolo tše 3. Datha e kgobokeditšwe ka dipoledišano tše di rulagantšwego le tše di sego tša rulaganywa gabotse (semi-structured interviews) le barutiši le dihlogo tša dikolo, dipoledišano tša sehlopha sa nepo le baithuti le maloko a SBST, le tshekatsheko ya ditokomane. Teori ya temogo ya leago ya Bandura (Bandura's social cognitive theory) e tšweleditše ka fao maitshwaro a baithuti le tiragatšo ya thuto di tutuetšwego ka ditirišano le ke tikologo.

Tshekatsheko ya merero e utolotše gore baithuti ba Mphato wa 7 ba itemogela mehuta ye e fapanego ya bomphenyašilo bja inthanete, go akaretšwa tlaišo, go kgaphelwa ka ntle ga setšhaba, go itira motho ka noši le go phatlalatša diteng tša titšithale tše kotsi. Bomphenyašilo bja inthanete bo ama maikutlo a baithuti, go itshepa, go tsepamiša

kgopolo le go tšea karolo ka phapošing; gomme seo se lebiša go tshepedišo ye mpe ya thuto. Baithuti gantši ba dula e le bahlaselwa bao ba homotšego ka lebaka la poifo, kgethollo, le mekgwa ye e lekanyeditšwego ya go bega, go feletša ka tlalelo ya maikutlo, ditlhohlo tša monagano, le mathata a boitshwaro ao a senyago maemo a bona a thuto. Dikutollo tše di laetša gore bomphenyašilo bja inthanete bo bea tšhošetšo ye kgolo go bobedi tshepedišo ya baithuti ya thuto le boiketlo bja kakaretšo. Nyakišišo ye e šišinya ditsenogare tše di feletšego tše di theilwego sekolong, melawana ye e kwagalago ya bomphenyašilo bja inthanete, thuto ya boagi bja titšithale, le thekgo ya tirišano go thibela le go rarolla bomphenyašilo bja inthanete.

Mantšu a bohlokwa: Tiragatšo ya thuto, bomphenyašilo bja inthanete, ditlamorago tša bomphenyašilo bja inthanete, baithuti ba sekolo sa fase, teori ya temogo ya leago.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FGD Focus Group discussion

REHC Research Ethics Higher Committee

SBST School-Based Support Team

SCT Social Cognitive Theory

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNISA University of South Africa

CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Cyberbullying is an ongoing, deliberate act of aggression committed by a person or group against a target who is unable to protect themselves by utilising electronic modes of interaction (Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015; Vyawahare & Chatterjee, 2020). This act of aggression is facilitated through the use of electronic device modes of interaction, such as cellular phones. E-mail, blogs, instant communication, text messages, virtual discussion spaces, webpages, online games, and social internet communities are all common platforms for cyberbullying. A new type of aggressive conduct among children called cyberbullying has emerged just recently as a result of the growing use of technology. Cyberbullying, which may take place on social media, messaging apps, online gaming platforms, and other digital platforms, is described as the utilisation of electronic communication to bully, menace, or harass people (Abarna et al., 2023). Worldwide, cyberbullying is a rising issue, and South Africa is no exception.

Today, learners' easy and rapid access to modern technology has emphasised cyberbullying as a prevalent online way of behaving among learners who actively utilise electronic devices to damage other learners' images. Learners have easy and immediate access to new things (Smith & Smith, 2020), negatively affecting both the socio-emotional and educational levels (Abbassi et al., 2024).

According to international research, cyberbullying affects not only teenagers but also primary school learners (Li et al., 2022). This has become increasingly apparent in the past two years of the COVID-19 epidemic, as social isolation has led to the dominance of the internet in learners' everyday lives (Chen et al., 2023). According to Depolis and Williford (2015), Sidera et al. (2020) and Zhang et al. (2023), up to 8% and 12% of primary school learners participate in cyberbullying, either as bullies or as victims.

The phenomenon known as "cyberbullying" occurs when learners intentionally engage in hostile conduct and utilise digital technologies to spread threatening messages to other people (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). Bullying of this nature can occur through a variety of communication channels, including short message services, applications, and online platforms where users can see, interact with, or exchange material. Cyberbullies may engage in a variety of destructive actions, such as spreading

rumours, publishing humiliating images or videos, or establishing fictitious personas to transmit false or unfavourable information, such as personal information about others that could embarrass or disgrace someone (Jane, 2020). Unfortunately, this type of bullying is becoming more prevalent as a result of increased technological accessibility, which makes it simple for people to post, comment, and share pictures and other information that may be seen by both friends and strangers. Such material might include hurtful and intimate remarks that, once posted online, form part of a permanent record of a person's actions, attitudes, and beliefs (Jane, 2020).

Despite the growing concern about cyberbullying in South Africa, there is limited exploration of the involvement of primary school learners in this context, particularly with respect to how it affects their academic performance. A greater part of the existing exploration has focused on high school students, and little is known about the experiences of younger children (Holfeld & Leadbeater, 2015). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District of Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Cyberbullying is a global problem that affects learners. Bullies now have an easier time tormenting their victims online because of the development of digital technology, which has grave psychological and emotional consequences (Cohen-Almagor, 2018; Mishra & Saini, 2023). Because of the well-established negative effects of cyberbullying, there is a greater need for education and activism to stop and treat this type of harassment. South Africa is one of the nations on the African continent where cyberbullying is widespread (Cohen-Almagor, 2018; Mpagi, 2022). The situation is exacerbated by the absence of regulation and the implementation of cybercrime laws in several African nations, which increases the incidence of cyberbullying. To address this issue, researchers have proposed more thorough laws and educational initiatives (Faucher et al., 2020).

According to Mkhize and Gopal (2021), online harassment of minors is increasing in South Africa, where incidences of cyberbullying have increased significantly. White et al. (2019) argued that many parents and instructors are unaware of how to recognise and deal with cyberbullying, which has contributed to this issue because of a lack of knowledge and comprehension. The South African government has acted by passing legislation and launching awareness programmes, but more must be done to safeguard learners from this type of abuse. Cyberbullying among primary school

learners is a growing problem in the province of Limpopo. There is a need for greater awareness and education initiatives to assist learners, parents, and teachers in understanding the issue and how to prevent cyberbullying, which has received scant attention in the province. The Limpopo Department of Education has acknowledged this issue and has taken steps to address it, but more steps need to be taken to protect learners from the harmful effects of cyberbullying (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2020). After the distracting suicide of a Grade 10 learner from Mbilwi Secondary School who killed herself following being tyrannised by other learners, Ms. Polly Boshielo, the MEC for Education in Limpopo, was engaged in consequential discussions with the learners from Mbilwi Secondary School in Sibasa, beyond Thohoyandou, on Thursday, 15 April 2020. The victim's physical assault by another girl was captured on a camera, and the video quickly went viral on social media, raising serious concerns that a long-standing issue is apparently emerging in schools. Bullying in our province's schools will not be tolerated. It interferes with teaching and learning. Boshielo said in the Limpopo Mirror on 23 April 2021, "You must notify the teachers right away if you witness a learner bullying another learner".

Smith and Smith (2020) believes that cyberbullying, which affects people of all ages and backgrounds, is a global issue that is becoming worse. Learners in primary school are not exempt from this phenomenon, which can have negative effects on their mental health and general well-being. Limpopo Province is also not immune to cyberbullying, and it is important to comprehend the accounts of primary school learners who have been victims of cyberbullying. The goal of this research project, "The Effects of Cyberbullying on Grade 7 Learners' Academic Performance in Vhembe West District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, is to explore the viewpoints, academic performance and experiences of primary school children who have experienced cyberbullying. The study's objectives include identifying many forms of cyberbullying that primary school learners in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province, face, how it affects their mental health, the effects it has on their academic performance, their well-being, and how they cope.

Victims of cyberbullying have unfavourable psychological effects such as sadness, anxiety, social discontent, poor school views, and, in rare cases, suicidal ideation. As demonstrated by Erreygers et al. (2016), Hinduja and Patchin (2022), and Slonje et al. (2013), substance misuse leads to suicide attempts and bodily injury. On the basis

of the possible negative consequences of internet bullying, Erreygers et al. (2016) and Wong (2020) both emphasised the importance of investigating how victims of cyberbullying cope as well as their coping mechanisms.

Victims are known to respond to cyberbullying threats in a variety of ways, but little emphasis has been placed on their academic implications and effects, particularly the way victims are influenced by threats. While several studies have investigated the influence of bullying on academic success, the results have been equivocal. Despite the stated odds ratios showing minimal impacts (OR = 0.8–0.9), the authors discovered that victims and bullies in schools had worse academic performance rates, which was demonstrated to be meaningful (Smith & Smith, 2020). Furthermore, Prince (2023) investigated the impact of undeviating intimidation, as a sufferer or a bully, on learners' educational success within the second and fourth grades. The effect of indirect bullying on victims was also shown (indirect/relational), although bullies were found to have greater academic performance. In a separate exploration, Evans et al. (2019) discovered that bullying has a detrimental effect on learners' grades and that being bullied is associated with worse accomplishment, which remains true even when learners attend schools with high bullying levels. The authors discovered that being exposed to multiple brutalities (sexual abuse, aggression by other learners, or bullying) had the most detrimental effects on educational performance. Similarly, Halliday (2023) and Kowalski et al. (2014) discovered that cyberbullying has detrimental effects on academic performance, with the latter having the greatest consequences.

Learners who are cyberbullied are likely to suffer from truancy, be absent from school and are reported to perform poorly in their academics.

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The motivation for this study stemmed from the researcher's experiences of witnessing some of the effects of cyberbullying in a school setting in Limpopo, where an unfortunate event occurred in which a former Grade 10 learner at the Mbilwi Secondary School committed suicide as a result of cyberbullying. This incident received local media coverage and directed attention to the potentially fatal results of cyberbullying among learners (Mthembu, 2022).

Despite the growing concern about cyberbullying in South Africa, there is limited research on the experiences of primary school learners in this regard. Tran et al.

(2021) argued that existing research has focused on high school learners and that little is known about the experiences of primary school learners. This study addresses this gap by exploring the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province (Sinyosi, 2015).

The researcher was further motivated by reports that she got from learners at her school who were complaining about the negative experiences around cyberbullying and its effects on their academic performance and was encouraged to research the topic. Moreover, in the context of Vhembe West District, where this proposed study was based, emerging literature suggests that cyberbullying among primary school learners is on the rise, an issue that has been reported by the Minister of Education in the Province (SABC NEWS). However, more scholars are needed to fully understand cyberbullying and its perspective, including the ways in which it might harm primary school learners.

The researcher's other motivation was a result of her observation that Grade 7 learners lack the skills necessary to exercise critical thinking when using internet-based technologies. Since cybercrimes do not take place within the walls of the school but nonetheless do damage to learners, teachers feel helpless in dealing with the detrimental effects on the physical and mental wellness of their learners. They frequently have to spend a significant amount of time in counselling sessions to fix broken psyches. Unfortunately, emotional scars can last a lifetime and often lead to conditions such as inequality, unequal power relations, and violence (Naicker, 2020).

The emergence of technology has led to a new dynamic concerning how learners exercise respect, offer consent, and grant autonomy. Since technology has become pervasive, especially in the last ten years, it is crucial to stay current with learners' social encounters (Naicker, 2020). However, exposure also has an adverse effect on learners' sense of identity, agency, and self. The researcher aim to be better both in my personal capacity as a mother and in my professional position as a teacher to have the potential to understand the internet to address the challenges that my learners face on a day-to-day basis.

Between 2011 and 2016, Child Line witnessed an 88% rise in cyberbullying counselling. ChildLine Bullying Report (2015–2016). Despite an increase in cyberbullying, young people continue to experience a significant amount of face-to-

face bullying. In 2015/16, Child Line gave a comparable number of counselling sessions concerning physical bullying (4,723 sessions, 51%) and cyberbullying (4,541 sessions, 49%) as per Child Line Bullying Report (2015–2016).

Another study by the South African Journal of Information Management [SAJIM] (2019) reported that cyberbullying negatively affected learners' emotions and academic performance such that some of them thought of committing suicide. Approximately 41 percent of the victims became less active in class, 24 percent of the victims' academic performance dropped, and 35 percent had repeated a grade since becoming targets of online bullying.

Cyberbullying usually occurs when perpetrators are anonymous; thus, it is critical to discover solutions to address this major issue, and this is one of the major aims of this study, as these learners live in a virtual world.

This research helps to identify some of the reasons for cyberbullying, which has the potential to aid in the development of strategies to reduce cyberbullying. This study investigated the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance, which can be helpful in underperforming schools, as this might be one of the reasons why certain learners underperform.

1.3 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying exists, it affects learners, academic performance may be impacted, and primary school learners are under-researched. According to Jabulani and Edward (2021) and Smith and Smith (2020), cyberbullying is a new form of bullying that puts victims, especially learners, in danger since they can feel targeted in both public and private spaces, such as their homes and school halls. People may experience online abuse at any time of day, which can have a major negative impact on their mental health. To effectively address cyberbullying, educators and parents must take a multifaceted approach to this issue.

The following discussion focuses on different types of cyberbullying methods, including harassment, flaming, exclusion, cyberstalking, outing, and masquerading, in relation to this research topic.

Sending unpleasant, threatening, or humiliating communications to a person or group on a regular basis via digital devices is known as harassment (Jabulani & Edward,

2021). In the context of primary school learners in Limpopo, South Africa, harassment may take many different forms, such as the posting of hurtful remarks on social networking sites or sending threatening text messages.

Flaming is the act of sending an individual anything unpleasant or derogatory to elicit a strong reaction from another individual (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). Learners in primary school may engage in flaming, which includes insults and nasty remarks, in online conversations or while playing video games.

Cretu and Morandau (2022) and Olweus (1993), who are well-known researchers in the field of bullying studies, stated that learners bully others when they say hurtful things about or make fun of another person; ignore or exclude that person from their group; hit, kick, push, or restrain that person physically; or tell lies, spread untrue rumours, or send hurtful notes in an effort to make other learners dislike that person.

Cyberbullying has the following characteristics: electronic contact, hostile conduct, intent, repetition (publicity), and harm to the victim. Academic difficulties and affective illnesses are the outcomes, with poorer self-esteem, higher levels of depression, and social exclusion being the most common causes (Ogundele, 2018).

The prevalence of victimisation ranges from 10% to 40%, whereas the prevalence of perpetration ranges from 3% to 20% (Selkie et al., 2020). Importantly, these rates differ depending on the timeframe used for assessment, and cyberbullying has a significant impact on and reach among primary school learners (Selkie et al., 2020).

1.3.1 Overview of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, which is defined as the use of internet communication to harass or bully others, has become a serious societal issue, particularly among young people. Numerous studies have examined the effects of cyberbullying on learners.

In his works, in 1973 and 1978, Adediran (2021) defined bullying as aggressive, intentional behaviour carried out by a group or individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily protect him or herself. Despite some disagreement over its precise definition, most experts concur that bullying entails repeated acts of aggression, a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim, and the intention to cause harm. Although the results are not entirely clear, various studies suggest that the prevalence and types of bullying vary among age groups. Bullying

appears to peak between the ages of 12 and 15 in primary school and tends to decline by the end of high school (Hymel et al., 2015). With respect to bullying types, there appears to be a transition as individuals get older from physical bullying to relational and indirect bullying.

According to Chan et al. (2021) and Washington (2015), the issue of cyberbullying in schools has received increasing attention in the literature. First and foremost, cyberbullying is a type of bullying that takes place on digital platforms and gadgets, including social media, messaging applications, and online games. Spreading stories, threatening someone, sending harassing messages, and posting humiliating or incriminating photos or videos are just a few examples of the many different ways it may manifest (Hinduja et al., 2022; Zotti, 2023). Cyberbullying victims may experience sadness, low self-esteem, and tension. Some of them commit suicide or engage in violence if they cannot overcome it. The need for preventive measures, such as raising awareness through campaigns and improving national legislation, has increased along with the prevalence of cyberbullying. Descriptions of the issue of access to technology while travelling have increased interest in becoming a cyberbully or a victim.

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the usage of new media technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones (Inganah et al., 2023). The increasing use of modern technology in classrooms can enhance student social engagement and collaborative learning possibilities. The use of computers in the classroom has been shown to improve learners' learning across the board, according to extensive studies. However, the use of electronic communication in the classroom also leads to problems that need our attention (Inganah et al., 2023). According to a study conducted on 355 learners aged between 12 and 18 years in the Jazan region, Saudi Arabia, 42.8% of cyberbullying cases occurred, with males experiencing cyberbullying at a slightly higher rate than females did. Among the participants, 20% spent more than 12 hours on the internet every day (Gaffney et al., 2023).

1.3.2 Forms of cyberbullying

There are different forms of cyberbullying, which include the following:

1.3.2.1 Exclusion

Exclusion is the purposeful exclusion of a person or group from online discussions or social media groups (Connolly & Connolly, 2014; King et al., 2023). This type of

cyberbullying may be especially damaging since it can cause feelings of social alienation and loneliness (Jabulani & Edward, 2021).

1.3.2.2 Cyberstalking

According to Smith and Smith (2020), cyberstalking is the practice of constantly watching and observing someone's online behaviour, frequently with the intention of frightening or hurting them. For learners, this kind of cyberbullying may be especially terrifying since they might not have the knowledge or tools to defend themselves against predators online. When someone is ousted, personal or private information about them is shared with the goal of embarrassing or humiliating them. Learners in primary school may share humiliating pictures or videos online or divulge private information to strangers on an outing. When someone is ousted, personal or private information about them is shared with the goal of embarrassing or humiliating them. Grade 7 learners may share humiliating pictures or videos online or divulge private information to strangers on an outing.

1.3.2.3 Masquerading

Farkas and Neumayer (2020) argue that masquerading is the practice of misleading or controlling people by assuming a false online persona. Because it may cause trust difficulties and feelings of betrayal, this type of cyberbullying can be especially damaging to learners in particular. Trickery is the act of tricking someone to obtain sensitive and intimate information, which is subsequently shared with a broad audience. This is also known as phishing or spoofing, and it involves sending an unknown target to a fake website and collecting sensitive information (Campbell & Bauman, 2018).

Masquerading is the use of another person's online persona to harm another person's reputation. This word is frequently used in conversations about Megan Meier's death, who was tormented online by a friend's mother using a phony internet persona; because there was no active federal legislation holding the offender accountable, she was simply charged with computer abuse (Sung, 2018).

1.3.2.4 Trolling

Trolling is the purposeful use of insults or offensive language on social networking sites and message boards. Trolling can also refer to pursuing or extending an

inflammatory debate on a social networking platform by directing the topic to the individual's personal message and using offensive language (Hardaker, 2010; Liu et al., 2023).

1.3.2.5 Sexting

The distribution, forwarding, or transmission of sexually explicit texts, photographs, and photos between electronic devices is referred to as sexting. Sexting can be classified as both sexual harassment and sexual assault when the individual does not consent (Mishna et al., 2022; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

Fake profiles can be made for someone to conceal their true identity and cyberbully someone (Abassi et al., 2025). The cyberbully may also cyberbully someone else's email or cell phone. This would give the impression that the threats were sent by someone else. The cyberbully is terrified that their identity may be disclosed, so they create bogus accounts. This typically suggests that the cyberbully is someone who knows the victim very well because the offender would not have to mask their identity if they did not know them well.

1.3.2.6 Dissing

Ifon (2023) argue that dissing is the act of emailing or posting derogatory material about someone on the internet in order to harm their reputation or friendships with others.

1.3.2.7 Fraping

Frapping occurs when someone enters into a social networking account and posts improperly on someone else's name (Dennehy et al. 2020). Fraping is a severe offence that many people feel is amusing and enjoyable, but it is not. Impersonating someone and destroying their reputation online may have significant implications. Remember that Google never forgets, so anything offensive or otherwise placed online will never be completely erased, even if it is removed.

1.3.2.8 Catfishing

Catfishing occurs when someone steals someone's online identity, typically images, and re-creates social networking profiles for fraudulent motives (Geldenhuys, 2023).

1.3.3 Factors contributing to cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has several unfavourable consequences, such as despair, anxiety, and suicide, and is an issue that is becoming increasingly prevalent, especially among young people. The involvement of learners in face-to-face interactions is the main factor influencing bullying and victimisation. Despite its limitations, an earlier study revealed a connection between conventional bullying and cyberbullying (Eyuboglu et al., 2025). Therefore, it is anticipated that participation in conventional bullying behaviour might foretell cyberbullying and cyber victimisation. Another key issue to consider is gender, since studies and press reports have demonstrated that it has a substantial effect on school violence and bullying. According to several studies, male learners are more prone than their female counterparts to engage in bullying conduct and to become the target of bullying. Several important elements that may increase the risk of cyberbullying behaviour have been identified through critical literature assessment of factors contributing to cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022; Ogunkuade & Kenku, 2023).

- *Anonymity*: The anonymity offered by internet communication is one of the major aspects that leads to cyberbullying. For instance, bullies may act without worrying about being exposed, making it simpler to prey on the weak (Englander, 2023; Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).
- *Accessibility*: Bullies now find it simpler to target victims owing to the ubiquitous availability and accessibility of digital technology such as cell phones and social media platforms. The continual connectedness of social media might make it challenging for victims to avoid harassment (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).
- *Social norms*: Popularity, status, and power-based social norms can support cyberbullying. Bullying may be accepted or even encouraged in this context because of these standards (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).
- *Lack of parental monitoring*: One element that contributes to cyberbullying is a lack of parental supervision of children's internet activity. Unattended learners are more likely to bully others or become victims of bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).
- *Psychological factors*: Some psychological traits, including low self-esteem, sadness, and anger, are connected to cyberbullying behaviour. People who

suffer from these difficulties may be more inclined to bully others online or to be bullied themselves (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).

- *Peer influence*: Another component that has been linked to cyberbullying is peer pressure. Cyberbullying may occasionally be used by people to assimilate into a group or win the acceptance of their peers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).
- *Lack of consequences*: Another aspect that contributes to cyberbullying is the absence of penalties. Because cyberbullying frequently occurs online, it can be challenging to track the offender and make them answerable for their acts (Greco, 2020; Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).

Cyberbullying is a growing concern in primary schools in South Africa, with various factors contributing to its occurrence (Piliso, 2020). This critical literature review examines the key factors that contribute to cyberbullying in primary schools in South Africa.

- *Technology access and usage*

Teenagers' access to and use of technology are among the main causes of cyberbullying. Learners have additional opportunities to engage in cyberbullying because of the growing availability and usage of technology. Research has shown that learners who use several devices and spend more time online are more likely to engage in cyberbullying (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Jun, 2020).

- *Social media and online anonymity*

Currently, children often use social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to engage in cyberbullying. Learners can bully others without fear of detection because of the anonymity of these sites. According to research, learners who use social media platforms anonymously are more likely to engage in cyberbullying (Chan et al., 2023; Mishna, 2012).

- *Lack of parental supervision and guidance*

The absence of parental supervision and advice is another element causing cyberbullying in primary schools. Learners may be more inclined to engage in cyberbullying if they do not receive parental counsel regarding their behaviour online. Research has shown that parental supervision and advice can considerably lower the

likelihood that learners will engage in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022; Vezne et al., 2023).

- *Peer pressure*

In rural primary schools in South Africa, peer pressure also plays a role in cyberbullying. Children are more likely to engage in cyberbullying if they feel compelled to do so by their peers. According to Kowalski et al. (2014) and Ranjith et al. (2023), peer pressure is a strong predictor of learners' conduct in regard to cyberbullying.

- *Low self-esteem and bullying victimisation*

Learners who lack self-confidence and who have experienced bullying are more likely to engage in cyberbullying. Research suggests that, as a means of seeking control and authority, learners who have been bullied may be more inclined to engage in cyberbullying (Slonje et al., 2013; Wang & Ngai, 2022).

1.3.4 Effects of cyberbullying on learner victims

Worldwide, learners are subject to cyberbullying. According to a large body of research, experiences with cyberbullying are quite similar across most nations (Campbell et al., 2019; Ngo et al., 2021; Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2012). For instance, Li et al. (2024) reported parallels between the cyberbullying of teenagers in China and Canada. In terms of cyberbullying, Thorell et al. (2021) and Vazsonyi et al. (2012) reported few group differences across 25 European nations. Research has indicated that learners who are the targets of cyberbullying suffer unfavourable outcomes. There are four types of negative effects: academic, psychological, social, and physical.

1.3.4.1 Academic effects of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has negative effects on the academic performance of learners. Academic performance has also been shown to suffer as a result of cyberbullying (Aparisi et al., 2021; Erreygers et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it has been established that learners who experience cyberbullying suffer academically. Hinduja and Patchin (2022) and Rębisz et al. (2023) reported that victims of cyberbullying are more likely than non-victims to skip school, have poorer grades, and feel less like they belong at school. Similarly, Halliday et al. (2023) and Mishna et al. (2010) reported that victims of cyberbullying are more likely than non-

victims to have academic issues, such as decreased attendance and poor performance.

Learners must focus on earning excellent grades, but being bullied makes it impossible for them to do so in any academic activity. Tjavanga and Jotia, (2012) and Kaur and Saini (2023) reported that 62% of learners who were victims of cyberbullying failed to pay attention in class and that 5% of victimised learners would continually worry about their attackers in cyberbullying research. Learners who are bullied frequently receive poorer marks and are at risk of poor academic performance. Academic performance is the knowledge gained, which is graded by the teacher. Academic performance is also described as educational goals set by learners that must be met over time (Narad & Abdullah, 2016; Zimmerman, 2023). Cyberbullying is on the rise (Mitsu & Dawood, 2022).

Absence from school is another effect of bullying. Bullying victims tend to separate themselves from others (Farhangpour et al., 2019). Cyberbullying may also impact the cyber-victim's antisocial conduct. Victims may want to avoid involvement in school activities. Self-isolation may make a person depressed, which might interfere with their focus and capacity to study (Farhangpour et al., 2019; Fomina et al., 2021; Smith, 2024).

According to the faucet hypothesis, learners improve their skills by being exposed to schooling regularly, and they cease making educational gains when exposure is interrupted (Di Pietro et al., 2023). As a result, learners who receive fewer hours of teaching during the school year are at a disadvantage in their learning, obtain poorer grades, perform worse on tests, and are more likely to drop out after completing compulsory education (Keppens 2023; Morrissey et al., 2014). Empirical research suggests that more time spent on classroom teaching is connected with higher academic attainment (Hoferichter et al., 2021). Learners who are regularly absent from school may feel less integrated into their class and find it difficult to engage.

Owing to its linkages with learner–teacher interactions, truancy may be negatively correlated with learners' academic performance. The evidence suggests that teachers have a negative perception of their learners' externalising difficulties, which leads to increased learner–teacher conflict and decreased learner–teacher intimacy (Roorda & Koomen, 2021). Teachers are also more annoyed and frustrated with learners who

skip school due to truancy (Filippello et al., 2019). As a result, teachers may be less eager to assist learners who skip school because they are truant in catching up on lost classes. Furthermore, truant learners may feel more alienated from their friends, teachers, and schools (Kleinsasser & Heinze, 2023) and may receive inadequate assistance to help them study. They may also be academically disinterested, with little desire to catch up with the material.

These results imply that learners' academic performance may be negatively impacted by cyberbullying. The effects of cyberbullying on learners, according to certain studies, may vary depending on the individual cyberbullying conduct involved. Ybarra and Mitchell (2014) and Zhu et al. (2021) reported that, compared with other types of cyberbullying, instant message harassment was related to worse psychological effects. Similarly, Li et al. (20) and Ngo et al. (2021) reported that social networking site cyberbullying had a more detrimental effect on learners' psychological well-being than did other types of cyberbullying. These results imply that the sort of cyberbullying that occurs may have a bearing on how it affects learners.

A 2023 study that revealed that 81.0% of American learners who use the internet also use social media provides evidence that social media use among young people is becoming more common. Surveys conducted as early as 2009 revealed that more than half of the learners used social media sites numerous times per day, with 22.0% logging on to a favourite website more than 10 times per day, indicating the beginning of this trend. Users may communicate, connect, obtain information, and increase their learning chances on social media sites. Social media offers many advantages, but it also has drawbacks, including the problem of cyberbullying, which has recently received much public attention and legal attention. Cyberbullying is the term used to describe an aggressive and purposeful act committed by a person or a group over time using internet communication against a target who is unable to defend themselves properly (Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015). The abuse may be quick, extensive, and long-lasting due to cyberbullying's online character, and since offenders can stay anonymous, the severity of the issue is exacerbated.

Learners must concentrate during classes to do well in school, but being bullied makes it difficult for them to concentrate and pay attention in class. According to Salmivalli et al. (2021) and Tjavanga and Jotia (2012), 62% of the learners who were bullied did not pay attention in class, and 5% indicated that they were always thinking about

bullies. Aparisi et al. (2021) and Hong et al. (2014) demonstrated that cyberbullied learners frequently receive poorer marks and are at risk of poor academic performance. Bullying, according to Siddique et al. (2023), frequently causes victims' emotional suffering and undermines their self-esteem, resulting in a reduction in academic performance. Marennyenya (2023) reported that absenteeism from school is another effect of bullying in schools worldwide. According to Koptleuova (2023), some victims of bullying forget to go to school to avoid being bullied. Esquivel (2023) discovered that victims of school bullying despise school because they are afraid of being bullied.

1.3.4.2 Psychological effects of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying involvement has been linked to depression, anxiety, stress, emotional issues, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts in terms of its detrimental effects on psychological well-being (Aoyama et al., 2011; Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Mong, 2020). Cyberbullying has detrimental effects on both victims and perpetrators, with mental, emotional, and social scars that can have long-term impact. Its perpetration often stems from previous involvement in traditional or cyberbullying victimisation. Anger is the main motive for cyberbullying. Research indicates that cyber violence victims experience harm, anger, fear, and embarrassment, with females reporting these emotions compared to their male counterparts (Badour & Brown, 2021). The emotional and social outcomes of cyber victimisation compared to traditional bullying have more negative impacts on a learner's physical, social, and cognitive well-being. As a result, victims suffer from depression, suicidal ideation, truancy, school problems, and deviant behaviours. Long-term negative outcomes include delinquency and substance abuse (Han & Park, 2023; Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).

According to several studies by Hinduja and Patchin (2022) and Martínez-Monteagudo et al. (2020), cyberbullying victims have greater levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than non-victims do. In a similar vein, Ho et al. (2020) and Kowalski et al. (2014) reported that, compared with non-victims, cyberbullying victims had higher levels of social anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem. These results imply that learners' psychological health may be significantly impacted by cyberbullying.

According to Li et al. (2024) and Maurya et al. (2022), although cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon, research has revealed a connection between

experiencing and engaging in cyberbullying and depressive disorders, poor self-esteem, behavioural issues, and drug misuse. Additionally, there may be a link between cyberbullying and deliberate self-harm since, according to recent studies, cyberbullying is more closely linked to suicidal ideation than traditional bullying is (Dorol & Mishara, 2021; Kowalski et al., 2014). To assess its link to real suicide attempts, however, more data are still needed. Because three investigations presented a wide definition of cyberbullying that included peer bullying across all forms of technology, they served as an essential starting point for a specific study on cyberbullying through social media (Chun et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2023). Social media still provides enormous advantages to young people despite the problems caused by cyberbullying, underscoring the importance of addressing and reducing this problem.

“Learners’ suicide is seen as the most serious consequence of being cyberbullied” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 283). “The increase in bullying on social media and other online platforms has caused instances of teen suicides to rise dramatically because many teens do not have the emotional capacity to deal with severe bullying” (Feinberg & Robey, 2009 p. 12). This is the primary reason why it is so important to stop this behaviour. “Cyberbullying may make a person feel very distressed and alone when he or she is bullied online” (Feinberg & Robey, 2009 p. 12).

“Victims of cyberbullying are almost two times more likely to attempt suicide than those who were not bullied” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 283). “Although cyberbullying cannot be identified as a sole predictor of suicide in adolescents and young adults, cyberbullying can increase the risk of suicide by amplifying feelings of isolation, instability, and hopelessness with pre-existing emotional, psychological, or environmental stressors” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022, p. 125).

Bullying may have a negative impact on victims' health and well-being, particularly their psychological health. Victims frequently feel isolated from school and the community and suffer from severe stress (Brigs, 2020). According to Ngo et al. (2021) and Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007), victims of cyberbullying may experience poor overall psychological circumstances. Their findings revealed that 31% of victimised learners were very sad or very unhappy, 19% were very or extremely terrified, and 18% were very or extremely ashamed by online abuse. Englander (2020) and Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) also discovered that repeated acts of cyberbullying

jeopardised healthy self-esteem development and were related to school failure, dropout, and increased psychiatric symptoms, including melancholy and anxiety. Furthermore, victims of persistent bullying are more likely to accept and internalise the bullies' treatment, leaving them with the impression that they have no control over their lives (Patterson et al., 2019; Salmivalli et al., 2021). As a result, people may acquire a negative worldview, with long-term effects that extend beyond psychological injury into a dysfunctional lifestyle.

If victims of bullying do not receive appropriate treatment to address the negative consequences, the damage can worsen, and in severe circumstances, victims may resort to self-harm or suicide (Fischer et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2023). A study by Benatov et al. (2022) on middle school learners in the United States revealed that both bullies and victims had suicidal thoughts, but victims had more suicidal thoughts than others did and were more likely to attempt suicide.

1.3.4.3 Social effects of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying among primary school learners has social implications. As a result, cyberbullied learners develop antisocial behaviours and have difficulty forming relationships (Mguye & Omadan, 2025). Cyberbullying poisons the school environment, making it difficult for learners to establish normal social relationships with their peers. Furthermore, cyberbullied learners develop a fear of socialising with their peers. Lozano-Blasco et al. (2020) discovered that both cyberbullies and victims of cyberbullying suffer social issues in their relationships.

Bullying victims also have few or no friends (Menessin & Salmivalli, 2017). Slonje et al. (2013) reported that learners with no experience of being bullied prefer not to associate themselves with learners who have experienced bullying. Aljabri et al. (2023) discovered that some victims of bullying purposefully separate themselves by picking learning areas with few learners to avoid being bullied. Separation makes sufferers depressed, which might interfere with their focus and capacity to study.

1.3.4.4 Physical effects of cyberbullying

Learners who have experienced cyber victimisation also frequently report being in poor physical condition (Osiesi et al., 2023). Research has shown that bullied learners frequently have inexplicable pains (headaches) and severe discomfort, a lack of appetite, bad posture, gastrointestinal problems, and physical injuries that necessitate

hospitalisation. Bullying can kill both bullied and bullying learners (Osiesi et al., 2023). Having suffered from bullying in primary school increases the likelihood of future psychopharmacological medication utilisation, increased body weight (boys), and teenage pregnancy (girls), whereas being a perpetrator increases the likelihood of future criminal convictions (Zhu et al., 2021).

1.3.5 The significance of prevention and intervention of cyberbullying in schools

Research on interventions for cyberbullying seeks to intervene in ongoing incidents and offer help to cyber bullies, cyber victims, or cyberbullying victims, as opposed to an elimination exploration, which focuses on stopping cyberbullying situations before they start (Perren et al., 2010). Studies on prevention and intervention are needed to demonstrate their efficacy in stopping cyberbullying and/or intervening in it. Owing to the overlap between conventional bullying and cyberbullying, some individuals can claim that creating preventive and intervention research is not especially necessary for cyberbullying (Chen et al., 2023). However, cyberbullying still has a distinct relationship with unfavourable consequences, even when typical school bullying is considered (Perren et al., 2010).

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To examine cyberbullying and academic performance, several key theories are used. Social cognitive theory (SCT) proposes that cyberbullying diminishes learners' motivation, engagement, and achievement by eroding self-efficacy through repeated online threats and harassment (Garg & Mahipalan, 2023). Research has revealed that cyberbullying affects learners' self-efficacy and performance over time, thereby affecting motivational resources crucial to academic success (Clark & Bussey, 2020). Groves (2022) noted that modelling positive behaviour can help learners grow resilient to the educational effects of cyberbullying.

Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), cyberbullying is seen as the result of dysfunctional interactions among a variety of systems, such as individual traits, school climates, and cultural norms. Considering this multi-layered perspective, it is imperative to promote positive digital behaviours among peers and adults as a means of prevention (Zhong et al., 2022). As with dehumanising emotions towards marginalised groups, the intergroup emotions theory

explains how they can motivate cyberbullying and interfere with school performance when internalised (Chan et al., 2023).

According to the social information processing model, cyberbullying aggression may be precipitated by biases in interpreting social cues (Fung, 2024). As a result of empirical research guided by these frameworks, cyberbullying has been found to possess multivariate roots across systems, as well as a link to academic struggles (Kowalski et al., 2021). Research on cyberbullying and its educational impacts relies heavily on theories that illuminate individual thought patterns, interpersonal relationships, and systemic contexts. These findings reveal how cyberbullying can impede learning and achievement through the complex interplay of factors shaping it. As these perspectives continue to be integrated, conceptual models guiding effective, multifaceted solutions have been enhanced.

1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Cyberbullying has detrimental effects on learner victims, particularly on their academic performance (Farhangpour et al., 2019). Bullying that takes place online is referred to as cyberbullying. Different types of technology, such as computers, mobile phones, tablets, and other social media communication tools, may be included (Scheithauer et al., 2021). According to Ferguson (2023), cyberbullying is a widespread issue.

This study aimed to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. This aim was designed to prevent future primary school learners' victimisation through social media platforms. If schools' social media pages and learners' use of technological devices are monitored accordingly, cyberbullying can be minimised in schools.

The issue with cyberbullying in schools is that schools and district officials do not understand how to properly address the issue, such that learners notice a drop in both the prevalence and negative effects of their academic performance (Anttila et al., 2023; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). While there has been an increase in cyberbullying awareness, there is a dearth of solid data to provide schools with proactive methods to address this problem. The bulk of school-aged learners were born into a culture in which technology use has always been a constant in their lives. As learners enter adolescence, they spend a significant amount of time on the internet and social

networking. Although there are several advantages of using the internet, learners are the primary beneficiaries.

In scholarly circles, cyberbullying and its ramifications for learners have attracted considerable attention; however, there remains a noticeable gap regarding its impact on Vhembe West District learners in Limpopo Province. Since these learners are at a critical developmental stage and would soon transition into secondary school, this oversight is particularly concerning. In existing studies, high school learners have been given the greatest amount of attention, whereas primary school learners have received a scant amount of attention, especially within specific South African contexts (Escortell-Sánchez, 2023). Research into the experiences of primary school learners, who are just as vulnerable to cyberbullying as older students, is imperative. Currently, no studies have been conducted in this region or age group to formulate effective, context-specific interventions designed to mitigate the detrimental effects of cyberbullying on learners' academic success and mental health.

1.6 STUDY JUSTIFICATION

By exploring how cyberbullying impacts the academic performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District, the study aimed to bridge this gap. The study aimed to add significant knowledge to the existing body of knowledge about cyberbullying among this demographic by shedding light on its nature, prevalence, and effects. Educators, policymakers, and the academic community can benefit from the findings of this study by developing targeted strategies and policies for addressing cyberbullying's unique challenges. In addition, this study aimed to enrich researchers' understanding of cyberbullying's multifaceted effects by focusing on a relatively understudied area and age group, paving the way for better education practices and interventions that safeguard the academic success and well-being of primary school learners in South Africa.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.7.1 Main question

What are the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo?

1.7.2 Sub-questions

1. How do Grade 7 learners experience cyberbullying in Vhembe West District?
2. What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying in Vhembe West District?
3. How does cyberbullying affect the performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District?
4. What can be done to prevent cyberbullying in Vhembe West District?

1.8 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.8.1 Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo.

1.8.2 Objectives

- To explore the cyberbullying experiences of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe, West District.
- To understand the factors that contribute to cyberbullying in Vhembe West District.
- To determine how cyberbullying affects the performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District.
- To identify ways in which cyberbullying can be prevented in Vhembe West District.

1.9 DEFINITION OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

- **Effects** - a change that occurs because of anything being done or happening. (Siregar, 2022). In context of cyberbullying, effects refer to negative emotional, psychological and social changes.
- **Cyberbullying** - Cyberbullying refers to the use of technology to harass, threaten, shame, or attack another person (Al-Ameedi et al., 2022). In the study, cyberbullying refers to social and cognitive harm using online platforms.
- **Learner** - a person who is studying, practicing, or being instructed to obtain knowledge or expertise in anything (Saputra et al., 2023). In the study, a learner is a person who is studying and seeking to succeed academically.

- **Academic performance** - the information obtained that is graded by a teacher and/or educational goals set by learners and instructors to be met during a defined time (Hunter et al., 2022). In the study, academic performance refers to achievement of academic tasks and activities.

1.10 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1 - Orientation to the study

Introduction, rationale for the study, literature review, statement of the problem, aims and objectives of the study, research methodology and design, limitations and delimitations, definition of key concepts, and conclusion.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

This chapter includes a comprehensive review of the literature related to the problem under study.

Chapter 3- Research design and methodology

This chapter contains the research questions, aims and objectives of the study, a discussion of participants, data instruments that will be used, data analysis and sample size.

Chapter 4 - Data analysis and discussion of findings

The data analysis and presentation of the findings of the study are discussed.

Chapter 5 - Summary, recommendations and conclusions

In this chapter, a summary of the findings, recommendations and conclusions of the study is presented.

1.11 CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying has become a social problem for people that interact online. It affects learners' behaviour. If we can stop this fearful behaviour in children when they are young, they are less likely perpetuate it. Unfortunately, this is not a simple procedure. This aspect necessitates that schools and parents become aware of the issue and act. Eliminating cyberbullying requires continuous collaborative effort. There remains a noticeable gap regarding cyberbullying and impact on Vhembe West District learners

in Limpopo Province. The study only focused on cyberbullying among grade 7 learners in Vhembe West district. The next chapter reviews literature on the topic.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the background, issue statement, study objectives, research questions, and significance of the study were discussed. All the theoretical background, study design, methods, sample procedures, limits and limitations, and ethical issues were also elaborated. The study's major ideas were laid down by the researcher, followed by the assignments of chapter structures.

The intent of this section is to undertake a literature review discussing cyberbullying and the impacts of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners from Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. A literature review helps to reflect on a subject matter of one's interests and concerns when engaging with others (Mohd Aripin et al., 2024). First, the first step of such a literature review, as defined by Mabuza et al. (2023), involves a comprehensive analysis of all the relevant information sources. Hwang (2023), on the other hand, noted that the literature review serves as a research framework and outlines the particular knowledge that the research aims to broaden. A literature review involves searching, reading, watching, and summarising literature relevant to research either directly or indirectly (Tjale, 2021).

This literature review aims to investigate the prevalence, features and effects associated with cyberbullying on the academic achievements of Grade 7 learners from the Vhembe West District and seeks to consolidate existing research on cyberbullying on the basis of empirical studies from 2012 to 2023. It aims to create targeted interventions and policies that can lessen the adverse effects of cyberbullying on the academic success of learners. This investigation used objectives and research questions. Irfan et al. (2025) also suggested that sub-topics be developed, but only as long as they are connected to the purpose/objective of the study.

While this digital interaction in the landscape is in constant flux, cyberbullying is a critical issue not only for educational purposes but also for the overall outcome of the learner and the educational process and is detrimental to academic performance and mental health (Mienye et al., 2024). The location selected to be targeted at cyberbullying is strategic, as it provides a context of specific socio-economic and educational pressures, particularly in rural areas where programmes of digital literacy

and cyber safety are in the nascent stage. Global cyberbullying discourse highlights that such behaviours spread to all young learners, regardless of their language context and culture (Ziems et al., 2020).

Digital technologies are rapidly spreading into educational and social settings but are not followed by robust strategies to counter cyberbullying, which poses a serious need for educators, parents and policy makers in South Africa (Mienye et al., 2024). A nation, such as South Africa, in an effort to address the former historical educational inequalities in education and bring about an education environment that is fair and advantageous to all learners, where the impact of cyberbullying is quite significant (Ware, 2021).

Some studies have already started to examine the effect of cyberbullying on academic performance over the past few years, suggesting that victims of cyberbullying interact with other issues, such as school engagement, self-esteem, and motivation for school performance (Lee et al., 2023). The diverse learner populations and differences in resources available in South African educational settings offered a unique opportunity for the learning of such processes to be observed (Abubakre et al., 2021).

This review is expected to make a positive contribution to the South African debate on cyberbullying in the education system through an examination of actual issues concerning learners in Vhembe West District. The research directions and policy formulation directed towards creating a safer and more supportive learning environment will draw from these results.

2.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CYBERBULLYING

Learners worldwide are facing an increasing amount of cyberbullying as a result of the rapid evolution of digital communication technologies over the past decade (Hu, 2024). Scholars have aimed to provide clear conceptual definitions and models that delineate the scope and key characteristics of cyberbullying to effectively study the phenomenon and its impacts (Kang et al., 2023). On the basis of current research, this section examines the proposed definitions and dimensions of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying among Grade 7 learners is a significant issue, with several key aspects to look at or take into consideration (Fossum et al., 2023). The issues to be considered are the definition of cyberbullying, its prevalence, forms, effects on learners' academic

performance, risk factors, and prevention and intervention strategies to prevent cyberbullying from occurring.

Masangcay (2020) contends that most learners use the internet to interact, and while a greater number of these interactions are pleasant, a rising number of learners are utilising technology to frighten and harass others, a practice known as cyberbullying.

Some statistics demonstrate the scope of the problem. According to Gohal et al. (2023), approximately one-quarter of learners report being victims of cyberbullying. This finding was based on a survey of rural high school learners conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Notably, this prevalence rate is higher than that reported in previous studies focused on urban or more affluent areas. This suggests that cyberbullying may be more prevalent in rural areas, where digital literacy and cyber-safety initiatives are still in their early stages. However, the risk is not distributed equally among learners. An ample number of the factors that cause learners to target offline bullying are poverty, disability, membership in a visible minority group, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) status (López-Castro et al., 2023). This also increases SA learners' chances of becoming targets of cyberbullying (Santre, 2023).

There is little doubt that cyberbullying is traumatic: one-third of learners who were bullied online reported symptoms of depression, which increased to nearly one-half for those who experienced both online and offline bullying (Muzammil & Arshad, 2023). Lamentably, learners tend to underrate the dangers of online bullying (Muzammil & Arshad, 2023). Jennifer Shapka, a researcher on bullying at the University of British Columbia, discovered that while most learners believe that the majority of negative behaviour that occurs online is intended as a joke, "learners need to be educated that this 'just joking' behaviour has serious implications" (Alanazi & Alves-Foss, 2020, p.10).

One reason that cyberbullying may be more harmful than offline bullying is the possibility of countless, invisible witnesses and/or collaborators, creating a situation in which targets are unsure of who knows and whom to fear (Gosse, 2021). Technology also expands these learners' reach, allowing them to harass their targets from anywhere and at any time (Suganya & Vijayarani, 2024). While these incidents should be reported, Lallie et al. (2023) indicated that it may be difficult for learners to do so:

how do they report an attack that leaves no physical scars and is perpetrated by an unknown attacker? Will the consequences of informing a parent or an educator that a learner is being cyberbullied be worse than bullying? Parents and educators want to help, but many believe that they are unprepared to deal with bullying in the digital world (Englander, 2023).

2.2.1 Nature of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is still prevalent on social media platforms, with users frequently using anonymity features to harass others via messages, comments, and posts. Image-based abuse, online gaming harassment, and cancelling culture movements remain common forms of cyberbullying, as do cyberstalking and phishing scams (Mishra et al., 2024). Perpetrators may use encrypted messaging apps to harass others, complicating intervention efforts (Malik & Dadure, 2024). Hendry et al. (2023) indicated that the changing nature of cyberbullying highlights the critical need for ongoing initiatives to promote online safety and assist victims.

2.2.2 Some definitions of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is generally defined as intentional and repeated harm inflicted on victims via electronic communication (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022; Kowalski et al., 2014). Sunerli et al. (2023) define cyberbullying as an aggressive, intentional act perpetrated by a group or an individual, with the use of electronic contact, repeatedly and over time, against victims who cannot defend themselves. There are four broad criteria that are evident in the definitions: (1) intentionality to harm the victim; (2) repetition or the likelihood that it will occur again; (3) power imbalances that hinder victims' ability to stop victimisation; and (4) electronic technology being used as a tool of bullying (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Researchers continue to refine conceptualisations and develop a consensus on cyberbullying definitions (Chang, 2021). Several experts emphasise, for example, that power imbalances separating bullying and mutual conflict may manifest differently online than face-to-face (e.g., anonymity and technological skills) (Frankenberger, 2024; Liu, 2024; Sibisi et al., 2025). The argument for repetition is that a single online post can spread widely and be viewed repeatedly, causing extensive harm (Görzig & Frumkin, 2013). The question of whether definitions should specify that targets are motivated by their membership in marginalised social groups (e.g., race, gender, or

sexual orientation) is also being debated. The use of digital media, power imbalance, and the intent to harm remain core dimensions that unite most perspectives.

2.2.3 Distinguishing cyberbullying from traditional bullying

In spite of their overlap, scholars have increasingly distinguished cyberbullying from traditional and in-person bullying (Cosma et al., 2020). Cyberbullying differs from traditional in-person bullying in the following ways:

- *Anonymity* - Online wrongdoers can conceal their identities more easily, though many know their victims (Davis & Arrigo, 2021).
- *Permanence* - Posts that are abusive are difficult to remove completely and are likely to resurface (Moody, 2021).
- *Bystander effect* - People rarely intervene online due to the physical distance between them (Fernandes et al., 2022).
- *Accessibility* - Digital devices allow victims to be targeted anywhere and at any time; harassment goes beyond the classroom (Espelage, 2024).

Rapid transmission - Online content spreads quickly through viral sharing (Singh et al., 2020).

It is also worth noting that power imbalances facilitate aggression across contexts, and both forms are associated with psychological distress and school problems among victims (Fulantelli, 2022). Cyberbullying entails distinct challenges, but its core dynamics are the same as traditional bullying (Mishna, 2020).

2.2.4 Demographic differences in cyberbullying

While cyberbullying can affect any child, certain groups are more likely to be affected. Research by Hequembourg et al. (2020) revealed that sexual minority youth are more likely than heterosexual youth to be victims of both cyberbullying and perpetrators. Learners with impairments are also more likely to be victims (Latiff et al., 2024). Gender differences according to Ashton and Ioannou (2022) have been reported; on some platforms, girls are more likely to be harassed on social media, whereas boys are more likely to be cyberbullied through online gaming. Collectively, knowing demographics assists in customising interventions and support (Singh et al., 2023). However, Wang et al. (2023) maintain that racial factors intersect with context as well, implying that race influences and is influenced by various social, cultural, and

environmental contexts. This intersectionality underscores the complexity of how race operates within different settings, impacting individuals' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes.

With cyberbullying, intentional online aggression occurs within a power imbalance, causing psychological and social harm as well. Owing to the anonymity and rapid transmission of cyberbullying, these challenges are amplified (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023). Learners' involvement rates range from 15 to 20% depending on their age, social group, and cultural context (Zou et al., 2023). Forms vary from denigration to exclusion, primarily through social media and texting (Yi & Zubiaga, 2023). Contrastingly, research on cyberbullying needs to keep pace with technological advancements and current models provide a framework for informing effective responses to this pervasive threat (Kang & Hwang, 2021).

2.2.5 Cultural dynamics

Cultural factors heavily influence the prevalence and response to cyberbullying (Hasan et al., 2023). Cultural norms, values, and attitudes toward conflict resolution and social hierarchy all affect how different communities perceive cyberbullying (Huang et al., 2023). Cultural diversity can influence the types of cyberbullying behaviours observed, with language, humour, and social norms all having an impact on online interactions (Steer et al., 2020). Understanding cultural dynamics is critical for developing culturally sensitive approaches to preventing and addressing cyberbullying, as well as creating inclusive and supportive online environments for people from various backgrounds (Wright et al., 2021).

2.3 TYPES OF CYBERBULLYING

As of 2024, cyberbullying is still evolving as technology advances and online behaviour shifts (Arar, 2024). Some common types of cyberbullying in recent years include the following:

Social media harassment: Individuals are targeted through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, often via public posts, comments, or direct messages (Lyu et al., 2024).

Online impersonation: Creating fictitious profiles or accounts to harass, deceive, or embarrass others, sometimes using stolen photos or personal information (Jethava & Rao, 2024).

Cyberstalking and tracking: Monitoring another person's online activity, location, or digital footprint without permission, often with malicious intent.

Image-based abuse: Sharing or distributing intimate or compromising images or videos of others without their permission, also known as "revenge porn" or "sextortion" (Negi Advocate, 2023).

Doxing and online intimidation: Publishing or sharing personal information, such as addresses, phone numbers, or financial information, to intimidate, harass, or incite violence against someone.

Gaming harassment: Verbal abuse, threats, or exclusion directed at individuals in online gaming communities, which is often exacerbated by competitive environments or anonymity (Dreker, 2024).

Phishing and cyberbullying: The practice of sending deceptive emails, messages, or links to trick learners into disclosing personal information or engaging in harmful behaviour, such as financial scams or malware distribution (Dreker, 2024).

As digital platforms become increasingly pervasive, cyberbullying manifests in many ways. On the basis of prior works, Horton (2019) defined six major types of cyberbullying:

Harassment - Sending offensive, insulting messages repeatedly.

Impersonation - Fraudulent profiles are created with the intention of embarrassment.

Outing/trickery - Sharing personal information and images without permission.

Denigration - Spreading false or derogatory information to hurt a person's reputation.

Exclusion - Distancing oneself from someone online to make them feel isolated.

Cyberstalking - An ongoing harassment and threat that causes intense fear in the victim.

Despite these categories representing common types, new types emerge with technological advances, such as zooming bombing during video calls (Faucher & Cassidy, 2020).

Owing to their widespread adoption among learners (Daniels et al., 2021), social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are most frequently used for cyberbullying. It is also possible for cyberbullying to occur through text messages, chat apps, blogs, discussion forums, online games, and other digital technologies enabling communication (Ambika, 2024). The understanding of modalities illuminates directions for preventing and responding to platform-specific issues (Kim et al., 2024). These types of cyberbullying highlight the diverse ways in which technology is used to harass, intimidate, or harm others online, emphasising the need for ongoing efforts to address and prevent digital abuse (Jethava & Rao, 2024).

2.4 UNDERSTANDING CYBERBULLYING IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Cyberbullying is a global phenomenon, but its manifestations differ across cultures and nations (Li & Park, 2024). Over the past decade, research has provided insights into cyberbullying in South Africa, including its nature, prevalence, risk factors, and implications (Polillo et al., 2024). An overview of key findings about cyberbullying among South African learners, as well as the educational and policy environments that shape prevention and response, is provided in this section (Shumba et al., 2023).

Studies have shown that learners in South Africa are highly at risk of cyberbullying (Mwansa et al., 2023). There are estimated victimisation rates of 13–57% and perpetration rates of 11–23% (Raath, 2020) among school learners. Variability stems from differences in measures and samples, but robust studies suggest that approximately 20–25% of teens are affected. The rates peak between the ages of 14 and 17 (Roos, 2023).

It has been found that cyberbullying is increasing in South Africa due to increasing internet access, a lack of oversight over adolescent technology use, and a model of violence in communities (Roos, 2023). Cyberbullying involvement appears comparable to or greater than the global average, but more research is needed to track evolving patterns (Zhu et al., 2021).

The prevalence of cyberbullying in primary schools differs at the individual level depending on age, the use and accessibility of technologies, and the culture of the school (Santre, 2023). Although the figures differ, studies have shown that cyberbullying is increasingly prevalent among young learners, including primary learners (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). As reported by Zhu et al. (2021), 10% to 40% of

primary school learners have experienced cyberbullying at least once, and the incident frequency changes depending on the region and demographics. Nevertheless, the actual prevalence of cyberbullying among learners may be higher than reported because of underreporting and the challenge of accurately measuring cyberbullying among learners (Chun et al., 2020). With increased cyberbullying prevalence, schools and educators must focus on supporting a positive school climate and cyber literacy and providing mechanisms for support to individuals who experience harassment online (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024).

Fischer et al. (2023) reported that the average cyberbullying rate among learners is 15%. In a meta-analysis of 80 studies, Zhu et al. (2021) reported that the prevalence of cyberbullying increases with age. As learners approach middle school, cyberbullying rates increase sharply (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022). Furthermore, many more learners experience occasional cyberbullying incidents (Chi et al., 2020). Research also shows that youth around the globe are significantly affected by cyberbullying (Zhu et al., 2021). Since cyberbullying prevalence varies across cultural contexts, Park et al. (2021) emphasise the need for further research across cultures. Understanding cyberbullying in the South African school context also requires the consideration of several factors, which are discussed below.

2.4.1 Digital divide

South Africa's digital landscape is diverse, with discrepancies in access to technology and internet connectivity between urban and rural areas, as well as between affluent and disadvantaged communities (Lembani et al., 2020). This can influence the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying incidents (Gohal et al., 2023).

The digital divide, which separates those with and without access to digital technologies, can influence cyberbullying in three important ways, as noted by Dodge (2024):

Access to technology: Limited access may reduce opportunities for cyberbullying, whereas greater access can increase the likelihood of engagement.

Digital literacy: Individuals who are unfamiliar with technology may be more vulnerable to cyberbullying due to a lack of understanding or support.

Social Isolation and Reporting: The digital divide can exacerbate social isolation and impede reporting efforts, perpetuating cyberbullying cycles.

2.4.2 Socioeconomic factors

Socioeconomic factors have a significant effect on cyberbullying dynamics among learners (Lee et al., 2023). Lower-income learners may face barriers to accessing technology and developing digital literacy skills, increasing their susceptibility to online harassment (Wilson, 2023). Disparities in support systems and access to mental health services can affect the ability of learners from low-income families to deal with cyberbullying (Lee et al., 2023). Schools in higher-income areas may have more resources for prevention and intervention programmes, whereas those in lower-income areas may face constraints (Adams et al., 2024). Verlarde and Vasodavan (2024) concluded that addressing socioeconomic factors is critical in developing comprehensive strategies to prevent and address cyberbullying among primary school learners, ensuring equal access to resources and support systems for all.

2.4.3 The school environment

The school environment has a strong influence on cyberbullying dynamics (Yang et al., 2020). School culture, policies, educational programmes, support systems, and peer relationships all play important roles (Coyle et al., 2022). Nagar and Talwar (2023) believe that a positive and supportive school environment, which includes clear policies, cyberbullying education, and accessible support systems, can effectively prevent and address cyberbullying incidents while instilling a culture of empathy, respect, and online safety in learners.

2.4.4 Legal framework

The legal framework surrounding cyberbullying in education includes anti-bullying policies, harassment and intimidation laws, education laws mandating cyberbullying prevention education, civil liability for schools and perpetrators, criminal laws for severe cases, and data protection and privacy laws (English, 2023). Heringer et al. (2023) believe that these laws aim to prevent and address cyberbullying, protect learners' rights and well-being, and promote a safe learning environment. Ben-Hayun and Perry-Hazan (2023) reported that schools, educators, learners, and parents need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities under these laws to effectively combat cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying legislation was enacted in South Africa in 2015 with the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill, which criminalises intentionally harassing or harming others on the basis of protected characteristics such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (Akeusola, 2023). Advocates note that while this is a step forward, there are gaps regarding enforcement, accountability, and addressing cyberbullying's broader motivations than hate speech (Prinsloo & Nesor, 2022).

However, the South African school system still lacks comprehensive policies regarding technology use and cyberbullying (De Lange & von Solms, 2022). Online harassment is not adequately addressed by legislation, according to educators. Clear implementation guidance that integrates punitive and restorative measures would strengthen protection (Adams et al., 2024). However, policy gaps are being closed.

2.4.5 Education and prevention

Cyberbullying must be addressed through education and prevention (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). Schools can implement comprehensive programmes that educate learners, teachers, and parents about the dangers of cyberbullying and how to prevent it (Yosep et al., 2023). This includes teaching learners about digital citizenship, responsible online behaviour, and how to deal with cyberbullying incidents (Stonebanks & Shariff, 2023). Nagar and Talwar (2023) argued that creating an open and supportive environment in which learners can report cyberbullying incidents without fear is also critical. Regular communication and collaboration between schools, parents, and communities can also contribute to a united front against cyberbullying (Wright & Wachs, 2023).

2.5 FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO CYBERBULLYING

The factors that contribute to the continuation of cyberbullying among learners include the following:

2.5.1 Peer pressure

Peer pressure can have a significant impact on cyberbullying by encouraging learners to engage in harmful behaviours online (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). In some cases, peers may pressure others to engage in cyberbullying activities to fit in or gain acceptance within a social group (Navarro, 2024). This pressure can manifest in a variety of ways, including encouraging participation in hurtful online conversations,

sharing or liking offensive content, and even directly targeting individuals with malicious messages or posts (Jean-Baptiste, 2021). Furthermore, the fear of being ostracized or bullied may drive learners to participate in cyberbullying, even if they disagree with it. Overall, peer pressure can foster a toxic online environment in which bullying behaviour is normalised and reinforced by social dynamics (Osunde & Adeyemi, 2024).

2.5.2 Social status

Huang et al. (2023) indicated that social status plays a role in cyberbullying by influencing power dynamics, group affiliations, online validation seeking, and social comparison among individuals. Those with higher social status may use their influence to target those with lower status, whereas individuals may engage in cyberbullying to assert their belonging to a particular social group or to gain attention or approval from peers (Minervini et al., 2023). Additionally, cyberbullying may arise from jealousy, envy, or resentment toward individuals perceived as more successful or popular online (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023).

2.5.3 A lack of conflict resolution skills

Conflict resolution skills are critical in combating cyberbullying in schools (Hendry et al., 2023). Learners who are equipped with effective conflict resolution strategies are better able to navigate interpersonal conflicts and resolve disputes constructively (Furlong, 2020). These abilities can help prevent misunderstandings from escalating into cyberbullying incidents and promote healthier online interactions between peers (Jeffrey et al., 2020).

Schools that teach conflict resolution skills empower learners to communicate assertively, empathise with others, and seek peaceful conflict resolution (Kafel, 2020). This can include techniques such as active listening, problem solving, and negotiation, which help learners effectively address disagreements and manage interpersonal tension (Winer et al., 2024).

Conflict resolution skills also foster empathy and understanding, allowing learners to recognise the impact of their words and actions on others (Santamaria-Villa et al., 2021). This increased awareness can reduce the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying behaviour and foster a more inclusive and respectful online community within the school setting (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024).

Siddiqui and Schultze-Krumbholz (2023) believe that incorporating conflict resolution education into school curricula can help create a positive school climate and empower learners to navigate conflicts constructively, lowering the frequency of cyberbullying incidents.

2.5.4 Anonymity and disinhibition

Anonymity and disinhibition in online settings reduce inhibitions and increase the likelihood of engaging in harmful behaviours such as cyberbullying (Wang et al., 2023). Individuals who can conceal their identities may act rashly and carelessly, spreading harmful content or sending malicious messages to others (Cohen-Almagor, 2018). Perceived anonymity can foster a sense of impunity, making it easier for perpetrators to avoid accountability (Wang et al., 2023). Addressing these issues is critical for combating cyberbullying and promoting safer online environments (Rathod et al., 2024).

2.5.5 Technology use

Technology facilitates cyberbullying by providing anonymity, accessibility, disinhibition, permanence, audience reach, and reinforcement of social dynamics (Cohen, 2024). The widespread availability of digital devices and online platforms makes it easier for learners to engage in harmful behaviour, increasing the scope and impact of cyberbullying incidents (Mishra et al., 2024). Addressing these factors is critical in successful efforts to prevent and mitigate cyberbullying (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024).

2.5.6 Lack of adult supervision

When adult supervision fails or is ineffective, it can contribute to cyberbullying (Santre, 2023). This can occur as a result of inadequate monitoring of learners' online activities, limited guidance on appropriate behaviour, failure to intervene in bullying incidents, the ability of adults to model negative behaviour, and insufficient cyberbullying education (Huang et al., 2023). Effective adult supervision is critical for preventing and addressing cyberbullying because it provides guidance, monitoring, intervention, positive role modelling, and education on respectful online behaviour (Bauerová & Kopřivová, 2023).

2.5.7 The bystander effects

Bystanders play a significant role in cyberbullying by either remaining silent or failing to report incidents, thus allowing behaviour to persist (Li, 2023). Some bystanders may passively participate in cyberbullying by engaging with hurtful content, whereas others may actively join to avoid becoming targets themselves (Huang et al., 2023). By providing validation and empowerment to bullies through their reactions, bystanders contribute to the continuation and escalation of bullying incidents. Encouraging bystanders to speak out against cyberbullying and supporting victims can help disrupt the cycle of harm and create a safer online environment (Espino et al., 2023).

Addressing these factors requires comprehensive strategies that focus on promoting positive behaviour, teaching empathy and conflict resolution skills, fostering a safe and respectful online environment, and empowering learners to take a stand against cyberbullying (Hazime, 2024).

2.6 THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON LEARNER VICTIMS

Over the past decade, a growing body of research by Cretu and Morandau (2024) has demonstrated how cyberbullying can negatively affect learners and teenagers. There is extensive evidence that cyberbullying undermines children's social-emotional, psychological, academic, and lifelong well-being and success (Mong, 2020). With a focus on the literature from 2015 to 2023, this section synthesises key findings on the consequences of cyberbullying for learners. In recent years, research has demonstrated the detrimental consequences of cyberbullying for learners in several domains, including academic, psychological, social, and physical effects (Halliday, 2022). These effects may be significantly mitigated by individual coping skills and external support systems. In the digital age, evidence-based prevention programmes and support are essential for reducing involvement and intervening in cyberbullying at multiple levels, from legislation to school policies to family education (Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023).

There are individual and contextual factors that affect the degree to which cyberbullying affects child functioning. These factors include:

Age - Learners who are younger than teenagers are usually more negatively affected by trauma (Kowalski et al., 2019). Stone (2020) indicated that learners' understanding

of and response to cyberbullying differ by age, with younger learners requiring simple explanations and close supervision, whereas older learners benefit from discussions about long-term consequences and digital citizenship. As learners grow, their cognitive, emotional, and social development changes, influencing their susceptibility to and coping mechanisms for cyberbullying (Jattamart & Kwangsawad, 2021). Interventions tailored to developmental stages provide effective support while encouraging safe online behaviour (Lioret et al., 2023).

Coping skills - Adaptive coping and resilience buffer harm (Khan & Unga, 2021). Adaptive coping strategies and resilience are critical for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying. These psychological constructs can help learners cope with the negative effects of cyberbullying. These are inclusive of positive behaviour and thought patterns that help learners manage stress and adversity successfully. In the case of cyberbullying, these strategies can significantly reduce the psychological and emotional impact.

Support systems - Support from parents, teachers, and peers prevents adverse outcomes (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2020). Support systems have a large effect on how learners deal with and recover from cyberbullying. These systems assist learners in maintaining their well-being, developing resilience, and functioning effectively in their daily lives by providing emotional support, practical guidance, and resources. Strengthening support networks is critical for mitigating the negative effects of cyberbullying and promoting healthy childhood development.

Platform characteristics - Anonymous platforms are more likely to amplify effects than platforms that are identifiable (Zhang et al., 2021). The characteristics of online platforms have a significant effect on how cyberbullying affects learners' functioning. Platforms that promote anonymity, allow for rapid content distribution and lack effective moderation can exacerbate the negative effects of cyberbullying. In contrast, platforms with strong privacy settings, effective moderation, and supportive community guidelines can help mitigate these effects and promote learners' well-being. Ensuring that learners use platforms with strong safety features, as well as cultivating an online culture of respect and support, is critical to reducing the negative impact of cyberbullying.

Frequency/duration - The longer and more persistent the cyberbullying is, the worse the consequences are (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022). The frequency and duration of cyberbullying have a significant effect on how a child functions. Bullying can cause immediate and severe emotional distress, social isolation, academic difficulties, and behavioural changes. Prolonged exposure can lead to long-term mental health problems, social and academic difficulties, and persistent behavioural issues. Addressing cyberbullying promptly and providing strong support systems are critical for mitigating its effects and promoting the well-being and development of affected learners.

A better understanding of these moderating factors allows us to tailor support to high-risk groups and leverage social resources.

2.6.1 Effects of cyberbullying on learners' academic performance

According to the literature reviewed over the past decade, cyberbullying victimisation adversely affects learners' academic performance (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024; Halliday et al., 2021; Martínez-Martínez et al., 2020). Using diverse measures of academic functioning, the observed relationship holds across diverse international contexts (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2023). The detrimental impacts of cyberbullying can be seen both directly through effects on grades and test scores and indirectly through psychological distress and school avoidance (Ngo et al., 2021). Chang et al. (2023) argued that although personal and contextual variables may influence the relationship in individual cases, the direction of the association remains unambiguous.

Several aspects of school functioning are undermined by cyberbullying, which interferes with learning and achievement. As a result of cyberbullying experiences (Rice et al., 2017), victims report significant declines in academic confidence and motivation. When learners are targeted online, they have difficulty concentrating, paying attention, and engaging in productive classroom behaviour (Zhu et al., 2023). Cyberbullying is associated with absenteeism, as learners avoid school to avoid harassment (Ngo et al., 2021).

Aparisi et al. (2021) reported a significant negative correlation between cyberbullying and academic performance across studies on factors such as emotional distress, social isolation, psychological well-being, coping mechanisms, and destruction and disruption. It has been reported that cyberbullying negatively affects academic

performance and grades among learners who have experienced it (Tran et al., 2022). It has also been shown that the strain of balancing harassment with schoolwork can compound learning problems (Bright et al., 2022). The use of supportive teachers and a positive climate can mitigate the effects of cyberbullying by maintaining engagement and efficacy (Pyżalski, 2023). However, Sinthumule and Ngonyama (2023) argued that cyberbullying often interrupts learning and academic progress unless appropriate interventions are implemented.

In essence, the relationship between cyberbullying and academic performance in adolescents is a growing topic of research (Torres et al., 2020). With the ubiquity of internet-connected devices, cyberbullying has become increasingly prevalent, defined as bullying behaviour enacted through digital platforms such as social media, texting, or gaming platforms (Harris & Jacobs, 2023). Several studies have consistently shown that cyberbullying victimisation is associated with lower academic achievement (Halliday et al., 2023).

Research shows that cyberbullying directly affects grades, test scores, and dropout rates in tangible ways (Agbabiaka, 2020; Chowdhury, 2024; Pham Thi & Duong, 2024). Forouzin (2023) reported that cyberbullying victimisation was associated with lower grades and test scores, even when traditional bullying and sociodemographic factors were controlled for in a large-scale study of over 120,000 learners across Europe. The relationship was strongest among learners, suggesting that early exposure to cyberbullying may be particularly detrimental (Chen & Chen, 2023). According to a study by Wright and Wachs (2024), as a result of frequent cyberbullying victimisation, middle school learners' Grade Point Averages decreased by 9 points over a one-year period.

Cyberbullying negatively impacts academic performance across national contexts (Halliday et al., 2023). Researchers have reported that cyberbullying negatively predicts academic achievement among Thai learners (Kowkuntla et al., 2016), Slovenian adolescents (Peker, 2021), and South African adolescents (Badenhorst, 2011). Martín-Pérez and Gascón-Cánovas (2023) further reported that victimisation significantly increased the likelihood of poor academic performance across 25 European countries.

There appears to be a dose-response relationship between cyberbullying and poorer academic outcomes on the basis of the consistency of findings (Li et al., 2023). The lowest marks were found among learners who experienced chronic cyberbullying lasting more than six months, according to Bash and Boutin (2018). Compared with non-victims or short-term victims, Korean adolescents who were cyberbullied for three months or more had significantly lower Grade Point Averages (Lee & Shin, 2017). It has been suggested that prolonged exposure to cyberbullying may deplete the cognitive resources necessary for effective study and participation in class (Zhang et al., 2022). According to Agbabiaka (2020), learners who are cyberbullied at the age of 13 perform worse academically than non-victims do by the age of 16. Cyberbullying appears to adversely affect academic performance beyond just the immediate period of harassment. Researchers have found that cyberbullying, as a direct effect on academic performance, is associated with poorer achievement through psychosocial and behavioural mechanisms (Torres et al., 2020).

In addition to achievement indicators, studies have linked cyberbullying to increased school disengagement and dropout rates (Wei et al., 2024). Kim and Kao (2019) examined a longitudinal dataset from the United States and reported that sixth-grade learners who reported frequent cyberbullying victimisation were more than three times more likely to drop out by tenth grade. Hang and Li (2021) suggested that early cyberbullying experiences may lead to learners leaving school prematurely. As a result, cyberbullying prevention and intervention programmes in late primary and secondary schools could reduce dropout rates among high school learners (Chen et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, studies in South Africa have shown that victimisation leads to increased school disengagement, absenteeism, depression, stress, and plummeting grades among affected learners (Mwangi, 2024), echoing international findings. In addition to bypassing educators' detection, cyberbullying is also associated with delinquency and aggression, which affect the school climate (De Lange & von Solms, 2022).

2.6.2 The psychological effects of cyberbullying

There are a variety of adverse psychological effects associated with cyberbullying as a victim or bully victim (Li et al., 2023). According to multiple studies (Bottino et al., 2015; Raskauskas & Huynh, 2015), cyberbullying victimisation is correlated with

depression and anxiety. According to Chen, Ho and Lwin (2017), cyberbullying is associated with internalising problems in a significant positive manner (Lee et al., 2023). In addition to the severity of harassment and the frequency of harassment, mental health problems such as suicidal ideation are more likely to occur (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).

Repeated online attacks can cause humiliation, powerlessness, and hopelessness, which are potential mechanisms underlying cyberbullying-related psychological distress (Maurya, 2023). In contrast to traditional bullying, the anonymity that perpetrators possess can also intensify distress (Esquivel et al., 2023). The prevalence of depression and emotional dysregulation associated with cyberbullying is greater than that associated with in-person bullying (Zou et al., 2023). Adverse outcomes are moderated by individual factors such as social support and resilience (Chang et al., 2023).

As a result of cyberbullying, learners' emotional states, self-perceptions, and scholastic behaviours that facilitate learning and success in school are negatively affected, which in turn indirectly lowers academic performance (Alhibs, 2023).

Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress resulting from cyberbullying victimisation are the most commonly studied factors. The strongest mediator between bullying participation and academic achievement was depression, according to Gaffney et al. (2019), in their meta-analysis of 131 studies. Owing to its 24-hour availability and ability to spread harmful content widely through online networks, cyberbullying exposure increases depression risk (Maurya et al., 2022). Therefore, depressed mood, loss of motivation, and other symptoms interfere with learners' ability to concentrate on schoolwork and participate in academic activities (Zhang & Li, 2023).

Therefore, the relationship between cyberbullying and achievement can also be explained by related internalising problems such as anxiety and low self-esteem (Halliday et al., 2023). As a result of victimisation, social anxiety can impair classmates' ability to participate in class and function socially (Iannello et al., 2024). Similarly, harassing messages undermine the motivation and confidence needed for academic success when they negatively affect learners' academic ability (Wu et al., 2022). When

learners are targeted after cyberbullying, counselling and skills training can help them cope with their emotions and rebuild their academic self-efficacy (Hazime, 2023).

In studies of general bullying and achievement, absenteeism has consistently been found to be a mediator (Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2023; Léné, 2024; Vacca et al., 2023). According to studies of Canadian and Taiwanese learners, cyberbullying increases school avoidance by 16% and 14%, respectively (Kamaruddin et al., 2023). The fear of social persecution prevents students from engaging in school activities (Martinez et al., 2023).

The reduction in class participation can also be explained by the fact that many victims withdraw socially rather than drawing attention to themselves (Rea, 2023). Concentration difficulties caused by cyberbullying events can interfere with the completion of assignments and tests necessary for academic success (Alkhayat, 2023). Cyberbullying also contributes to poorer academic performance among learners when participation and cognitive distraction are decreased (Hörmann et al., 2024).

The long-term effects of cyberbullying are becoming increasingly studied, despite most research focusing on short-term effects. Research shows that early cyberbullying predicts enduring psychological problems in learners (Zou et al., 2024). According to a 10-year study of learners, cyberbullying victimisation during adolescence was associated with depression and anxiety into adulthood (Grigore & Maffei, 2020). Trauma caused by cyberbullying during critical developmental periods appears to adversely affect mental health for a long period of time.

Additionally, cyberbullying can result in lasting peer relationship problems due to social stigma and isolation (Alrawasheleh, 2024). While the specific mechanisms linked to cyberbullying and diverse youth outcomes deserve further research, preventing and mitigating cyberbullying is clearly critical for supporting healthy learning and development (Çakar-Mengü, & Mengü, 2023). Cyberbullying has serious social effects on learners, families, and communities. Here, we look at these social effects in detail:

2.6.2.1 Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Mong (2020) noted that cyberbullying has a significant negative effect on mental health and emotional well-being, increasing anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness. Victims frequently have low self-esteem because they internalise

negative messages, which contributes to a diminished sense of self-worth. Victims may struggle to cope with emotional harm, engaging in avoidance behaviours that disrupt healthy coping mechanisms (Siddique et al., 2023). Mitigation strategies include access to mental health support, resilience promotion, the creation of supportive environments, early intervention, and increased awareness of the psychological impact of cyberbullying (Malik & Dadure, 2024).

In severe cases, cyberbullying can lead to suicidal thoughts and actions, increasing the risk of self-harm and long-term psychological trauma (Dewi et al., 2023).

2.6.2.2 Cyberbullying leading to suicide

Suicide is a very serious provocation that many learners encounter (Utaminingsih, et al., 2025). Although suicide is becoming more prevalent among learners today, no one thinks of it in terms of teenagers (Miller, 2024). Suicide is the second leading cause of death worldwide, trailing only traffic accidents (Feng & Tan, 2024). Adewuya and Oladipo (2020) reported that suicide ideation and attempts among learners aged 10 to 34 have nearly doubled since 2008. Learners who are frequently overstretched, bear low egotism, and are in need of inspiration have a preference to stay on one's own, which eventually leads to downheartedness. Mueller and Winsor (2022) believe that depressed learners commit suicide as they believe that suicide will solve their problems. For the past five years, news reports have been crammed with the narratives of learners (Zhu et al., 2021). Therapists cautioned of the dangers that cyberbullying portrays, entailing suicidal ideation and behaviour (Lonergan et al., 2023). Fadhli et al. (2022) defined bullycide as a term used to describe the relationship between teen suicide and cyberbullying.

Few studies have investigated the relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation; however, the findings indicate that cyberbullying is strongly correlated with suicidal ideation (Quintana- Orts et al., 2022). On the other hand, cyberbullying is associated with psychiatric issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, poor physical health, crying, being embarrassed, and insomnia (Eyuboglu et al., 2025). Suicidal thoughts are more common among learners who exhibit these symptoms (Flores et al., 2020). In addition, depression is strongly connected to an increased risk of suicidal ideation and behaviour (Pérez-Albéniz et al., 2025). Research indicates that approximately 90% of those who die by suicide have a mental illness, which is one of

the leading risk factors for suicide (Wheeler et al., 2024). Consequently, cyberbullying has been described as a risk factor for signs of depression and anxiety (Kangrga et al., 2024), as well as suicidal ideations (Justyna, 2025). Teachers, parents, and policymakers work together to overcome this problem as soon as possible.

2.6.3 Social effects of cyberbullying

In addition to internalising symptoms, cyberbullying negatively impacts social functioning and relationships. In the aftermath of online harassment, victims often feel isolated and excluded, with decreased perceptions of peer support (Ho et al., 2020). Social exclusion on social media may have a negative effect on self-concept (Xu et al., 2023). Additionally, victims tend to have lower social competence and participation in social activities (Martinez- Martinez et al., 2020).

Compared with peers who are not involved in cyberbullying (Kim, 2022), victims of cyberbullying and perpetrators have greater difficulty building and maintaining high-quality friendships. Many targets withdraw socially as a way of coping with the stigma and stress associated with public denigration online (Chang et al., 2023). It has been shown that positive friendships can buffer the social effects of cyberbullying (Halliday et al., 2023). The development of peer acceptance and belongingness is key to reducing social consequences (Trotter, 2023).

2.6.3.1 Social isolation

Cyberbullying-induced social isolation causes victims to withdraw from socialisation, either online or offline, intensifying the sentiment of isolation and vulnerability. Such withdrawal may also impair their ability to trust others, limiting their ability to form new associations and seek help. Esquivel (2023) argued that isolation has a negative effect on mental health, including increased anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, all of which can impair academic and professional performance. To mitigate the effects of cyberbullying, providing access to counselling, promoting inclusive environments, and increasing awareness of its impact are critical (Hazime, 2024). Addressing social isolation necessitates a multifaceted strategy that prioritises emotional support, education, and community involvement (Malik & Dadure, 2024).

2.6.3.2 Interpersonal relationships

Cyberbullying causes significant strain on interpersonal relationships, resulting in communication breakdowns within families as victims withdraw and parents feel helpless (Smith, 2020). Friends may distance themselves due to misunderstandings or unintentionally blaming the victim, resulting in social isolation and a loss of trust (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023). Mehta (2024) argues that cyberbullying creates a hostile environment in schools, causing harm to peer relationships and instilling fear and mistrust. To mitigate these effects, open communication, education about the consequences of cyberbullying, and access to counselling are essential (Malik & Dadure, 2024). Perasso and Di Giuseppe (2024) indicated that implementing antibullying policies in schools can also contribute to safer and more supportive social settings.

2.6.3.3 Digital footprint and reputation

Cyberbullying leaves an indelible digital footprint because harmful content remains online and accessible indefinitely, harming the reputations of both victims and perpetrators (Cofone, 2020). Victims experience emotional distress and social stigma, which can undermine their confidence and future opportunities (Ngo et al., 2021). Perpetrators face accountability, potential legal consequences, and tarnished reputations, which can jeopardise their academic and professional opportunities. Chiner et al. (2025) argues that these effects can be mitigated by educating learners about responsible online behaviour and proactive management of their digital presence. Support systems, legal frameworks, and institutional policies are critical for addressing and preventing the social consequences of cyberbullying (Malik & Dadure, 2024).

2.6.4 Physical effects of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can have significant physical effects on learners, including the following:

2.6.4.1 Stress and anxiety

Cyberbullying, because of its persistent nature and the anonymity it provides perpetrators, can cause significant stress and anxiety (Gohal et al., 2023). Victims are frequently afraid of being targeted, which causes them to be anxious when navigating online spaces (Kang et al., 2023). The internet's anonymity can exacerbate victims'

feelings of helplessness and isolation as they attempt to identify their aggressors or seek help (Makarova & Makarova, 2023). Because cyberbullying is so prevalent, victims may find it difficult to avoid harassment, increasing their stress and contributing to a sense of powerlessness (Chen et al., 2024). Furthermore, the fear of public humiliation or social repercussions can heighten anxiety, as victims consider the long-term effects on their reputation and relationships (Malik & Dadure, 2024).

2.6.4.2 Sleep disturbances

Sleep deprivation is a common physical consequence of cyberbullying caused by the stress and anxiety it induces (Zou et al., 2023). Victims frequently struggle to fall or stay asleep because of the increased arousal and worry caused by online harassment (Maurya, 2023). The persistent fear of being targeted online causes racing thoughts and hypervigilance, making relaxing before bedtime difficult (Strähl, 2023). Chronic sleep deprivation can have a negative impact on overall health, including weakened immune function and an increased risk of mental health disorders, highlighting the importance of addressing cyberbullying and supporting victims (Strähl, 2023).

2.6.4.3 Decreased appetite or overeating

Depending on how the individual reacts to stress and emotional distress, cyberbullying can cause both a decreased appetite and overeating (Fernández-Felipe et al., 2021). Some victims may lose their appetite as a result of increased anxiety and unease, whereas others may seek comfort in food, leading to overeating (Appiah, 2022). These responses can differ on the basis of coping mechanisms and the severity of cyberbullying, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals may manifest physical symptoms in response to online harassment (Wong, 2020).

2.6.4.4 Increased risk of health problems

The increased risk of health problems is a significant physical consequence of cyberbullying, owing to the chronic stress and emotional strain it causes victims (Zhu et al., 2021). Prolonged exposure to cyberbullying weakens the immune system, increasing the vulnerability of people to illness and infection (Rhoads, 2023). Persistent stress and anxiety can also lead to cardiovascular problems and aggravate pre-existing health conditions such as asthma or migraines (Saqib et al., 2023). Disrupted sleep patterns and unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as overeating or

underreating, exacerbate these health risks, emphasising the importance of combating cyberbullying to protect both mental and physical well-being (Alper, 2022).

2.7 INTERVENTIONS AND PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying must be addressed through education and prevention (Chicote-Beato et al., 2024). Schools can implement comprehensive programmes that educate learners, teachers, and parents about the dangers of cyberbullying and how to prevent it (Yosep et al., 2023). This includes teaching learners about digital citizenship, responsible online behaviour, and how to deal with cyberbullying incidents (Stonebanks & Shariff, 2023). Nagar and Talwar (2023) argued that creating an open and supportive environment in which learners can report cyberbullying without fear is also critical. Regular communication and collaboration between schools, parents, and communities can also contribute to a united front against cyberbullying (Wright & Wachs, 2023).

As a means of preventing cyberbullying, experts recommend designing interventions on the basis of cultural values and addressing local risk factors (Masango et al., 2022). Antibullying initiatives promoting online empathy and responsibility can benefit from collectivist worldviews that emphasise community wellbeing in South Africa (Roos, 2019). It is also possible to reintegrate affected learners through reconciliation, rather than alienation, after incidents by leveraging schools' communal ethos and traditional healing practices (Prinsloo & Nesor, 2022).

Chen et al. (2023) suggested that parents and communities can reduce cyberbullying by establishing clear media use norms, educating learners about online behaviour, monitoring activities, encouraging positive online interactions, and building community support. It has been shown that tailoring global evidence-based programmes to reinforce cultural strengths and priorities can increase effectiveness (De Lange & von Solms, 2022). South African learners face a significant problem that requires continued innovation and evaluation of culturally responsive solutions.

There is growing evidence that South African learners face significant risks from cyberbullying and its disruption of their well-being and learning (Singh et al., 2023). Schools grapple with applying legislation. Although nuanced experiences across diverse communities remain unclear, tailored interventions can reduce involvement

and harmful impacts if sustained research and policy efforts are continued (Fazel & Soneson, 2023).

It is important for school and counselling professionals to recognise cyberbullying as more than just an issue of adolescent social dynamics; it is a salient threat to learning. To prevent lasting damage to victims' educational development, academic support seems crucial. Instead of solely punishing individual bullies, antibullying education should focus on building a positive school climate and peer dynamics (Konishi et al., 2024). Early in the transition years, when cyberbullying peaks, evidence-based programmes for building cyber ethics and resilience should begin (Goldstein et al., 2023).

The implementation of evidence-based practices that reduce cyberbullying prevalence at scale requires collaboration between researchers and policymakers (Akeusola, 2023). Cyberbullying can be meaningfully addressed only through multifaceted efforts across disciplines and institutions (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023). Torres (2023) argues that allowing learners to learn in safe, enriching online spaces and curbing cyber aggression promises significant academic benefits.

A robust longitudinal design should be used to assess nuanced individual and contextual moderators over time to build on the established victimisation-achievement link (Nagle, 2023). To reveal if and when depressive symptoms, disengagement, and plummeting grades begin to manifest post-victimisation, studies tracking victims' trajectories would be helpful. On the basis of these insights, interventions should be timed and targeted appropriately for victims' developmental needs (Kim, 2024). Since cyberbullying is ingrained in modern education, ongoing research is necessary to advance prevention science and eliminate its threat to learners' well-being (Elbedour et al., 2020).

Effective interventions and prevention programmes are urgently needed given the detrimental effects cyberbullying has on learners' well-being and education (Yosep et al., 2023). During the past decade, research has revealed key factors that contribute to successful school initiatives tailored to parents, staff, and learners (Barker et al., 2023). It is possible to reduce cyberbullying and mitigate associated harm through comprehensive school-wide programmes as well as targeted skill-building programmes (Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023).

2.7.1 School-based programmes

Owing to their continual contact with learners and mandate to provide a safe, nurturing environment, schools are a key context for cyberbullying prevention efforts. Studies consistently demonstrate that antibullying programmes implemented in schools can reduce bullying and victimisation (Ramirez et al., 2024). The effect sizes are generally small but meaningful at scale. A variety of programmes targeting cyberbullying have been developed and evaluated on the basis of insights gained through traditional bullying interventions (Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023).

School climate and policies can be addressed through comprehensive, whole-school programmes that involve the entire school community instead of discrete classroom lessons, which are particularly effective in reducing cyber aggression (Rizzo et al., 2023). According to the KiVa antibullying programme from Finland, peer support can be enhanced, bullying can be monitored via surveys, and designated staff members can coordinate school policies and interventions (Herkama et al., 2024). Several studies have shown that KiVa significantly decreases cyberbullying and victimisation over a one- or two-year period compared to a control school (Tozzo et al., 2022).

2.7.2 Classroom curricula

Among all types of school interventions, classroom-based cyberbullying curricula are the most common (Wang & Jiang, 2023). By adding lessons or modules to traditional anti-bullying curricula that address cyberbullying, traditional anti-bullying curricula can be effectively used to reduce cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation (Gaffney et al., 2019). A programme's general goal is to raise awareness, dispel myths, promote empathy, teach coping strategies, develop digital citizenship, and promote peer advocacy (de Almeida, 2024).

In Cyber Friendly Schools, for example, learners are taught about legal issues, ethical online behaviour, and respectful relationship skills through classroom materials (Webb et al., 2021). Media heroes, on the other hand, emphasises constructive responses to cyberbullying through role-playing (Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023). Both programmes led to significant reductions in cyberbullying rates.

Several curricula emphasise peer dynamics and advocacy, including the system to track and account for children (STAC) programme, which prepares learners to advocate for victims and promotes a positive online environment (Hunter et al., 2022).

In cyber bystander sessions, students learn how to act when they witness cyberbullying by providing support or reporting incidents (Schacter et al., 2019). As a result of STAC and cyber bystander training, defending behaviours increased, and perpetration decreased. It appears that peer advocacy skills are emerging as a best practice, although there are limited follow-up data available.

Despite the evident benefits of anti-bullying curricula, the authors noted that it can be challenging to change behaviour by teaching lessons that learners may perceive as boring or irrelevant (Gaffney et al., 2019). Studies directly comparing curricula to whole school programmes could provide insight into ideal implementation strategies (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). Schools should examine learner engagement and supplement curricula with ecological approaches.

2.7.3 Targeted skill-building approaches

With promising results, researchers have developed brief, targeted cyberbullying interventions aimed at at-risk groups that deliver specific skill sets. As part of social-emotional learning that improves coping, iDEFEND is a training programme that teaches learners how to manage distressing emotions, respond calmly to cyberbullying, and seek help when necessary) training teaches learners to tolerate distressing emotions, respond calmly to cyberbullying, and seek help (Giovanelli et al., 2025). Primary school learners receiving iDEFEND reported less cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation than waitlist controls did in a randomised trial. In addition to increasing mental health literacy, the Cyber Friendly Mind programme improved learners' awareness of depression, emotional regulation skills, and adaptive online behaviour (Giovanelli et al., 2025).

To increase empathy, perspective-taking, and online relationships, targeted social cognition interventions are recommended. The exercise of media literacy encourages the analysis of cyberbullying cases from a variety of perspectives (Exner-Cortens & Cummings, 2021). A video game, *Crystal Island: Lost Horizon*, puts players in a virtual bullying scenario from both perpetrator and victim roles to build empathy. In both programmes, acceptance of cyberbullying was reduced post-intervention. Perspective-taking approaches from a social perspective are promising complementary strategies (Exner-Cortens & Cummings, 2021).

Through collaborative problem solving, restorative justice practices can address cyber aggression in adolescents involved with bullying (GPFS.org, 2022). In these programmes, perpetrators, victims, and parents share experiences, make amends, and enter into behaviour contracts. Despite being understudied, initial results have indicated an improved school climate and decreased rates of repeat bullying (Hu et al., 2025). Owing to their therapeutic focus, restorative models are worth further exploration when applied to cyberbullying.

Through brief targeted programmes, cyberbullying can be meaningfully reduced through key skill training, but intensive school-wide changes may not be an option for resource-limited schools. To better understand their relative and combined effects, more research needs to compare targeted and comprehensive programmes.

2.7.4 Parent and community approaches

A multifaceted solution to cyberbullying extends beyond school-based initiatives to educate parents and communities about cyberbullying. Despite being less extensively studied than school programmes are, preliminary evidence suggests that engaging families and community institutions can increase prevention efforts (Ngai et al., 2023).

Jabulani and Edward (2021) maintain that monitoring learners' online activities, communicating cyberbullying risks to parents, and intervening appropriately when incidents occur are imperative. A webinar training programme for parents covering prevention strategies across developmental stages was provided by the Cyber Friendly Homes programme (Hudson, 2021), and parents reported improved management of cyberbullying situations and better monitoring of technology use after the intervention. Parental involvement appears to be crucial to extending safe practices outside of the school environment.

As part of public education campaigns (Boromell, 2022), documentaries, websites, and advertising can increase awareness of cyberbullying among the general public and shape societal norms. In a survey conducted by Perkins et al. (2021), the Cartoon Network's Stop Bullying Speak Up campaign led to significant increases in bullying knowledge and willingness to act among surveyed youth post exposure (which included learner-focused ads, coping tips, and community outreach). Despite not guaranteeing behaviour change, media efforts and school partnerships are worth pursuing.

Moreover, paediatric health organisations reinforce cyberbullying as a public health issue that must be addressed collaboratively (Sripa & Ninphet, 2024). During visits, paediatricians are encouraged to screen for cyberbullying and advocate for prevention programmes in schools and communities. Such institutional policies legitimise action against cyber aggression. To drive social change, ongoing advocacy is essential.

2.7.5 Role of school-based support teams (SBSTs)

Lesesa (2022) posits that SBSTs are the primary intervention and enablers for preventing and responding to cyberbullying in schools. The SBST (team consisting of professionals from other school specialties to those that are already providing services to learners, such as social workers, counsellors and teachers) is key in creating a secure and supportive environment within schools where cyberbullying is not acceptable (Thobane et al., 2023). They are responsible for trying to intervene before harm happens by creating the policies in place, organising educational programmes and training teachers, learners and families (Thobane et al., 2023).. Aspects of a culture based on respect, empathy, and digital citizenship are key to fostering safety in the space.

SBSTs, in addition to preventive strategies, contribute to support services for a group of learners who experience cyberbullying (Thobane et al., 2023). The SBST ensures that learners have a secure environment in which to ask for help, discuss their experiences, and develop coping strategies through counselling, peer mediation, support groups, and referrals to outside resources. The SBST contributes to building resilience in learners and restoring power in their online interaction while also taking charge of the emotional and mental health impact of being subjected to online harassment (Lesesa ,2022). In addition, the SBST collaborates with parents to provide them with the means and support to monitor their learner's online behaviour, to set bounds and to support the learner in positive behaviour online at home (Mkwanazi, 2023).

The SBST's approach to cyberbullying prevention includes partnership and cooperation. SBST has opportunities to increase resources and reach out to the wider community to combat cyberbullying, leveraging community-based stakeholders, law enforcement agencies, mental health professionals, and experts (Lesesa, 2022). In fact, SBST aims to establish a support network that reaches the community (Tsetetsi

et al., 2023). SBST, according to Mashishi (2020), has helped schools be empowered to create environments where cyberbullying cannot be tolerated and every learner feels safe, respected, and included in both physical and virtual spaces.

2.7.6 Future directions

Research on cyberbullying interventions over the past decade has yielded encouraging results, but there are still significant gaps (Zhu et al., 2021). If initial behaviour changes persist over multiple years once programmes end (Gaffney et al., 2019), longer follow-up studies are critical. There is also room for improvement in comparing the effectiveness of programmes across different cultures. By focusing on non-Western settings, best practices that can be adapted to diverse populations can be identified.

Furthermore, cost-benefit analyses are lacking but are crucial for encouraging widespread adoption (Gaffney et al., 2019). A net societal gain from cyberbullying prevention might be determined by assessing programmes' affordability per learner and weighing expenses against the likelihood of reduced perpetration. Legislators may mandate or fund programmes within schools on the basis of research illustrating the economic impacts of cyberbullying. The importance of framing solutions from both economic and humanitarian perspectives is gaining traction.

Cyberbullying prevention options that are interactive online require continued creativity and testing as digital natives mature (Dey, 2024). Through customised apps, virtual reality simulations, and gaming environments, interactive modes can help learners engage with antibullying content and learn it better (James & Preeth, 2023). A number of design possibilities are available to researchers when they capitalise on learners' affinity for technology while teaching safe practices (Allman et al., 2023; Brevik & Holm, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2025).

Creating safer online ecosystems for learners requires an empirical cross-sector approach to cyberbullying prevention (Isabella & Agustian, 2023). Schools, families, health care, the government, and the tech industry all have a stake and a role to play. Cyberbullying is a pervasive public health issue that can be overcome with coordinated efforts guided by multidimensional research (Komalasari et al., 2024).

2.8 GAPS IN LITERATURE RELATING TO CYBERBULLYING

There is a significant knowledge gap concerning cyberbullying and its educational impacts, especially in rural school contexts such as South Africa's Vhembe West District, despite the growth of research on cyberbullying and its educational impacts. To build an evidence base that can inform effective interventions tailored to the district's unique ecology and needs, targeted research areas must be identified for future research. This section synthesises major limitations in the literature to date and outlines key directions for further research.

In Western cultures, most studies on cyberbullying and antibullying interventions are conducted in urban and suburban settings. Research into rural schools is scarce, particularly in developing nations, such as rural South Africa (Awaah et al., 2024). Under-resourced schools are likely to have different experiences on the basis of factors such as access to technology, peer dynamics, school climate, and staff availability. In rural school environments, more research would be useful for tailoring interventions on the basis of their unique assets, risks, and needs. To disrupt the assumption that urban findings apply uniformly, rural prevalence data and intervention research are needed (Awaah et al., 2024).

There have been few studies in South Africa or Sub-Saharan Africa specifically looking at cyberbullying patterns and impacts among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals (Nyoni et al., 2023). In contrast to the risks and consequences documented in predominantly middle-class research samples, markers of poverty, including food insecurity, limited internet access at home, reliance on mobile devices, and uneven digital literacy skills, may shape cyberbullying risk and consequences differently. By understanding the nature and scope of victimisation in rural, low-income schools, as well as the assets and challenges available to those learners, realistic programming can be developed. To understand youths' cyberbullying experiences, researchers need to contextualise them within broader systemic inequalities (Buchan et al., 2024).

Cyberbullying has negative effects on learners from Africa, especially in terms of emotions, socialisation, and academic performance. Research in Africa continues to use Western theoretical frameworks and measures without considering how cultural values and norms regarding peer relationships, social hierarchy, conflict resolution, and digital media use may influence learners' online experiences and their impacts

(Hu & Liu, 2024). To improve the validity, depth, and specificity of cyberbullying research and interventions, native African researchers and frameworks that are attuned to cultural paradigms and learners' voices could be employed.

As a methodological approach, cross-sectional studies measure learners' cyberbullying experiences, mental health, and academic performance at a single point in time (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). To elucidate the causal pathways between cyberbullying exposure, emotional outcomes, academic performance, and long-term trajectory, more rigorous longitudinal designs are crucial (Wang & Jiang, 2023). It is possible to illuminate the process and timing by which cyberbullying exerts cumulative damage by following cohorts of learners over multiple years. It would be possible to implement preventive interventions to disrupt destructive cascades on the basis of such insights.

Furthermore, studies overwhelmingly use self-report surveys to measure cyberbullying perpetration, victimisation, and other constructs (Yusuf et al., 2021). By integrating multiple data sources, such as peer nominations, teacher reports, counsellor interviews, and school records, such as disciplinary referrals and absences, validity can be strengthened, and self-report biases can be reduced (McDaniel et al., 2024). Researchers should combine rich qualitative insights with large-scale surveys to help them better understand complex dynamics (Neale & Tarrant, 2024). They should also gather perspectives from educators, parents, community members, and other stakeholders other than learners (McDaniel et al., 2024).

Anti-cyberbullying programmes have seldom been evaluated with randomised controlled trials in South Africa or globally, a standard for determining a causal intervention effect (Alkhatat, 2023). Although quasi-experimental programme designs dominate the literature, they cannot verify true impacts without comparison groups. It is therefore crucial to conduct rigorous tests of interventions identified as promising from the global evidence base in South African schools to provide data specific to the South African education system that will be useful in guiding policy choices.

The lack of economic and cost-effectiveness data is a major obstacle to the adoption of cyberbullying prevention models at scale by education departments and school boards (Ferretti et al., 2024). This study provides a compelling business case for investment to analyse the affordability of implementing programmes per student in

light of their effectiveness and projected savings from reducing cyberbullying. It is crucial for researchers to provide pragmatic decision-makers with evidence-based, context-specific solutions that are proven to be effective.

The Vhembe West District itself has not published any studies investigating patterns, consequences, or interventions associated with cyberbullying among primary school learners (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). To accurately assess the nature of the risks, assets, and complex dynamics faced by learners in this particular setting, local research contextualised in Vhembe West schools, and their surrounding social ecology is necessary. Unless district-specific data are documented, researchers should not assume that findings from other regions will transfer seamlessly.

As an initial step, Vhembe West education leaders need both basic prevalence studies and intervention-focused studies. The baseline data can be used to identify cyberbullying's most salient types, platforms, incidence across age ranges, and locations, as well as key perpetrator groups and short-term effects (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). A district-specific assessment of the most effective, feasible, and sustainable prevention programmes could be produced by implementing and evaluating pilot prevention programmes.

Research methods and framing that are pragmatic and culturally attuned to the lived realities, particularities, and ecology of rural South African schools are essential for advancing the scholarly field to address cyberbullying effectively in rural schools (Fakude, 2023). By overlooking the idiosyncratic assets and needs shaping students' online experiences differently across communities, transplanting interventions or conclusions wholesale from urban Western settings risks failure. Schools can develop tailored knowledge and capacity to prevent cyber aggression and foster digitally responsible learning environments through progressive research and authentic grassroots collaboration (Scott et al., 2023).

However, research on cyberbullying among South African learners and its impact on education is rare because of factors such as competing priorities, limited resources, low awareness and recognition, disparities in technology access and cultural nuances (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2020). All these factors collectively contribute to a scarcity of comprehensive studies in the country. To advance the understanding of

cyberbullying manifestations and effects on learning across diverse school contexts, large-scale surveys are needed (Masango et al., 2022).

The scarcity of research on cyberbullying among South African learners and its impact on education can be attributed to several factors (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2020).

Limited Awareness: Cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon in South Africa, and there may be limited awareness among researchers, educators, and policymakers about its prevalence and impact on learners (Vassiliadis, 2024).

Cultural and Societal Factors: Cultural norms and societal attitudes towards bullying and technology may differ between South Africa and other countries (Yende, 2024). This could influence how cyberbullying is perceived, reported, and addressed, making it less of a priority for research (Machado et al., 2024).

Resource constraints: Conducting research requires funding, time, and expertise. South Africa, like many other countries, may face resource constraints that limit the capacity to undertake comprehensive studies on cyberbullying and its effects on education (Singh et al., 2023).

Data Accessibility: Access to data on cyberbullying incidents and their impact on education may be limited in South Africa. This could be due to factors such as underreporting, a lack of standardised reporting mechanisms, or privacy concerns (Chen et al, 2023).

Research Priorities: Research agendas in South Africa may prioritise other pressing social issues or educational challenges over cyberbullying. As a result, limited attention and resources may be allocated to studying this specific topic (Adlem, 2023).

The scarcity of research on cyberbullying among South African learners and its impact on education highlights the need for increased awareness, resources, and collaboration to address this important issue effectively (Cilliers & Chinyamurindi, 2023).

2.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The theoretical framework, as Wallsten (2024) stated, has significance in every decision made in the process of research. Remenyi (2022) noted that the inquirer may begin constructing its theory, on the basis of a study, from the findings and set it after a project. Purnawan et al. (2024) stressed that there is no right or wrong theoretical

framework for doing research work, as they can all be seen in a different light. In the same paper, Alvesson and Sandberg (2024) stated that a review of the literature cannot be performed properly by a researcher until the theoretical framework has been established. In fact, the real solution to any problem is to determine some of the literature first and then try to build a framework. In reality, the true solution to any problem is to read some of the literature and then try to develop a framework.

On the basis of Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, Masoumi et al. (2024) claim that social cognitive theory (SCT) is an approach to studying and teaching how learners learn and engage in cyberbullying behaviours. It explains the significance of observational learner-based learning, imitation and modelling in the internet environment to mock aggressive behaviours that are displayed by others. SCT also incorporates perceived rewards and consequences, self-efficacy, and moral disengagement into the impact of cyberbullying behaviour (Paciello et al., 2023). This theoretical approach is used to understand social and cognitive processes that are at the core of cyberbullying as well as prevention and intervention strategies (Farhan, 2025).

In this study, SCT theory is selected to enable researchers to understand cyberbullying mechanisms and their mechanisms, as well as to apply SCT to the subject and, in turn, derive prevention and intervention-based strategies to reduce the occurrence of cyberbullying.

2.9.1 Key components of social cognitive theory

Bandura's social cognitive theory includes the following key components:

2.9.1.1 Observational learning

Lacombe (2024) noted that Bandura's social cognitive theory is based on observational learning, which is the process of acquiring behaviours by watching and imitating others. Attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation are key components (Sarker et al., 2024). The observer must concentrate on the model, remember the behaviour, be able to replicate it, and want to perform it. Bandura's Bobo Doll experiment demonstrated that learners imitate aggressive behaviour after witnessing that a model acts aggressively towards the doll (Lacombe et al., 2024). This demonstrated how behaviour can be learned and spread in a social setting.

Observational learning has a significant effect on education, psychology, business, social influence, and child development (Sarker et al., 2024). It promotes learning by allowing learners to emulate positive role models and effective behaviour. In the workplace, it improves training and leadership effectiveness, whereas in the media, it influences consumer behaviour and social norms. Learners frequently imitate parental and peer behaviour, making them important influences (Amina et al., 2023). Owing to their significant impact, influencers and the media are held accountable for modelling positive behaviours.

Bandura emphasised the significance of observational learning, or learning by observing others, in the development of new behaviour (Hancock et al., 2021). Individuals can learn new skills and behaviours by observing the actions and outcomes of others. Johnson and Florida (2024) also emphasise the influence of observational learning and social modelling on behaviour in social cognitive theory.

Attention to the model, retention of the observed behaviour, reproducibility, and motivation to imitate it all contribute to observational learning (Rezaei et al., 2023). Sarker et al. (2024) are of the view that the learner must focus on and remember the behaviour before physically and cognitively replicating it. Motivation, influenced by rewards and feedback, is required for the behaviour to be repeated. These steps highlight the relationship between the model's influence and the learner's abilities (Zhu et al., 2020).

Agbabiaka et al. (2020) indicated that when learners witness peers being cyberbullied, they may experience increased anxiety and fear, resulting in decreased concentration and lower academic performance. Additionally, if cyberbullying behaviour is modelled and not addressed, other learners may imitate it, perpetuating a hostile learning environment (Sibisi et al., 2025). Victims of cyberbullying may internalise negative messages, resulting in low self-esteem and motivation, which can negatively impact their academic performance (Bernardo et al., 2025). Marsh et al. (2023) argued that when counteracting these negative influences, an effective intervention requires positive role models and a supportive environment.

Observational learning is related to cyberbullying because it allows learners to imitate the bullying behaviours they observe, especially if bullies face no consequences (Aminah et al., 2024). Witnessing cyberbullying can cause fear and anxiety, resulting

in lower academic performance and participation. It also normalises behaviour, making it seem acceptable to the peer group (Barlett et al., 2024). Positive role models and interventions are essential in combating these negative influences.

2.9.1.2 Modelling

Modelling is the process of imitating the behaviour of others. Bandura proposed that learners are more likely to imitate the behaviours of models whom they see as similar to themselves, admired, or in positions of authority (Bandura, 2023). The behaviour of models can have a significant effect on an individual's own behaviour.

Learning through modelling entails observing, retaining, reproducing, and being motivated to imitate the behaviour of others (Bandura, 2023). Individuals observe the model's actions, memorise the information, and attempt to replicate the behaviour themselves (Bandura, 2023). Motivation is a key factor in determining whether observed behaviour is imitated, and reinforcement increases the likelihood of imitation. Modelling allows people to learn new skills, behaviours, and attitudes by observing and imitating the actions of others.

Modelling has an impact on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in the face of cyberbullying by influencing their emotional responses, social dynamics, self-esteem, coping mechanisms, and learning engagement (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2020). The observation that peers engage in or cope with cyberbullying can influence their behaviours and attitudes, ultimately affecting academic outcomes (Ngo et al., 2021).

2.9.1.3 Reinforcement

Bandura's social cognitive theory states that reinforcement strengthens or weakens behaviours on the basis of their consequences (Bandura, 2023). Direct reinforcement occurs when individuals receive rewards or punishments immediately following a behaviour. Vicarious reinforcement occurs when people observe others being rewarded or punished, which influences their own behaviour (Zhang et al., 2023). Akyar and Tuncer (2022) argued that self-reinforcement occurs when people reward or punish themselves to regulate their behaviour. These reinforcement types influence the likelihood of behaviour repetition in response to perceived outcomes (Wang, 2024).

Reinforcement learning strengthens behaviour by associating it with positive or negative outcomes (Collins & Cockburn, 2020). Positive reinforcement uses rewards to encourage desired behaviours, whereas negative reinforcement eliminates unpleasant stimuli to achieve the same result. Reinforcement should be applied immediately and consistently for maximum effectiveness. Furthermore, shaping gradually reinforces closer approximations to the desired behaviour (Zhao et al., 2023). These mechanisms help learners learn and maintain desired behaviour by reinforcing the link between actions and outcomes.

Aparisi et al. (2023) noted that reinforcement influences the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in a variety of ways. Negative reinforcement can cause avoidance behaviour, such as skipping classes, whereas a lack of positive reinforcement reduces motivation and engagement (Aparisi et al., 2023). Cyberbullying reinforces negative self-perceptions, which reduces self-efficacy and academic performance (Li et al., 2024). Peer reinforcement can perpetuate bullying and exacerbate its effects. However, positive reinforcement from teachers and parents can help mitigate these negative effects and promote victims' academic success.

Bandura emphasised the importance of reinforcement during the learning process. Observational learning is influenced by the consequences (rewards or punishments) of the observed behaviour (Bandura, 2023).

2.9.1.4 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific tasks according to Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bhati & Sethy, 2022). It affects decisions, effort, perseverance, and resilience. Self-efficacy is impacted by mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional states (Bhati & Sethy, 2022). High self-efficacy creates motivation and confidence, whereas low self-efficacy causes self-doubt and avoidance of challenges (Dixon et al., 2020). This concept is critical for understanding how learners approach and achieve their goals.

Self-efficacy is a learner's belief in their own competence and is a powerful predictor of academic success and is adversely affected by cyberbullying (Li et al., 2024). Cyberbullying can lower self-esteem, motivation and educational engagement, which significantly affects academic achievement (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2020). This emotional distress due to cyberbullying also affects cognition (such as attention and

memory), further hindering learning (Li et al., 2022). These negative effects can be mitigated with supportive interventions such as counselling and resilience-building programmes. Anti-cyberbullying policies that foster a safe and supportive school environment can also increase self-efficacy and academic performance (Aparisi et al., 2021).

Self-efficacy positively affects the academic functioning of Grade 7 learners and their motivation, effort, persistence, and grit to overcome academic challenges directly related to Grade 7 learners (Andres, 2020). Students who have high levels of self-efficacy are much more likely to utilise effective learning strategies and to engage with their studies (Andres, 2020). They experience a better response to stress and anxiety related to schoolwork, which leads to better school performance. Increased self-efficacy is related to greater classroom involvement and engagement (Teane & Gombwe, 2023). Generally, self-efficacy promotes a positive attitude toward learning and thus academic performance (Zhao, 2021).

Self-efficacy-informed learning processes entail several critical processes. Learners with high self-efficacy establish and reach difficult targets, persevere in the face of challenges, and engage in good learning strategies (Li et al., 2022). This confidence also helps them adopt a positive attitude and reduces anxiety, which supports their learning. In addition, being more active in class conversations and receiving feedback helps increase academic performance. In summary, self-efficacy enhances motivation, resilience and strategic learning, leading to enhanced performance (Zhao, 2021).

Bandura originated the idea of self-efficacy, which is defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to successfully carry out a behaviour or achieve a desired outcome. Self-efficacy influences learners' decisions, their level of effort, and their perseverance in the face of adversity (Bandura, 2023). Bandura suggested that belief in self-efficacy is developed through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences (observing others), social persuasion, and physiological arousal (Bandura, 2023).

Cyberbullying can diminish self-efficacy through repeated online harassment, threats, and denigration, which undermine victims' academic competence and self-worth.

2.9.1.5 Reciprocal determinism

Bandura proposed that cognitive, behavioural, and environmental factors interact to influence human behaviour (Ott, 2024). This concept, known as reciprocal determinism, proposes that people not only are influenced by their surroundings but also actively shape them through their behaviour and cognitive processes.

Bandura's social cognitive theory serves as a framework for understanding how people learn and grow through observation, imitation, cognitive processes, and interactions with their surroundings. It has been used extensively to explain and modify human behaviour in a variety of fields, including education, psychology, and communication (Bandura, 2023).

According to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT), cyberbullying and academics are frequently studied from a social cognitive perspective (Johnson & Florida, 2024). Human behaviour is influenced by a reciprocal interaction of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Within this framework, Johnson highlights the critical role of self-efficacy—individuals' beliefs that they are capable of succeeding and exerting control over life events (Liu & Lu, 2023). The author explains that people will not act or persist in the face of difficulties unless they believe that their actions can produce the desired results (Virhia et al., 2023).

Consequently, low self-efficacy can decrease student engagement, persistence, and academic performance. The findings of Iannello et al. (2024) indicate that cyberbullying victimisation over 1 year predicts a decrease in school self-efficacy and a decline in grades among Spanish learners. In conclusion, prolonged exposure to cyberbullying can erode learners' motivational resources, which are essential for school success (Zhang et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying is often perpetuated by learners who mimic cruel, degrading social interactions modelled in cyberbullying (Englander, 2023). However, SCT also indicates that positive modelling can lead to constructive responses among learners to cyberbullying (Zhao et al., 2023). As an example, Yang et al. (2023) proposed that the intentional modelling of resilience by teachers and parents can strengthen coping efficacy and prevent the adverse effects of victimisation on education.

Researchers continue to apply SCT to untangle the complex dynamics that may link cyberbullying with lower academic performance, taking into account both individual cognitions and broader social variables (Yang, 2020).

According to social cognitive theory (SCT), human behaviour can be understood in terms of personal factors, behaviours, and environmental influences (Zhou et al., 2024). Observational learning, in which people learn by observing others; self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's own ability to succeed; reciprocal determinism, which posits the mutual influence between people and their environment; and behavioural capability, which refers to the knowledge and skills required to perform a behaviour (Bandura, 2023). It considers outcome expectations, reinforcements, self-regulation, and environmental factors (Song, 2024). These elements are combined to form an integrated understanding of the ways in which behaviours are acquired, maintained, and modified, which is widely applicable in various domains ranging from education to health (Wiig et al., 2020).

2.10 CONCLUSION

The review of the literature emphasises the need for intervention in cyberbullying in an educational context. It shows how cyberbullying affects various aspects of students, such as academics, emotions, socialisation, health, and the school environment. Despite the success of school-based programmes and community involvement in the fight against cyberbullying, more research is needed, especially in rural areas, to develop evidence-based interventions for the specific contextuality of such communities.

Moving forward, there is a very clear theme of improved digital literacy and resilience to enable more learners to navigate online spaces safely and respectfully. This further implies a need to develop a positive atmosphere about the school culture, in which students can relate with empathy and intervene in cyberbullying. Parents, guardians, and all members of the larger group play a vital role in taking a common stance. The insights gained from the research thus far and the identified gaps will allow stakeholders to strive towards a safer, more respectful, and more inclusive learning environment to create and nurture the next generation of learners.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, the literature pertaining to this study was reviewed. The design and method of the study, including the study paradigm and methodological methods, are mentioned and described in Chapter 3. The research aims and research questions concern the choice of data collection and data analysis procedures that could be used to investigate the effects of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners and to analyse the intervention strategies identified by this study that are very likely to diminish the impact of cyberbullying on primary school learners in Vhembe West.

The chapter is devoted to the applicability of a qualitative research technique to the study and participants' preferences and processes and procedures of data collection. Notably, the major aim of this study is one aspect that should be carefully followed for maintaining trustworthiness or authenticity in data analysis (Aljohan & Bugis, 2024).

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Research methodology and design are fundamental to qualitative research because they dictate the manner in which data are gathered and analysed (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). Qualitative research employs the interpretivist paradigm as a philosophical lens to comprehend the meaning of human experiences and social phenomena, aiming to obtain information to the full (Muzari et al, 2022). It emphasises subjective observations and the context of the participants' lived experiences. A research design is used to describe techniques and processes of data collection and analysis, such as interviews, focus groups, and document analysis (Tracy, 2024). Qualitative methodologies are flexible and iterative in nature, which permits researchers to adjust as they interact with the data (Lim, 2025). This methodology and design ensured that the study yielded deep and informative insights into complex social issues (Muzari et al., 2022).

Pandey and Pandey (2021) emphasised that research projects can be categorised not only on the basis of their design and methodology but also their method of data gathering. The researcher gathered information in this study through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. These were rigorously

utilised, with ethical approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee and the Limpopo Department of Education. The researcher confirmed ethical standards by obtaining the permission of participants' principals after each participant provided informed consent. The protocol provided a cautious implementation of the informed consent process to increase participant safety during the study.

The researcher started the study in three selected public primary schools by meeting with principals, who acted as the gatekeepers. This meeting helped establish very good working relationships with all the participants. The researcher explained the purpose and objectives of the research to the participants before providing consent forms. Thus, there was an intention to connect with Grade 7 learners in a designated area.

The researcher requested a recorder during the interviews, as some participants might be hesitant to be recorded. To ensure that the questions were clear and included, the interview guide questions were initially administered in the participants' home language and then in English. The interviews were conducted in prearranged, unoccupied classrooms for learners, principals' offices for Grade 7 class teachers, and school-based support teams. Each session lasted 45 to 60 minutes to give the participants enough time to respond to all the questions in depth. For the purpose of data analysis, responses were captured and transcribed quickly (Lareau, 2021).

To preserve the confidentiality and integrity of the data gathered, the researcher adhered to data storage and security procedures. Hard copies were stored in a secure cupboard for five years so that they could be used for academic purposes later. The electronic files were stored on a password-protected computer, and any later use would undergo additional ethics review and permission (Lareau, 2021). Once a five-year retention period is up, physical replicas will be destroyed, and electronic files will be completely wiped using specialist software to ensure total data destruction (Lareau, 2021). This process highlights the researcher's commitment to ethical conduct, participant safety, and sound data management following the highest qualitative research standards.

3.2.1 Research design

A qualitative research approach with a case study design was adopted to systematically develop a framework for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

The application of research design acts as a blueprint, wherein the interplay of research questions with implementation methods guarantees the consistency of findings. As shown by Sharma et al. (2023) and Hennink et al. (2020), consider research design a tool vital for connecting the goals of the study to data collection and data analysis methods, whereas Canal (2024) and Pandey and Pandey (2021) highlight research design as essential for testing theories and understanding variable relationships.

A well-constructed research design ensures the study's reliability and validity by thoroughly describing its methodology, participant selection, and ethical issues. A qualitative methodology enables a researcher to implement a case study research design when collecting data (Khoa et al., 2023).

A well-structured research design was essential in this study since it established clear objectives, defined research variables, and outlined acceptable methods (Kalyan, 2024). It enables correct and trustworthy data collection methods, aids in the identification of cause-and-effect linkages, reduces prejudice, and allows for ethical concerns when dealing with delicate themes (Singh et al., 2025). It also promoted comparative research, data interpretation, and the creation of targeted interventions to help lessen the negative effects of cyberbullying on learners' academic performance.

Aguinisi (2023) indicated that a strong study design increases the credibility and significance of findings by ensuring ethical rigour and resource efficiency. Using an interpretivist paradigm and a case study approach, this study sought to provide deep, context-specific insights into how cyberbullying affects Grade 7 learners' academic performance and emotional well-being, as well as important guidance for targeted interventions.

3.2.1.1 Single Case Study

For this study, the researcher used a single case study research design and adopted a qualitative data collection strategy. A single case study was carried out across three sample locations to place the research problem within context. Because she adopted a single case study research method, the researcher was able to gather data through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions. A case study, as defined by Hancock et al. (2021), is a single programme or event that has

been rigorously studied over time. Determining how cyberbullying affects the academic performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe District might take time; however, this does not mean that cyberbullying will not be discovered. Moreover, the case study gave the researcher insight into a condition that was previously unknown or poorly recognised (Drisko, 2025).

Casula et al. (2021) agree that case studies are useful for making or providing early indicators for assumptions. Priya (2021) added that a case study allows the researcher to note information about the broader context of a case being examined, including details of the physical surroundings as well as any historical, economic, or social variables important to the scenario. Concerned stakeholders at the impacted schools where the research was performed may come to know about cyberbullying through a case study.

According to Davies et al. (2024), the Hobson choice can only be used by researchers using a case study. In case study research, Hobson's choice refers to the restricted option of investigating a given case owing to restrictions such as access or ethical issues, resulting in a "take it or leave it" situation. In the study of the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance, Davies et al. (2024) use the notion of Hobson's choice to represent the limits researchers encounter when employing a case study technique, such as being confined to certain instances owing to ethical or access difficulties. This is consistent with the case study's strength of offering precise, context-specific insights, even if it restricts generalisability (Paparini et al., 2021).

Amadori (2025) contended that a single case study provides a thorough examination of the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance, as it captures individual experiences and contextual variables. This study provides valuable information that can be used to influence targeted actions and future studies.

On the basis of the concepts presented by many academics, a case study was chosen for this study since it allowed the researcher to apply fresh ideas and propositions about the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe District.

3.2.2 Research paradigm

The research paradigm is a collective, shared belief system of worldviews that expresses the disciplinary perspective and value system and hence defines the approach of research to solving problems (Mdikana & Hove, 2025). A research paradigm is also a cluster of ideas and beliefs about the world and how it is to be studied and understood (Lim, 2025).

We selected the interpretivist paradigm to investigate the perceptions and descriptions of Grade 7 learners regarding how they experience cyberbullying. The interpretivist approach was paramount for this study; it emphasised understanding the subjective, emotive facets of participants' experiences, allowing a deeper understanding of the impact of cyberbullying instead of the numbers (Yao et al., 2024). According to Morgan (2022), the interpretivist paradigm offers researchers the opportunity to engage with participants in depth while also capturing rich, contextualised data. Additionally, because interpretivism seeks the truth of each context rather than making broad generalisations, it reinforces the authenticity and reliability of the findings (Silva et al., 2023).

The interpretivist paradigm in this study was a good fit, as it emphasised learners' subjective experiences and contextual phenomena. The focus of this study was to explore the meaning of and reactions of learners to cyberbullying, providing permission for the collection of rich, qualitative evidence through interviews and case studies (Shafik, 2025). This approach is an all-encompassing approach that considers not only academic performance but also emotional, social, and psychological outcomes. Its flexible nature enables dynamic analysis and encourages empathy, resulting in more ethical and participant-focused research in sensitive fields (Dutra, 2025).

According to Omodan (2024), the interpretivist paradigm helps guarantee that research conclusions are consistent with the study's aims of investigating personal and context-specific phenomena, hence increasing the study's validity. By integrating this methodology with qualitative research approaches, as stated by Braun and Clarke (2024), the study maintained methodological consistency. This focus on individual experiences allows for a more nuanced understanding of how cyberbullying impacts

academic achievement, as well as significant insights into the development of methods to prevent its harmful implications (Rathod et al., 2024).

Canal (2024) contended that the main distinction between a paradigm and a research method is how each functions as a narrative framework inside the research process. To support these claims, Britton (2024) proposed conducting an interpretive study to determine how many interviews would be conducted with participants.

3.2.3 Research approach

The selected qualitative methodology suited the study, as it permitted the researcher to collect data by semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews. Yang et al. (2024) define a scientific inquiry as a systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation that is sustained by theory and hypotheses about relationships that are posited about natural phenomena. Barrios et al. (2024) argued that the research method is a system that is also interested in mirroring and occurring in the logic of administrative research and how it triumphs reality.

The research approach needs to be divided into two aspects, which are explained so that the reader can obtain an overview of the research approach (Dudovskiy, 2018). Thus, we must understand that research is a methodical examination to determine facts: the dictionary states that research is (1) careful study and (2) a search or investigation. However, the method involves thinking about or talking about something, which could be a problem or a task, to determine an answer. In the context of research, research can work as a research method (Garcia- Rodriguez & Smith, 2024). The researcher intended to examine the impact of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners and possible methods for reducing cyberbullying among Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District. To achieve this goal, the researcher employed a qualitative research design.

Nayar and Stanley (2024) argued that conducting a qualitative study such as this (which this study conducted) would investigate reality interactively and provide room for differing perspectives of one's experience. Therefore, with the investigative approach, the researcher could have many opportunities to analyse and understand a central phenomenon, concept, or process under study in qualitative research methodology. Zhu et al. (2024) also reiterated that, whereas qualitative research can include a range of methods, the primary methods include interviews, focus group

discussions and document analysis across different domains. The data in this particular study were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus groups and document analyses. Thus, the qualitative research principles mentioned in the methods section provided richness, detail and reflective tracing of participants' experiences and perspectives in the data that were collected (Ahmed, 2025).

Wilson (2023) claims that in a qualitative method, there is a requirement that respondents be allowed to respond freely to face-to-face interviewers and that they be permitted to confer with co-interviewees in order to frame responses to questions asked by the interviewer. In the discussion, the interviewer could ask the participants open and very broad questions about the phenomenon.

Since a qualitative research method was implemented, this allowed for the exploration of participants' feelings and personal views (Adetunji, 2025). It also supports the use of qualitative analysis and the collection of rich, thick descriptive data from interviews, focus groups and document analysis to account for the nuances and complexities of cyberbullying, which may not be discovered via quantitative research methods (Dailey & Roche, 2025). According to Horton and Lyng (2022), qualitative research methodology creates a contextual understanding of the social and psychological aspects that impact the academic performance of learners, as in the present study.

The qualitative methodology used by the author at least provided the researcher with the chance to put their hands on the data and take notes during semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and transcribe the text data for future analysis (Schwab, 2025).

It is, somewhat paradoxically, a shortcoming of the qualitative research methodology that samples are usually small and drawn from respondents for whom the phenomenon represents a more salient personal experience (Foote & Healy, 2025). Therefore, the generalisability of its findings could be limited. However, Karunarathna et al. (2024) posit that an established qualitative approach facilitates the analysis to explore complex entities and the acquisition of dense data on human experience. Mirgissa (2024) also added that qualitative research is flexible and context-bound and promotes strong interactivity between the researcher and the research participants. It also fosters an interpretative analysis that may create new knowledge and provide a clearer understanding of social processes (Naeem et al., 2023).

The qualitative research design was appropriate for the current study, as it provided in-depth descriptions of the feelings and experiences of Grade 7 learners who were cyberbullied, thus showing effects on their self-esteem, motivation and academic performance (Olotu & Beyers, 2024). The context in which cyberbullying occurs, strategies used to cope, and several recurrent issues, such as loneliness and anxiety, are also relevant to cyber victims (Dailey & Roche, 2025). This strategy generated valuable insights for the development of a focused intervention to support learners emotionally and academically.

3.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

The 3 sampled schools (referred to as Schools A, B, and C in the study) are located in rural areas of Limpopo Province, South Africa, where systemic socio-economic disparities persist. These public primary schools, A, B, and C, which fall under quintiles 1–3, have enrolments of 640, 530, and 355 learners, respectively, receive limited government funding per learner, and face infrastructure challenges such as old buildings and overcrowded classrooms (Nevhotalu et al., 2023). The socio-economic status of learners reflects broader national trends: families in these areas grapple with high unemployment, which was 35.9% in the Makhado Municipality in Limpopo Province in 2019 (Nevhotalu et al., 2023). The majority of parents are unemployed.

3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

3.4.1 Population

The population in this study consisted of a total of 30 SBSTs members, 197 learners, 3 principals and 3 grade 7 teachers. This research employs participants who are directly involved with the problem of cyberbullying among Grade 7 learners at public primary schools in Vhembe West, Limpopo Province. As Zhao (2021) noted, a population encompasses the complete set of individuals or entities from which a research sample is derived. This research population consisted of learners, Grade 7 class teachers, school principals, and members of the school-based support team (SBST) from the three selected public schools within the Vhembe West District of Limpopo Province.

The population characteristics for this study consist of the following:

- Grade 7 learners who have either encountered or observed instances of cyberbullying.
- Grade 7 teachers who are responsible for educating these learners and may have witnessed or handled cases of cyberbullying.
- Principals who are responsible for overseeing the implementation of policies and maintaining the overall environment of their schools.
- School-based support team (SBST) members who offered additional support to learners, particularly in addressing social and psychological challenges such as bullying.

The number of participants in this study comprised 24 participants selected from three selected schools. This population was selected on the basis of the specific focus of the study, thus ensuring that all participants possessed relevant experiences and responsibilities associated with cyberbullying and its impacts on learners' academic performance. A population is the larger collection from which elements are selected to be included in a sample to study (Zhao, 2021).

A population, according to Beck (2024), is defined as any entire set of individuals, firms, hospitals, shopping centres, university students, or similar organisations that share one or more characteristic(s). A population is an enormous cohort, which is expected to have a meaningful contribution to a sample. Similarly, Verma et al. (2024) define the population as all persons or things, which is the object of the research that will be targeted, upon which we endeavour to obtain certain attributes.

The sample of participants for this study included 24 people from three selected schools. A selected sample of 24 learners is considered adequate for in-depth data analysis through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Ethical issues (the concepts of informed consent and anonymity), which involve participants' psychological well-being, were carefully adhered to during research (Painley, 2025). The population of the study is shown in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: The study population

Participant Group	Number Per School	Total (3 Schools)
Principals	1	3
School-based Support Team Members	3	9
Grade 7 class teachers	1	3
Grade 7 learners	3	9
Total	8	24

3.4.2 Sampling

Sampling is an important technique in research that involves selecting a subset of measures or units from a larger population to reflect its traits and behaviours. This method is necessary for making generalisations about the larger population while dealing with a manageable subset (Casteel & Bridier, 2021; Schoch, 2020). Sampling is especially beneficial when surveying the whole population is not feasible, owing to constraints such as time, expense, or access.

In qualitative research, sampling stresses depth over breadth, allowing for a more in-depth examination of certain phenomena. Research on the academic effects of cyberbullying frequently focuses on detailed individual experiences rather than large statistical patterns (Brevard, 2023). Purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and convenience sampling are examples of common qualitative sampling approaches. Purposive sampling selects participants based on particular criteria relevant to the study, whereas snowball sampling relies on individuals recruiting people from their networks, which is useful for reaching hard-to-reach groups. Convenience sampling, on the other hand, selects participants based on their availability and desire to engage, resulting in practicality but frequently lacking representation (Brevard, 2023).

The difference between populations and samples is critical to research methods. Populations are all of the cases being studied, whereas samples are smaller subsets intended to reflect the qualities of the larger group. Samples must be carefully selected to ensure that they correctly represent the population's diversity and traits, allowing for valid and trustworthy generalisations (Baltes & Ralph, 2022).

The researcher used purposive sampling for this study. Purposive sampling is a qualitative research method that selects participants on the basis of predefined criteria, ensuring that the data directly address the research question (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). Its advantages include a targeted focus on relevant cases, efficiency in resource-limited studies, and high-quality insights from participants with first-hand experience (Zhang & Wang, 2025). It enables exploration of rare or understudied phenomena and reduces bias by filtering irrelevant responses. Prioritising depth over breadth supported nuanced, context-specific findings, making it ideal for a qualitative study such as analysing cyberbullying's academic effects (Ali, 2024).

Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) posited that, quite often, the use of purposive sampling ensures that each element in a sample will help the researcher or not, and hence, it follows that each element must meet the population parameter of the study. Unfitting details, if they exist, can be neglected, such as those for an element. Additionally, Ezer and Aksüt (2021) stated that a purposive sample might provide very useful information to reach the study objectives. Purposive sampling is particularly helpful when a researcher is doing research for the purpose of building historical reality, describing a phenomenon, creating something new, or seeking input from certain respondents who are privileged with the information. According to Sibona et al. (2020), an additional benefit of a purposive sampling design was that it permitted the author to identify unusual or rich examples. It further enabled the researcher to recruit study participants from an otherwise inaccessible specialised population. Additionally, a purposive sample enabled the researcher to depend on prior experiences, intuition, and/or research results. Mweshi and Sakyi (2020) noted that a purposive sample enables the researcher to gather data in a manner that can make the diagnosed case/s reasonably representative of the population in question.

In this research, purposive sampling was the appropriate method to apply to this study, as such a method allowed the researcher to choose principals, SBST members and Grade 7 class teachers with greater teaching experience (McEvoy, 2024). Hereafter, the investigation was conducted in three selected primary schools in Vhembe West District. In addition, it was highlighted that an adequate sample is only based on how homogeneous or heterogeneous the populations from which the sample is taken are, and how similar or dissimilar in terms of appropriately selected characteristics associated with the research interest are the subjects in the sample.

Purposive sampling is carried out where the researcher intends to study specific cases (Campbell et al., 2019). This approach provides researchers with choices for learners using expert opinions and focuses mainly on how cyberbullying affects the academic performance of Grade 7 learners (Ahmed, 2024).

The following procedure was followed to choose the study participants.

- **Sampling procedure for the 3 principals**

The principals from Schools A, B and C under quintiles 1- 3 were chosen through purposive sampling, considering their leadership positions and participation in addressing academic and behavioural challenges, including cyberbullying. The researcher contacted each school's principal after securing approval from the Unisa Research Ethics Committee and the Limpopo Department of Education. The selection of principals was based on their crucial role in managing their schools and enforcing antibullying policies. The criteria for including the principals were as follows:

Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for this research included Grade 7 learners from the 3 selected primary schools who had experienced cyberbullying. Additionally, school-based support teams, principals, and Grade 7 class teachers were included as a result of their pivotal roles within the sampled schools. Individuals who would be willing to participate and who would voluntarily participate in the research would be included.

Exclusion criteria

The exclusion criteria were as follows:

Learners who did not fall within Grade 7 demographic standards and those who had not experienced cyberbullying. The other cohorts excluded individuals who did not hold positions as principals, teachers, or members of school-based support teams and those who would refuse to engage in the research.

The principals contributed to the study by granting access to learners, teachers, and other pertinent documents for analysis.

- **Sampling procedure for the 9 SBST members**

The members of the SBST were carefully selected for their active commitment to promoting learners' academic, psychological, and social well-being, with a special focus on tackling the issues provided by cyberbullying. The principals from three

sampled schools selected appropriate SBST members, as they were well aware of their functional roles at the respective schools and those who were experienced with learners affected by cyberbullying. The criteria for including SBST members were as follows:

Inclusion criteria

Members of the SBST who were experienced in supporting learners who experienced cyberbullying incidents.

Exclusion criteria

SBST members lack direct experience with cases of cyberbullying or those not participating in intervention programmes.

The principals played a crucial role in identifying the 9 SBST members and facilitated their consent to take part in the study.

- **Sampling procedure for the three 3 Grade 7 Teachers**

Grade 7 teachers were purposively selected because they directly address Grade 7 learners and therefore have a vantage point on the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance. Selections were made by the researcher with consideration for teachers' previous experience in Grade 7 and their willingness to participate in the research. The criteria for selecting Grade 7 teachers were as follows:

Inclusion criteria

Teachers who had a minimum of three years of teaching Grade 7 learners and who possessed direct insight into their learners' academic performance and social interactions.

Exclusion criteria

Teachers who did not teach Grade 7 or were not actively involved in monitoring the learners' academic performance and incidence of cyberbullying.

The principals helped identify appropriate teachers and supported their involvement in this study.

- **Sampling procedure for the 9 grade 7 learners**

The Grade 7 learners were chosen on the basis of their first-hand experience with cyberbullying as victims or witnesses of cyberbullying. The researcher collaborated with the class teachers and members of the school-based support team (SBST) to identify learners who had been affected by cyberbullying and were willing to discuss their experiences. The criteria for including learners were as follows:

Inclusion criteria

Grade 7 learners who had personally encountered cyberbullying.

Exclusion criteria

Learners who had not experienced the study or those who preferred not to take part in the study.

Purposive sampling was utilised in this study to select Grade 7 learners from three sampled schools (schools A, B, and C) who had experienced cyberbullying and who showed corresponding behavioural or academic changes. Teachers and school-based support team (SBST) members helped in selecting learners using particular criteria, guaranteeing the gathering of thorough qualitative data relevant to the study's aim.

3.4.3 Information on the 24 participants

The study participants included 15 adults and 9 Grade 7 learners who were under the age of 18.

3.4.3.1 Information on the three principals

Table 3.2 below provides information on the 3 principals.

Table 3.2: Information on 3 Principals Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Experience as Principal	Number of years at current
P1	Male	62	35	20	15
P2	Male	52	29	4	4
P3	Female	54	32	7	1

Key:

P1 to P3 = Participants 1 to 3

The study included three school principals, two males and one female, ranging in age from 52 to 62 years. Their teaching experience spans between 29 and 35 years, with principalship experience ranging from 4 to 20 years. The amount of time spent at their current schools varied, with one principal in their first year and another at their school for 15 years.

3.4.3.2 Information on the three Grade 7 teachers

Table 3.3 below provides information on the Grade 3 teachers.

Table 3.3: Information on the 3 Grade 7 teachers

Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Subject taught	Grade	Number of years at current school
T1	Female	56	15	Social Sciences Tshivenda	7 7	11
T2	Female	49	12	Life Orientation	7	12
T3	Male	39	8	Mathematics English	7 7	8

The study involved three teachers, two females and one male, aged between 39 and 56 years. Their teaching experience ranged from 8 to 15 years, and all were currently teaching Grade 7 learners. The subjects taught varied, with their time at their current schools ranging from 7-12 years.

Key:

T1 to T3 = Teacher participants 1 to 3

3.4.3.3 Information on the 9 SBST members

Table 3.4 below provides information on the 9 SBST members.

Table 3.4: Information on SBST members

Participant	Gender	Age	Role in SBST	Number of years in the role
SBSTm1	Female	35	Learning support co-ordinator	5
SBSTm2	Male	31	SBST co-ordinator	1
SBSTm3	Female	56	Life Orientation teacher	7
SBSTm4	Male	57	SBST co-ordinator	3
SBSTm5	Male	48	Life Orientation teacher	6
SBSTm6	Female	39	SGB Chairperson	2
SBSTm7	Female	53	SBST co-ordinator	3
SBSTm8	Female	43	Learning support co-ordinator	3
SBSTm9	Female	49	Life Orientation teacher	3

Key:

- **SBSTm1 to SBSTm9 = School-based support Team member 1 to School-based support Team member 9.**
- **SBST= School-Based Support Team**
- **SGB = School Governing Body**

The study included nine SBST members, five females and four males, aged between 31 and 57 years. Their roles within the SBST varied and included SBST co-ordinators, learning support coordinators, Life Orientation teachers, and one school governing body (SGB) chairperson. Their experience in these roles ranged from 1 to 7 years, reflecting a mix of newer and more experienced members contributing to the support structures in their schools.

3.4.3.4 Information on the nine Grade 7 learners

Table 3.5 below provides information on the 7 learners.

Table 3.5: Information on Grade 7 learners

Participant	Gender	Age	Grade	Years at current school	Experienced cyberbullying (Yes/No)
L1	Female	12	7	8	Yes
L2	Female	12	7	8	Yes
L3	Female	13	7	8	Yes
L4	Female	12	7	8	Yes
L5	Male	12	7	8	Yes
L6	Female	13	7	8	Yes
L7	Male	12	7	8	Yes
L8	Female	12	7	8	Yes
L9	Female	12	7	8	Yes

Key:

L1 to L9 = Learner 1 to Learner 9

The study involved nine Grade 7 learners, consisting of seven females and two males, all aged between 12 and 13 years. Each learner had been at their current school for eight years, indicating long-term enrolment. All the learners reported experiencing cyberbullying.

3.5 INSTRUMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

To obtain a full grasp of the research issue, data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, which captured various viewpoints, triangulated findings, and provided both qualitative and contextual insights.

Instrumentation and data collection are critical components of qualitative research, which is aimed at investigating complicated phenomena using rich, non-numerical data (Lim, 2025). Qualitative research makes extensive use of human-centred methods and procedures to document participants' experiences, perceptions, and actions in natural settings (Lim, 2025).

Data collection, while commonly seen as a simple and painless activity, is a difficult and comprehensive process. According to Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023), the idea that data collection is straightforward does not account for inherent problems. The procedure can be time-consuming, emotionally draining, and ethically complex, necessitating careful planning and sensitivity.

According to Subrahmanyam (2025), to produce accurate and relevant results, researchers must consider aspects such as participant trust, possible bias, and data interpretation. These components are very important in maintaining the credibility and validity of study findings.

Data collection entailed documenting the frequency of certain behaviours, phrases, or expressions, as well as participant reactions, views, and quotes. According to Khoa et al. (2023), the procedure included identifying and selecting participants, obtaining informed consent, and collecting information systematically using various questioning approaches.

In this study, the role of the researcher was important. According to Tracey (2024), the researcher is frequently the primary data collector, emphasising the necessity of reflexivity, empathy, and ethical awareness in qualitative research.

Qualitative research comprises various features that make it an effective tool for studying complicated phenomena (Lim, 2025). This study offered deep and extensive insights into individuals' experiences, emotions, and perceptions, allowing for a more comprehensive explanation of actions and decisions (Lim, 2025). The flexibility of data collection also allows researchers to tailor their methods on the basis of participant responses, revealing unexpected themes and effectively probing complicated subjects (Tracy, 2024). Qualitative approaches are excellent at capturing the intricacies of human emotions and perceptions, increasing participant involvement through direct contact, and offering contextual knowledge within specific circumstances (Lim, 2025). Furthermore, qualitative research provides a framework for theory development by finding repeated themes and patterns (Naeem et al, 2024).

The data collection approach was centred on ethical issues. After obtaining clearance from the University's Research Ethics Committee, the researcher ensured that all participants provided informed consent through their respective principals. The participants were informed of the study's aim and objectives. Audio recordings were utilised with specific consent, and responses were transcribed quickly to eliminate delays in analysing the data (Lareau, 2021; Rutakumwa et al., 2020). This technique not only assured participant safety but also encouraged trust and openness throughout the interviews.

To maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the collected information, stringent data storage and security protocols were implemented. Hard copies of the data, including signed consent forms and transcriptions, are kept securely in a locked cabinet for a duration of five years for possible future academic uses. After this five-year retention period, these hard copies will be disposed of through shredding to maintain confidentiality and adherence to ethical guidelines (Lareau, 2021; Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

Electronic data, such as recordings of interviews and their transcriptions, is kept on a computer that is protected by a password to prevent unauthorised access (Azem Qashou et al., 2025). After five years, the electronic data will be permanently removed

using specialised software to guarantee complete data destruction. This method ensures that all data are treated responsibly and ethically, adhering to the highest standards of qualitative research (Hendon et al., 2025).

The researcher assured the validity and dependability of the results by prioritising ethical issues and implementing strong data storage policies. These methodologies are useful when analysing complex topics such as cyberbullying's effects on academic performance, providing strategies that can be used to inspire targeted treatments and policy creation.

3.5.1 Data Collection Methods

To acquire and corroborate data, qualitative researchers use a variety of methods (Tracy, 2024). Face-to-face interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussions served as the key data-gathering methods in this study (Khoa et al., 2023).

Table 3.6 below presents the data collection methods, instruments, and corresponding participants.

Table 3.6: Data collection methods, instruments and corresponding participants

Data collection method	Data collection instrument	Corresponding participants	Total participants
Focus group discussions	Discussion Schedule	9 Grade 7 class learners	18
		9 SBST members	
Face-to-face individual Interviews	Interview schedule	3 Grade 7 teachers	6
		3 Principals	
Document analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Previous and current year mark schedules. ▪ SBST records. ▪ Schools' disciplinary policy. 	Selected documents	N/A

Qualitative research is an interactive, in-person study that takes extensive time to properly interview participants and capture processes as they occur spontaneously (Mdikana & Hove, 2025).

For this study, the researcher employed three instruments - semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis (Karunarathna et al., 2024). Semi-structured interviews facilitated freedom yet retained a structured format, enabling the generation of participants' in-depth personal opinions (Lin, 2025). Focus groups permit joint exploration of shared experiences and group functioning (Lim, 2025), whereas documentation reviews provide an opportunity to look at secondary or supporting evidence, such as attendance or misbehaviour records, in conjunction with primary data (Smith, 2024). Triangulating different sources of data was employed to enhance a complete understanding of this study's issue (Kumar et al, 2023).

3.5.1.1 Focus-group discussion

Focus group discussions were also held with Grade 7 learners and school-based support teams across three selected schools in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province. The researcher used focus group discussions for this study because they open up rich and interesting discussions that reveal personal experiences and opinions in their own right (Minh, 2025). This permitted the researcher to discover nuances and shared patterns that more common methods of collecting information might not have (Tracy, 2024).

Focus groups are defined by Akyildiz and Ahmed (2021) as a group of respondents who interact with a researcher in discussions of a predetermined topic. Focus groups differ from individual interviews since group members can freely comment on and debate the point in question and contribute to different aspects of the topic (Lauri, 2019). The significance of the data obtained from focus group interviews is greater than that obtained from personal interviews, as participants can act in everyday scenes during interviews (Tümen Akyildiz, 2020). The focus groups in this qualitative study helped the researcher obtain in-depth information from the respondents (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

Karatsareas (2022) referred to a focus group discussion as any semi-structured/unstructured exchange within a small group of people. Cohen Almagor (2018) also proposed that focus group interviews involve tightly manufactured questions and answer sessions, which require more open-ended questions in qualitative methods.

Typed focus group questions (Locke et al., 2022) structured the discussions. Mengue-Topio et al. (2024) further suggested that the researcher uses focus group interviews and brainstorming to generate new ideas, which is also similar to this case; when small group dynamics operate, individuals are inclined to think and amend their ideas. If you are in the research space and you care how users interact with a system in a particular way, you can get a few people together and ask them what it is like using your system.

The use of focus group discussions proved invaluable for this study, as they enabled the researcher to collect detailed information about the personal experiences of Grade 7 learners with cyberbullying, promote a sense of openness and honesty, gather a diversity of perspectives on cyberbullying's influence on learners' academic

performance, and obtain useful input into the development of interventions (Okuboyejo et al., 2025).

3.5.1.2 Focus group discussion procedure

Focus group discussions are a qualitative research approach that involves directed group interactions to elicit participants' experiences, views, and attitudes (Lim, 2025). A researcher often facilitates these discussions, ensuring that all participants contribute and that the discourse stays on track with the study objectives (Lim, 2025). The focus groups were especially useful for gathering varied viewpoints, studying group dynamics, and learning how participants generate meaning collectively (Asrifan et al., 2025).

In guiding the focus group discussions, the researcher implemented a systematic route consistent with ethical considerations (Minh, 2025). The first task the researcher performed was to ensure that the participants had a good understanding of the objective and study and the rights of the participants. The participants were informed that, at any time, they could withdraw from the study. The consent forms were sent and signed to indicate this.

A total of 9 Grade 7 learners and 9 SBST members from three purposively selected schools in Vhembe West District participated in this sample. Two focus group discussions were held at each of the schools, one with three Grade 7 learners and one with three SBST participants. Overall, six focus group discussions were conducted for this study. They also agreed to audio-record the focus group discussions. The learner conversations and SBST conversations were separate conversations.

The sessions with SBST members were held in a private room at each school, selected for its quiet nature to guarantee confidentiality and focus (McEvoy, 2024). Each session lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, allowing ample time for discussion while being mindful of the participants' schedules. To facilitate the participants' attendance, the researcher coordinated with the principals and SBST members ahead of time. A mutually agreeable time was chosen, and a formal invitation was distributed with the confirmed date and time. Some difficulties were faced in scheduling times due to the busy calendars of the SBST members; however, the researcher collaborated closely with the school administration to identify a suitable time that was convenient for everyone (Mathoni, 2024).

The Grade 7 learners comprised nine learners, with three learners from each of the three sampled schools. Separate focus group discussions were held with these learners, one focus group from each school, featuring three learners per group. Like in the SBST discussions, the focus groups for learners were structured to promote interaction, allowing learners to share their experiences and views on cyberbullying.

These group discussions lasted for 30 to 45 minutes. To arrange these sessions, the researcher collaborated closely with Grade 7 teachers to identify a suitable time that would not conflict with the learners' academic commitments. Consent was also secured from both the learners and their parents before the focus group sessions began. While organising the sessions with the learners, challenges arose regarding scheduling a time that accommodated all participants. However, with the assistance of Grade 7 teachers, the researcher successfully scheduled focus group discussions at times that were convenient for the nine sampled learners at each of the three selected schools.

Data were securely stored on a password-protected laptop (Mathebula et al., 2025) after the interviews. The researcher kept all the data anonymous throughout the research process.

However, focus group discussions, such as those in this study, were helpful for learning (because participants were discussing their experiences interactively) and hence provided better insights into the impact of cyberbullying on academic performance (Gieles et al., 2025). The nature of the group dynamic allowed participants to build on one another's thinking, and it produced an overall wider mix of facts and opinions than individual interviews could achieve. Focus groups also enabled the researcher to probe deeper into themes that were more superficial at the beginning by restarting talks on the basis of group responses. Interpersonal relationships also enable participants to have a sense of comfort, as they discover that their thoughts are shared by others (Down et al., 2023).

3.5.1.3 Interviews

The interviews were conducted with 3 Grade 7 teachers and 3 principals from the three sampled public primary schools. Nasser and Ahmed (2025) indicated that interviews are an important tool for obtaining detailed, non-numerical data in qualitative research. This technique comprises direct interaction between the researcher and the

participants, allowing for the examination of complex phenomena in organised, semi-structured, or unstructured formats (Khan et al., 2025). The flexibility of interviews enables researchers to dive into delicate elements of human experiences, gathering both verbal and nonverbal signs necessary for comprehending sensitive themes (Taylor et al., 2025).

The use of qualitative interviews to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance was very effective. This strategy created a secure and confidential setting in which individuals may discuss their own experiences and emotional responses to cyberbullying. The interviews provided contextual insights into the social and cultural aspects that determine both the prevalence of cyberbullying and its effects on academic performance (Mishna et al., 2022). Furthermore, the rich data gathered through interviews were useful for developing targeted strategies aimed at reducing the negative effects of cyberbullying on academic performance (Ifon, 2023).

3.5.1.4 Interview procedure

A total of 3 principals and 3 Grade 7 class teachers from the three schools were interviewed separately face-to-face. The interviews were conducted at a time and location convenient for the participants. According to Bathran and Samuel (2024), face-to-face semi-structured interviews constitute a qualitative research method in which the interviewer facilitates a conversation in person with a broad guide of prepared open-ended questions. In this atmosphere, the interviewer was able to explore different themes more deeply, and the interviewee was invited to expand upon their experiences while also recording simultaneous nonverbal cues for context (Elhami et al., 2024).

They spoke to the participants to arrange the interviews that worked for them. The interviewed sites were sampled schools, and the respondents were recruited. The interviews were not conducted during regular school hours or examination periods to prevent teaching and learning disruptions. All the participants were invited to participate in the interviews, and the interviews occurred according to the planned schedule without the need for any disruptions. Like what is generally done in semi-structured interviews, the researcher in this study used a series and question of open responses to each participant (scheduled), prepared them prior to the interview (open-

ended questions) (Wahyuni, 2024) and followed up only with questions when necessary, on the basis of the initial feedback of the interviewee.

A writing pad was used for the points that were made by the subject during the interview. Each interview was recorded on audio with the permission of each participant. Furthermore, to meet all the needs of the interviewees so that they are at ease with being at their best and providing detailed information, the language of each respondent was allowed to respond exactly as they wished. The discussion was based on the questions formulated to help answer the research question. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes.

The advantages of semi-structured forms of interviews as a way to examine the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 students, including in depth and personal insights into experiences and emotions experienced by students, were facilitated. Because the approach was fluid, follow-up questions to the principals' and Grade 7 teachers' responses revealed previously unseen rapport, guided them to reveal deeper levels of understanding and facilitated participants' information sharing about cyberbullying; non-verbal signs and cues lent depth to the data (Leslie et al., 2024). In line with Khanolainen and Semanova (2023), follow-up questions could also help establish in-depth insight; thus, this approach is useful for exploring the complex and sensitive experiences of the effects of cyberbullying on the academic achievements of Grade 7 learners. Belina (2023) suggested that under semi-structured interviews, require a list of potential themes and types of questions; all of these themes and some questions may vary according to the interview regime.

Semi-structured interviews allowed us to obtain data in an approach-compatible manner. Semi-structured interviews, among other aids, may have received the kind of information suited to the qualitative approach, thus ensuring that the data that participants provided for the study would provide meaningful support for the phenomenon under investigation. In any studies, semi-structured interviews elicit maximum information about what the participants are thinking, how they are feeling, their actions and the reason behind the actions (Wen et al., 2023).

3.5.1.5 Document analysis

Document analysis is a qualitative research approach that involves interpreting and studying written, visual, or physical materials to collect data pertinent to the research

questions (Tracy, 2024). This method is beneficial in qualitative research, as it facilitates the examination of existing documents that provide insights into the topic being studied. The documents analysed included the participating learners' previous and current year's mark schedules to determine the impact cyberbullying had on their academic performance, the school's and SBST's records to determine the action plan that was undertaken to address and resolve cyberbullying situations and the school's disciplinary policy regarding how to address cyberbullying incidents.

A major advantage of document analysis is its capacity to offer a comprehensive historical context that enhances other data collection methods, such as interviews and focus groups (Hadibarata et al., 2024). This approach enabled the researcher to triangulate the information gathered from focus group discussions and interviews, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the results.

3.5.1.6 Document analysis process

Document analysis is a qualitative systematic research method that is used to analyse and interpret a variety of documents to find meaning, context and significance (Jamil et al., 2024). This strategy involved scrutiny of three records: the learners' mark schedules of the previous year and the current year, the schools' and SBST's documents and the school's disciplinary policy. A letter asking for access to the abovementioned documents was addressed to the principals of all the schools. In that letter, the purpose of the study was described. The principals were promised the safekeeping of the papers. The researcher hand-delivered the letter and requested to copy the last year and this year mark schedules, the schools' discipline policy and the SBST records. Minutes from SBST committee meetings also assisted the researcher in providing evidence as to whether any of the schools had taken the time to address and resolve instances of cyber-bullying that occurred with students. Upon receiving permission from the principals, copies of the documents were obtained from the custodians (also school principals). Those documents were analysed for confidence.

The researcher reviewed this documentation for emerging patterns, themes, and knowledge related to the research questions. Khoa et al. (2023) believe that a study of documents can also add a historical perspective, validate what can be known through other data sources, and present a broader look at the phenomena being studied. The researcher conducted an onsite review of past and present grade reports

and school and SBST records from the sampled primary school upon formal request from principals.

The use of document analysis proved to be effective for understanding the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 academic performance in that it offered objective data from documents, such as SBST minutes and school records, reports from different years' marks and disciplinary reports. This approach provided a historical context, headwinds, supported and validated the qualitative findings, and evaluated the performance of policies/interventions. It also proved to be a cost-effective approach for obtaining in-depth information that could be bolstered with other methods of research to obtain a greater understanding of the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners and their performance in academia.

The contents of the documents were guaranteed to be kept in a safe place. The consent letter was handed in by the researcher, and the researcher also asked if the previous and previous year mark schedules, schools' disciplinary policies and SBST records could be copied. The SBST committee meet minutes assisted the researcher in obtaining evidence on whether schools discussed and resolved cases of cyberbullying among learners. After the principals consented, the researcher collected the documents from the custodians, who were also principals of the schools. Importantly, each of those documents was reviewed sensitively.

All-important stuff and unique facts were recorded as themes to reduce any potential barriers to the analysis process since key and unique facts were noted. The correspondence of the school's disciplinary policy with Limpopo Department of Education policies, on how cyberbullying should be treated in schools, was identified as part of the extent of the consistency and uniformity of the research.

Where discrepancies occurred, the investigator considered what effect these discrepancies may have had. The researcher examined the mark schedules of the previous and current year, schools' files and SBST files and reviewed the documents thoroughly multiple times to identify the effects of cyberbullying on grade 7 learners' academic progress (Watson & Foster, 2006), scrutinised the school stamp dates and the principal's signature. These acts were *sui juris* and operated as evidence that the papers were those of a school. On the basis of the importance of their content in relation to the categories, references within the documents for each category were put

in evidence and categorised. A structured checklist was employed by the researcher to guide the examination of the documents for elements, including authenticity, relevance, importance, context, and bias. The researcher's interpretation was based on the research questions, a thematic structure, and the established practices in qualitative research.

Point and Baruch (2023) warned that in the document analysis methodology, there is no recording and subsequent transcribing of spoken answers. Dalglish et al. (2020) document analysis is an integrated and conceptually informed approach, process and technique to find, identify, retrieve and analyse documents according to their relevance, significance and meaning.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS, PROCESS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis refers to the reasoning and interpretation of collected data (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). Moreover, Salmona and Kaczynski (2024) stressed that data analysis serves as the endpoint in listening to what other participants mean in response to the questions formulated throughout their interviews and focuses on group discussion. Lester et al. (2020) mentioned that when the data analysis method is used, it is best to begin by considering the objectives under analysis. Hammer and Harper (2024) argue that data analysis involves using your thinking to make sense of the data you have collected. The data analysis for the study was processed in an interpretive or constructivist manner where the data were descriptively coded in relation to the responses of the participants, interview transcriptions and relevant documentation (Naeem et al., 2023).

The data for the study were analysed using thematic content analysis. The datasets included semi-structured face-to-face focus group discussions and interviews, as well as an analysis of the documents. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for recognising and interpreting patterns of meaning in data through categorising it into themes (Buetow, 2025). It is a systematic coding, topic creation, refining and presentation process that provides richer descriptions of respondents' experiences and perspectives (Lim, 2025).

Arntson and Yoon (2023) emphasised that the success of the data analysis process project depends upon the input of data through focus groups, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, which should be taped or recorded on a recording machine

and then transcribed exactly as spoken. The interview and focus group transcripts were organised according to units of meaning that emerged directly from the questions. To minimise the perceived risk in sharing information with the researcher, three focus groups were used for the perception of SBST members and participants as the most successful strategy. The questions acted as framers to structure the interview schedule. This procedure involves the coding of the data, which is defined as giving names to the categories or classifications that are used within the data (Lock et al., 2022). Therefore, the data coding was a part of that. Coding involves grouping data into particular themes (Reyes et al., 2024).

The data extracted prior to determining the themes by which the information in the documents was coded (used as themes) were the descriptors. Thematic data analysis was used in analysing the documents, that is, the facts that were significant and unique from the observations or data were extracted as themes and related to these themes. To maintain consistency and standardisation, processes detailed in the learners' Code of Conduct and the SBST records were mapped onto processes of handling bullying and, more specifically, cyberbullying. In cases of discrepancy, the author analysed the consequences of differences to guarantee that the analysis was conducted appropriately. The researcher used triangulation, member checking, thematic analysis and contextual analysis to guarantee the accuracy of the analysis. The validity of the interpretation was maintained in several ways: triangulation was employed to ensure that the analysis was safe from subjectivity by cross-referencing data to those from multiple sources, member checking demonstrated the verification of findings with the participants, thematic analysis ensured that the analysis remained systematic and allowed key patterns to appear, and contextual analysis facilitated the transfer of the results into the relevant social and educational context (Lim, 2025).

Data from the documents, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using a five-stage approach widely used in thematic content data analysis (Naeem et al., 2023).

Step 1: Acquaintance and immersion

In qualitative research, research involves reading the acquired material; the researcher must become familiar with the acquired material and read it several times and monitor for emerging trends (Mohamadirizi et al., 2025).

Data interpretation and analysis were preceded by knowledge of the contextual and conceptual terrain of the study (Lim, 2025) and were therefore the first step in qualitative research. This required awareness of the study aims, its socio-cultural environment, and the theoretical model guiding the study (Wen et al., 2025). The researcher analysed not only the study topics but also the participants' views and research strategies (interviews, focus groups, document analysis) critically during the study (Minh, 2025). Improving contextual awareness is essential for ensuring interpretative sensitivity and methodological consistency (Lim, 2025).

At this stage, the researcher transcribed the recorded data. She subsequently read, reviewed and re-read the transcripts to familiarise herself with the findings. She generally considered the findings, and then, a preliminary analysis linking the themes to the research questions and objectives helped draw conclusions (Kullman & Chudyk, 2025). Immersion has developed these ideas even further. Participants go through in-person interviews with the same participants as with interviews with facilitators to experience the participants lived experiences (Abalona et al., 2025). Similarly, reflexivity was crucial, as the researcher was able to consider her own biases and how they might affect what was read on the data (Ahmed, 2024). By going through this stage, the findings of the study became real and well-grounded in the experiences of the participants, as well as free of researcher bias.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

This step in qualitative data analysis entailed categorising and coding data to identify key themes and patterns (Kullman & Chudyk, 2025). During this step, the researcher began by organising the data and labelling each data point to ensure that it corresponded to one or more of the developed themes (Saunders et al., 2023). This means that each response was carefully reviewed and coded by assigning it to a category that accurately reflected its meaning.

Important statements were colour-coded to help refine the analysis. Coding is a technique for highlighting important bits of information, making it easier to trace repeating concepts throughout datasets (Zhang et al., 2022). Statements regarding emotional anguish caused by cyberbullying are classified in red, but those concerning academic difficulties are coded in blue (Yi & Zubiaga, 2023). This visual contrast enabled the researcher to swiftly identify and organise significant ideas.

This technique was mostly used to streamline the process of summarising the study's recommendations. When developing findings and proposing solutions, the researcher simply referred back to the most important material by classifying and colour-coding essential assertions (Holcomb, 2023). Najjar (2025) believes that this organised procedure guarantees that no significant element is ignored and that the final analysis appropriately represents the impact of the phenomenon under study, such as in this case, cyberbullying, on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners.

Step 3: Creating themes

During this step, the researcher thoroughly studied the categories of responses from the interviews and focus group participants to discover recurring themes and patterns (Lim, 2025). These repeating ideas were then combined to create themes, which reflected significant notions emerging from the data (Naeem, 2024). Similar themes were further grouped into wider categories to enable systematic and reliable analysis, allowing the data to be better organised (Karunarathna et al., 2024). This allowed the researcher to identify patterns of similar information across the interviews and discussions. This procedure also allowed the researcher to code the data systematically, making it easier to comprehend and derive relevant findings. By classifying themes, the researcher ensured that the findings correctly and clearly reflected the participants' opinions (Lim, 2025).

Step 4: Explanation

The 'Explanation' describes the researcher's methods for ensuring data correctness and consistency (Karunarathna et al., 2024). It outlines how thematic content analysis (TCA) was used to detect recurring themes, organise similar concepts, and evaluate trends in participant replies (Dery et al., 2025). This method, which was backed by existing research, helped frame the findings and provide a strong foundation for the study's recommendations.

The researcher used this process to fix coding mistakes and ensure data correctness and uniformity. A thorough study of several topics was undertaken by evaluating participant responses and the associated literature (Susanto et al., 2024). The researcher was able to identify recurring themes and group-related concepts and evaluate trends to better understand the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance. This method guarantees that the findings are well structured

and useful, serving as a solid foundation for the study's recommendations (Khan, 2024).

Step 5: Interpretation and verification

Finally, in the last step, the researcher integrated all of their interpretations into a single analysis to ensure that the report would be coherent (Tracy, 2024). This approach involves an in-depth evaluation of all the themes, coded statements, and findings in pursuit of clarity and consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The writer was able to identify and correct errors in written narratives, for example, in terms of discrepancies, misinterpretations, and data gaps (Lim, 2024). This last evaluation increased the trustworthiness of the study by confirming that the findings accurately reflected the impact of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners (Maranan et al., 2025).

3.7 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Wilcox (2024) interpreted trustworthiness for a research study as demonstrating the truth value of one's conclusions, providing a foundation for application, and supporting other people in making estimates about the consistency and objectivity of the results. Kakar et al. (2023) defined it as the degree to which the data and analysis are credible and dependable. Trustworthiness incorporates credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The standard for trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to provide enhancement of a contextually based understanding and not to generalise to a larger population (Maxwell, 2021). To maintain the trustworthiness of the study regarding the influence of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners, the researcher will make use of the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ertürk et al., 2025).

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to how faithfully the researcher is able to interpret the data provided by the respondents (Kakar et al., 2023). Credibility is the degree to which a study's findings reflect reality and are therefore considered believable or plausible (Aguinis 2023). Credibility is, as Steccolini (2023) indicates, concerned with the following questions:

- Is research what people think it is?
- Are the researchers actually hearing what they believe they are hearing?

According to Ahmed (2024), research can be said to be trustworthy if it provides clear descriptions and if it can be identified by other readers /researcher to have had experience with the same phenomenon. The trustworthiness of studying the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance was established through triangulation of data collection methods and member checking, with Grade 7 participants challenging my interpretations of findings to ensure the accuracy and truthfulness of their experiences, transparency in methods, and maintaining ethical standards (Mueller & Winsor, 2022). Credibility was established through triangulation (of sources of information).

3.7.2 Transferability

Mirhosseini and Pearson (2024) conceptualised transferability as the extent to which the methods and results of a qualitative research study might be understood in relation to the reader of the study. It is less about generic norms and more about sharing information and collaboration with the individual researcher. Additionally, the transferability of Varpio et al. (2021) is conceptualised as the possibility of applying data and analysis tools beyond one research project. To gain high transferability in this research, the researcher presented a thick description of the context. The researcher did this to arm the reader with information for use. Transferability was facilitated through purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2019). Relatedly, Ahmed (2024) states that transferability can be ensured by a comprehensive description of the research context, participants, and settings, allowing others to judge whether the findings apply to other contexts or groups.

3.7.3 Dependability

How much the researcher can trust the findings is the meaning of dependability. One pathway to genuine commitment is to present rich, nuanced descriptions that illustrate how particular behaviours and thoughts are inflected through and arise from contextual interactions (Amin et al., 2020).

In qualitative studies, Amin et al. (2023) assume that dependability is the same as reliability. Like validity, reliability connects with dependability through credibility. If the research generates valid findings, it is more likely to be reliable (Aguinis, 2023).

The researcher maintained an accurate and complete audit trail that documented all aspects of the study, including the collection of data, decisions made during the study, and any changes to the study plan; this was performed to establish reliability and to facilitate duplication of the research. These findings support the validity of the investigation of factors influencing the impact of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners.

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is established by confirming that data support the researcher's conclusions, and the conclusions and interpretation are derived from the data (Wang et al., 2024). The study procedure was adequately described by the researcher, and others may critique the study plan. This means that anyone who looks at the data should draw the same conclusions as the researcher did. The validity of the research is secure because the approach of the researcher towards her work is evident enough, and one researcher can understand how the researcher proceeded and how she took interviews and revealed the logic of taking interviews (Kakar, 2023). The researcher also ensured that the results displayed were inferences of the respondents in this research.

The trustworthiness of the data was also enhanced by the fact that high levels of immersion in the datasets and that data interpretation is iterative. Confirmability was ensured by presenting an objective account of findings, which are evidence-based by triangulating data and combining an audit trail (trace, document analysis), reflexivity, and transparent reporting (Abidin et al., 2024).

3.8 RESEARCH ETHICS

Unisa's Ethics Review Committee provided ethical clearance for the research. In addition, the Limpopo Department of Education authorised the study to be conducted in 3 schools. Formal approval for visiting schools and conducting the investigation was then received from the principals themselves. After permission for the study was obtained, the study participants were notified about this investigation and then allocated to the study group. The participants were informed that they were participating only on a voluntary basis and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. Ethics approval was obtained for all schools before the data collection process commenced.

The principals of the school discussed the study information with the parents of the learners and informed them of their consent before selecting their learners to participate in the study. They were also required to sign an informed consent document to participate in the study. The researchers informed the respondents of the purpose of the study to be carried out, and the names of the subjects did not exist in the study. The respondents' privacy and anonymity were preserved. The participants were also told that the data collected in this study would be submitted to the University for the dissertation, and all research-related information regarding the research participants would remain anonymous.

Ethics entails the researcher's responsibility towards the participants, funders, and beneficiaries of the research (Water, 2024). Furthermore, Guyotte et al. (2023) advised that any qualitative researcher who falls asleep during a study should first consider the moral and ethical implications when wishing to start research in any faculty in any educational institution. This is because all social research, as well as education research, deals with persons' lives in the social world and should therefore be considered especially important and, thereby, concern serious ethical problems when engaging in research. It also presents that ethics are a cornerstone of research (London, 2021). With those, it may or may not "hold together," the way the fragile or intricate weave of it, the ability of the researcher to do good research, would become dismantled. Accordingly, the researcher was careful in working within research ethics throughout the study.

The four ethical standards proposed by this study are outlined below:

3.8.1 Informed consent, human rights and voluntary involvement

Subsequent to receiving ethical clearance from Unisa's Research Ethics Review Committee and permission from the Limpopo Department of Education, the researcher verified that the concerned schools that each participant had signed the informed consent forms. The lack of dignity or integrity of the participants was threatened (Brittain et al., 2020).

Consent letters were sent to Grade 7 class teachers, SBSTs, and principals. Letters contained information about the study and the reason why participants were being invited to be part of it. The advantages of the study are also presented. It was also clarified that volunteers will not be incentivised. To facilitate an approved study,

contact details for the supervisor, i.e., e-mail address as well as contact numbers, were provided in the letter. Once these terms had been explained, the potential participants signed the letter as evidence of their willingness to participate.

Parent/guardian consent was obtained from the under-18 participants to take part in this study, and learner participants expressed assent prior to the discussions. Focus group discussions were conducted with the learners by the researcher. The researcher telephoned each parent and/or guardian to determine whether he/she consented/rejected the participation of the children. The objectives of the study were presented to the parents and/or guardians. After they gave their phone consent, the researcher forwarded them a written consent letter. The letter pointed out any risks the learners might be taking by participating in the study. Learners could also terminate their participation at any time during the data gathering period, as stated in the letter. The letter also indicated that the learners were involved in their own will with no financial gain and with a view to benefit the entire educational community. There was an informed consent letter that the parents and/or guardians had to sign authorising the learners to participate in the study. The parents of the involved learners signed a consent form before the study. Parents/guardians were requested to maintain a signed copy of the letter. The researcher subsequently sought assent from the learners for the focus group discussion.

3.8.2 Harm and risk

Kang and Hwang (2021) described any untoward effects that participants may encounter due to their involvement in a study as harmful. This harm is physical, psychological, social, economic, and legal. Risk involves the potential or likelihood of such a threat (Moore, 2025).

The participants were notified by the researcher that they would be protected against any possible harm during the course of the data collection. Nonetheless, since the sample was primarily aged, the majority of the respondents were learners who were under 18 years of age.

The participants did not report any potential risks of harm or discomfort, but they were encouraged to ask the interviewer if they did not want to finish or continue with the interview or focus group discussions. During data collection and analysis, no personal

details were collected. All the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted incidentally.

3.8.3 Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

Before the study was conducted, the participants were informed that all the data collected would be used for research purposes only and that their surname and name would not appear in any reports during or after the study, and personal information would not be collected or combined with the results. The privacy of the participants was also not compromised, which is a fundamental right to ensure safety and security and to be able to contribute to the study. The autonomy of the participants was always preserved during the data collection, and the participants were aware that they could decide to withdraw from the study if they wished. In addition, the study findings regarding contributions' identification will not be disclosed to anyone (Liu et al., 2023).

3.8.4 Cautiousness, truthfulness, and integrity (deception)

Masters et al. (2021) argue that lying is an action to pretend below the level of a clown. It is not hidden in the fact that one is lying, but in the person whom one is lying to; one provides the means to others to get some things from oneself slyly or deceitfully. The researcher informed all participants that the study had been approved by the university's ethical committee and explained to them the purpose and objectives of the study before proceeding with any action. The researcher provided the participants with information on the steps in the interview process. Moreover, Park et al. (2024) noted that fakers can use deception, particularly in more sensitive or high-risk performances.

3.9 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

3.9.1 Limitations

This study targeted only cyber victims and did not include bullies. The semi-structured and focus group interviews were not translated because the participants were not English home language speakers but were assisted through translation during focus group interviews by educators. While there may have been difficulties for some participants regarding all the questions, attitudes towards literacy and learning as embedded in the focus group task and prior to the focus group support provided, whose purpose was to enable the best possible participation of participants, must be

acknowledged. This emphasis draws attention to the diversity in language and to its proactive steps to improve the comprehension of, and respondents to, questions.

Owing to the study nature (qualitative approach) and context specificity, the findings of this study may not be generalised across all Grade 7 learners in the remaining districts/provinces. Since the focus was on a single district, the generalisability of the findings may be restricted. However, the findings would be useful and relevant to those who relate to this phenomenon.

This study's sample size was relatively small ($N = 24$), which may not fully enable an understanding of all the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance. However, as Watson et al. (2025) indicated, a small participant sample may yield richer data than a large number of subjects.

3.9.2 Delimitations

The investigation focused only on Grade 7 participants in Vhembe West District. The focus of this study was to explore the impact of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners. The other grades and districts are subsequently excluded from the study, and the research is limited to the Vhembe West District. In other words, the results are local and do not necessarily apply to other districts.

The Latent Class Analysis was also limited by the research questions for which it was intended to be applied. This study focused on investigating cyberbullying encounters, explaining the conditions correlated with cyberbullying and investigating the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance and how cyberbullying can be avoided. Other elements related to tarot interpretations, such as long-term psychological consequences or greater social implications, were also out of the scope of this project.

3.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter considered the research design adopted to study the effects of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province. The chapter began with a description of the method, research design, participants, instrument for data acquisition, data analysis, ethical issues and quality assurance concerning validity and reliability. The study's limits and boundaries are also presented.

A qualitative methodology was adopted in this study to provide an in-depth representation of the experiences and views of Grade 7 learners regarding cyberbullying and their impact on academic achievement. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis ensured that a variety of procedures were utilised for data collection in qualitative methodology.

In the ethical reflections elaborated in this chapter, the latter ethics emphasised consent, privacy, and non-harm to the subjects. Such precautions helped with ethical standards and the protection of rights and welfare for each respondent and every respondent. The credibility and reliability of the study was enhanced through triangulation, member checking and audit trail. Overall, these strategies increased the credibility, dependability and transferability of the research findings and, consequently, the strength of the study.

Despite some limitations of the study (low generalisability and potential biases of the researchers), it provides insights into the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' school performance and is a useful resource for developing effective intervention programmes and support services. The findings and discussion of the study are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter (Chapter 3) focused on the study design and approaches used to collect the data; it was crucial to develop themes that would facilitate the emergence of the results of the study. In this chapter, the interpretation of the collected data is described, and the impact of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 students is discussed. This study aimed primarily to investigate the impact of cyberbullying on the academic achievement of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District.

Data were collected from a sample of participants, namely, Grade 7 learners, teachers, school-based support teams and principals from three sampled schools in Vhembe West District. Here, the researcher analyses the data and narrate the story. A total of 24 participants, comprising 3 principals, 9 SBST members, 9 learners, and 3 teachers in three primary schools, were the study subjects. The participants were interviewed and were able to produce particulars on the impact of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic achievement at the selected primary schools in Vhembe West District.

4.2 PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through multiple methods: semi-structured interviews with principals and Grade 7 teachers, focus group discussions with school-based support teams and learners, and document analysis.

4.2.1 Interviews

The semi-structured interviews included three principals and Grade 7 class teachers. These participants played a pivotal role within the sampled schools. The interviews were held in private areas of the schools for 30–45 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide. Sessions were audio-recorded with consent and accompanied by field notes to guarantee accuracy. Ethical issues, such as confidentiality and voluntary involvement, were scrupulously followed.

The interview process included individuals who volunteered and were eager to be involved in the study. Participants who were not Grade 7 learners, who did not

experience cyberbullying, principals, Grade 7 teachers, or members of school-based support teams, and who refused to participate were excluded from the study.

The principals contributed to the study by granting access to learners and teachers to take part in the study. The principals also gave authorisation and access to other pertinent documents for analysis. Teachers who were part of the study had a minimum of three years of teaching Grade 7 learners and possessed direct insight into their learners' academic performance and social interactions. The principals helped to identify the appropriate teachers and supported their involvement in this study. The principals of every selected primary school were engaged in an interview distinctly from Grade 7 teachers.

4.2.2 Document analysis

Document analysis was used for triangulation and was helpful for guaranteeing the trustworthiness of the study outcomes. Document analysis is a qualitative, systematic research method that is implemented to analyse and interpret a variety of documents to find meaning, context, and significance (Jamil et al., 2024). The researcher hand-delivered a permission letter to principals. The researcher collected three records: the learners' mark schedules of the previous year and the current year from each school, the schools' and SBST's documents and the school's disciplinary policy, year mark schedules, the schools' discipline policy, and SBST records and three documents, minutes from SBST committee meetings to address and resolve instances of cyberbullying that occurred with learners.

The researcher first created definitions by breaking the information into texts and figures. The researcher proceeded to develop codes. The researcher scanned and skimmed through the documents to look for common phrases and figures. This process was guided by the discrepancies left by participants who were interviewed as individuals and in focus group discussions, as referred to in the preceding chapter. The analysis of the documents also made it feasible for the researcher to authenticate the findings from extensive interviews and focus group discussions.

4.2.3 Focus group discussions

The focus group discussions were carried out with Grade 7 learners in addition to school-based support teams at three selected primary schools. The focus group discussions were conducted in private areas of the schools for 45 to 60 minutes. The

researcher facilitated the conversations using a semi-structured guide. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and accompanied by field notes to guarantee accuracy. The researcher conducted two focus group discussions at each school. The first focus group discussion was conducted with the learners. The second group discussion was conducted with the SBST team. The researcher conducted a total of six focus group discussions. Ethical issues such as autonomy and voluntary involvement were strictly adhered to.

The learners' focus group discussions included individuals who volunteered and were willing to partake in the research. Participants who were not Grade 7 learners, who did not experience cyberbullying, principals, Grade 7 teachers, or members of school-based support teams, and Grade 7 learners who refused to participate were excluded from the research.

The SBST teams' focus group discussions included individuals who volunteered and were willing to partake in the research. Participants who were not members of school-based support teams, who were not aware of cyberbullying, including principals, other Grade 7 teachers, and SBST members who refused to participate, were excluded from the research.

The principals contributed to the study by granting access to learners and SBST teams an opportunity to take part in the study. The principals also gave permission to hold the discussion on the school premises after school hours. Learners' focus group discussions were conducted separately from school-based support teams' focus group discussions, as indicated in Chapter 3 of the study. Each of the two groups, the learner and the school-based support team focus groups, consisted of 18 participants.

The researcher analysed, presented, and deliberated on data obtained from extensive and focus group interviews conducted concurrently. In this way, the researcher was able to illustrate commonalities and disparities in the viewpoints and ideas expressed by SBSTs and learners regarding the efficacy of strategies to lessen the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' performance in Vhembe District.

4.3 PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher carefully followed the steps of thematic analysis outlined by Buetow (2025). The researcher identified,

categorised, and refined the data from the interviews, focus groups, and documents into common, emerging, and ultimately dominant themes.

During the theme analysis phase, the researcher arranged the data to answer the research questions. The researcher transcribed the raw data and coded it. Analogous codes were combined to establish types, which evolved into themes that operated as the foundation for structuring and presenting the study's results. The data were then presented in narrative format, and in certain instances, the participants' real voiced words were used to clarify their ideas and beliefs and to ensure that the readers thoroughly comprehended the participants' thoughts and ideas.

The sampled schools and participants in the research were assigned codes. The researcher followed ethical norms while using code names to safeguard the identities of the schools and participants, as guided by Bertram et al. (2025). Table 4.1 below illustrates the assigned codes.

Table 4.1: Participants' assigned codes

Number of schools	Number of participants	Codes	Participation type
3	3 principals	P1, P2, P3	Interviews
	3 teachers	T1, T2, T3	Interviews
	9 learners	L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9	Focus group discussions
	9 school-based support team (SBST) members	SBSTm 1, SBSTm 2, SBSTm 3, SBSTm 4, SBSTm 5, SBSTm 6, SBSTm 7, SBSTm 8, SBSTm 9	Focus group discussions
TOTAL	24 participants		

4.4 EMERGING THEMES FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

This section provides a deliberation of the research outcomes. It provides further explanations and interpretations of the findings and connects them to the literature. It unpacks the views and ideas the researcher identified in the literature review in Chapter 2 and discusses them in correlation with research findings.

The study developed the following themes via thematic content analysis (Avram, 2025). The participants' direct responses are presented verbatim.

Table 4.2 presents the themes that emerged from the data analysis process:

Table 4.2: Emergent Themes from Data Analysis

Themes Numbers	Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1	Participants' understanding and experiences of cyberbullying in primary schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the concept of cyberbullying • Different forms of cyberbullying experienced in schools • Learners' experiences of cyberbullying • Responses towards cyberbullying
Theme 2	Understanding factors that contribute to cyberbullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors contributing to cyberbullying experiences
Theme 3	Determining how cyberbullying affects the performance of Grade 7 learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of cyberbullying experiences on Grade 7 learners • Teachers, principals and SBSTs' perspectives on the effects of cyberbullying on learners • Learners' perspectives on the reasons for being targeted as victims
Theme 4	Identifying ways to prevent cyberbullying in primary schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways of preventing cyberbullying in primary schools • Managing cyberbullying in primary schools

Importantly, however, the primary objective of this study was to explore the effects of cyberbullying on the academic performance of Grade 7 learners in the Vhembe West District. Principals, SBSTs, and teachers all play important roles in preventing cyberbullying among Grade 7 learners. The generated findings were examined, presented, and debated in connection with the emerging themes.

4.5 THEMES

4.5.1 Theme 1: Participants' understanding and experiences of cyberbullying in primary schools

Theme 1 explored participants' understanding of and experiences with cyberbullying in primary schools. The theme was designed to meet the research objective of exploring the cyberbullying experiences of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District. Under this theme, the following sub-themes emerged: understanding the concept of cyberbullying, different forms of cyberbullying experienced in schools, and learners' experiences of cyberbullying and responses to cyberbullying.

4.5.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Understanding the concept of cyberbullying

The researcher asked the participants in the interviews and focus group discussions the following question: "*What do you understand by the concept of cyberbullying?*" The question was designed to determine whether all of the participants shared the same opinions on the idea of cyberbullying. By asking the participants about their understanding of cyberbullying, the researcher sought to ascertain whether they knew and understood cyberbullying.

T1 indicated that "Cyberbullying is when someone uses the internet or social media to hurt other people; it is the use of electronic communication to bully a person, so cyberbullying is bullying through digital tools such as social media, spreading lies, spreading rumours, sending threats, intimidating, harassing, and harming someone". Other participants (L2, SBSTm3, and T2) reported that cyberbullying involves platforms such as "Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok," which are used to cause "emotional distress" by way of "sharing digital messages or posts and, if you're going to use sending messages to the victim with the intention to cause harm".

The participants were able to identify the negative impact of cyberbullying using terms such as harassment, embarrassment, harm, intimidation and threats. These terms are

associated with long-lasting negative effects, such as emotional and physical pain (Yeager, 2025). Harassment, embarrassment, harm, intimidation, threats, and bullying affect a learner's development in that cyberbullying creates a form of social rejection (Sibisi et al., 2025).

P1 mentioned the following:

“Cyberbullying is a means to use an electronic communication method to bully a person by, for example, sending messages harassing or humiliating another individual. ... Yeah, it's a way of sending messages to someone, sometimes bullying them using your phone.”

The participant's definition of cyberbullying provided a clear understanding of cyberbullying and the different digital platforms that are used to communicate the bully's intentions. These platforms could arguably be the most popular social media platforms where cyberbullying exists (Tayeh, 2025), or they could be social media platforms that the participants use. For example, **SBSTm1** stated the following:

“I understand that cyberbullying is the kind of bullying that takes place through social media such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and the web. An individual can be bullied in any form, whether it is the language that is used or the pictures that are harmful or information that was not supposed to be shared on social media about them but was shared without their consent.”

Social platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram offer opportunities to carry out cyberbullying by allowing people to give bad comments, derogatory remarks, and irrelevant comments in the comment column on the victim's account.

The participants' responses indicate that they can understand and identify the meaning of cyberbullying and associate its meaning with negative effects such as harassment, embarrassment, harm, intimidation, threats, and bullying, which are associated with long-lasting negative effects such as cognitive, emotional, and physical pain.

Cao et al. (2025) agree that identifying learners' understanding of cyberbullying provides a more accurate understanding of their experiences and behaviour. Furthermore, it allows the creation of interventions that appeal to learners and can be applied to them.

Notably, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 revealed that there is no clear definition except that cyberbullying typically involves acts of aggression, harassment, and intimidation during online interaction; the bully is anonymous; there must be authority inequality and an intent to hurt the victim; and the victim must show signs of depression (Han et al., 2025). This can be perceived as problematic because, without a clear definition of cyberbullying, schools cannot develop controls and interventions to prevent it. Without a definition of cyberbullying, a school cannot inform staff members about the rules and sanctions it wishes to implement (Ganca, 2024).

However, in this study, most participants understood the meaning of cyberbullying. Bartholomeu et al. (2021) state that rejection is an incredibly painful experience, given the relationships between social exclusion and isolation and between school violence and self-harm.

This study's findings indicate that the adult participants understood the meaning of cyberbullying. The finding confirms the social cognitive theory's principle of reinforcement and motivation. This principle asserts that individuals can either strengthen or weaken learners' behaviour (Bandura, 2023). Adults' awareness of cyberbullying can help deter its occurrence (Zhang et al., 2023).

At an early stage, learners seek social acceptance to facilitate their learning and development of networking and social skills. Belonging to a group is an essential need for them to develop survival skills, and it is important for their psychological well-being (Bartholomeu et al., 2021). If adults are aware that cyberbullying is a form of rejection, which results in trust issues, as children can no longer trust and depend on their peers within their online social network to give them information and feedback that is useful to the learner, they can deter its occurrence.

4.5.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Different forms of cyberbullying experienced in schools

The researcher asked the participants in the interviews and focus group discussions the following question: *What are the forms of cyberbullying that you know?* Identifying the different forms of cyberbullying could help in understanding its characteristics and the risks that are posed to the victim.

The principals, teachers, and SBSTs were able to identify the different forms of cyberbullying, whereas the learners themselves could not. The knowledgeable participant's responses about the different forms of cyberbullying ranged from

harassment, outing, exclusion, impersonation, fake profiles, cyberstalking, trolling, doxing, shaming, flaming, and cyberstalking. The fact that the adult participants could identify the different forms of cyberbullying means that they knew that cyberbullying is versatile. It can be hidden and adapted to any online platform without the victim knowing that they are being bullied. To illustrate the hidden nature of cyberbullying, participant **T3** stated,

“It is when a child is being excluded from online activities or conversations or when a child is not allowed to use any social media. A learner who does not have the latest technology, such as mobile devices and computers, could feel that he/she is being excluded. Additionally, harassment online is sustained and intentional. It may involve the abuse of threatening messages sent to a learner or to a group. Learners can experience cyberstalking. This is when someone is stalking you; the person attacks you on all the communication platforms, such as emails and social media. It also refers to adults using the internet to contact and meet young people for abusive activities. The person can open a fake profile so that the person can fake the account and hide their identity with the intention to cyberbully a child. A learner can experience catfishing, which is recreating social networking profiles for deceptive purposes to deceive your child.”

For example, cyberbullying can adapt accordingly to the use of different social media platforms, as **P2** mentioned.

“It includes online harassment, like someone harassing you online. Maybe he or she found your nude photo and published it, or he or she edited my picture to look like I'm funny looking, so-and-so. So that picture will reach more online platforms without my permission. Yeah, so that you can be free to feel ashamed by sending those pictures to the public.”

*According to **SBSTm 5**, the different forms of cyberbullying include “shaming someone on social media, sending abusive text messages, excluding someone from WhatsApp groups, and sending teasing messages on Facebook and Instagram”.*

The findings revealed that adult participants could identify different types of cyberbullying, whereas the learners could not. The fact that the adult participants could identify the different forms of cyberbullying means that they knew that it was versatile. It can be hidden and adapted to any online platform without the victim knowing that

they are being bullied. The hidden nature of cyberbullying and adaptability enable cyberbullies to remain completely anonymous to their victims. By concealing the identity of the cyberbully, they can carry out malicious activities online to unsuspecting victims (Mali et al., 2025). The participants' responses revealed that harassment, outing, exclusion, impersonation, fake profiles, cyberstalking, trolling, doxing, shaming, flaming, and cyberstalking were the supreme collective forms of cyberbullying.

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 also revealed similar results. For example, harassment, online impersonation, cyberstalking, image-based abuse, trickery or outing, doxing, denigration, and phishing for malicious purposes are the different forms of cyberbullying that are found on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and online games (Pina, 2021). Cyberbullying is constantly evolving and adapting with the introduction of new online video, text, audio, and graphic-based platforms (Okunev, 2023).

This finding confirms what Agustiningsih and Yusuf (2023), Nito et al. (2022), and Zhang (2022) reported: harassment, exclusion, flaming, cyberstalking, outing, impersonation, perpetration, victimisation, by standing, flooding, masquerading, trolling, sexual harassment, and denigration are the most common forms of cyberbullying. Such behaviours cause shame, fear, and stress. They affect learners' ability to think and socialise. As a result, they can affect their social development within the school and their ability to concentrate in class.

In contrast to the present study, Zhang (2022) went a step further by differentiating the forms of cyberbullying according to the nature and level of aggression, whereas this study sought to recognise the different forms of cyberbullying to understand its characteristics and the risks that are posed to the victim.

These findings align with the principles of social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 2023), which views learners as having the ability to perform and succeed in academic tasks. However, cyberbullying affects learners' self-efficacy in academic tasks.

The findings show that adult participants could identify the different forms of cyberbullying and associate their meaning with negative effects, whereas the learners could not. These findings align with the modelling principles of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2023), which also states that modelling allows people to learn new skills,

behaviours, and attitudes by observing and imitating the actions of others. In this case, the learners do not know the meaning of cyberbullying and cannot distinguish the different forms of cyberbullying; therefore, they are unlikely to identify cyberbullying when it occurs because they are unaware that they can imitate it. As a result, this leads to a vicious cycle of cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation.

4.5.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Learners' experiences of cyberbullying

All 9 learners who participated in the focus group discussion stated that they had experienced cyberbullying. Their responses indicate that they were aware of cyberbullying. At least two participants went on to describe the context in which cyberbullying occurred.

One participant mentioned, *"Yes, I have experienced cyberbullying. There were several individuals who created fake accounts to send me hurtful messages on Instagram"* (L2). Another participant explained,

"Some kids in my class kept sending me mean messages about how I looked in our school's online group," L4.

The use of mean comments and the use of fake accounts to harass and intimidate the victim show some of the methods that cyberbullies use to attack their victims. In accordance with the participants' responses, the comments and messages sent on the online platforms were intended to embarrass and hurt the victim. The responses also indicate that the creation of fake accounts concealed the identity of the cyberbully, making it impossible for the victim to identify them. Additionally, L7 mentioned that some learners in her class consistently harassed her, highlighting that the victim was frequently targeted without knowing who the perpetrator was.

The research findings reveal that primary school learners experience cyberbullying. Similarly, Martel-Santana et al. (2025) reported that primary school learners between the ages of 7 and 11 years' experience cyberbullying, although their experiences may differ according to gender. The present study revealed that primary school learners in Vhembe West experience cyberbullying in the form of mean comments and fake accounts. These methods are used to attack, harass, and intimidate the victim. Cyberbullies use fake accounts to conceal their identity as cyberbullies, making it impossible for the victim to identify them (Yildirim, 2025).

Similarly, Lareki et al. (2023) studied the link between the formation of false digital identities and cyberbullying behaviours and reported that those people who created false profiles online tended to engage in cyberbullying behaviours. Cyberbullies create fake accounts to observe and obtain information about the victim's profile and online interactions, and they use that information to send messages that attack, threaten, and harass the victim. The anonymity of the fake identity allows the cyberbully to carry out such behaviour without being identified. Hua et al. (2019) studied the types of messages that cyberbullies use on social media platforms and reported that the messages contained insults that affected the victim's intelligence, physical appearance, and worth.

In contrast, Farhangpour et al. (2019) reported that most victims experienced cyberbullying in the form of sexual harassment. Walquist et al. (2024) reported that victims experienced receiving offensive messages, rumours and gossip, and swearing.

The findings of this study indicate that primary school learners do experience cyberbullying, which is in sharp contrast to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which revealed that high school learners experience cyberbullying more than primary school learners do. Although the literature has asserted that the true prevalence of cyberbullying may be greater among learners, it is mainly affected by the underreporting of cases and a lack of standard measurements of cyberbullying.

This study's findings indicate that Grade 7 learners experience cyberbullying in the form of the use of mean comments and fake accounts to harass and intimidate victims, confirming social cognitive theory, which states the principle of reinforcement. This principle asserts that individuals can either strengthen or weaken their behaviour (Bandura, 2023). The principle of vicarious reinforcement is the most noticeable in this study's findings, as displaced strengthening takes place when people perceive others as being rewarded or punished, which influences their behaviour (Zhang et al., 2023). According to the study, victims continued to be victimised by cyberbullying; it could be that perpetrators saw others behaving similarly without any negative consequences. The lack of consequences prompts cyberbullying to continue attacking victims. As a result, this leads to a vicious cycle of cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation.

The implications of these findings are that Grade 7 learners in rural areas do experience cyberbullying, whereby the cyberbully uses fake identities and fake accounts to express mean comments. If these negative experiences are modelled and reinforced, this could lead to reduced self-efficacy and continued cyberbullying patterns among learners. The outcomes give emphasis to the necessity for additional enhanced digital literacy and online behaviour sensitisation programmes that are targeted at rural primary school learners.

4.5.1.4 Subtheme 1.4: Principals', SBSTs' and teachers' responses towards cyberbullying

Most of the participants from the interviews reported that they could identify that the learners were cyberbullied. Most of the participants identified victims of cyberbullying through observing learner behavioural changes, whereas other participants reported that they could identify victims of cyberbullying through reports from the learners themselves. The participants who observed behavioural changes stated that the signs of learner behavioural changes range from changes in academic performance, loss of interest in or withdrawal from learning activities, and evading or avoiding teachers and principals. They noted their feelings of sadness, fearfulness, anxiety, and isolation. They also noted that some learners were frequently absent from school, and some learners became angry about the use of a digital gadget or were resentful towards other learners. This is evident in the following statements:

“A learner would be sad in class, and upon investigation, I discovered that the learner was being bullied on social media platforms. A learner will just lose interest in sports, and when I ask the learner, he/she will cite that some learner(s) were bullying them online. A learner would skip a class, and when I asked as a friend, he/she would cite that someone in the classroom said something bad about the learner on Facebook.”

T2

“She can be quite lonely and drop in his or her performance. Learners who are cyberbullied are sometimes afraid of their phones. If they see a group of learners on the phone, they may think that the picture or whatever is being watched on their phone is them. So, they are afraid, they isolate themselves, they don't want to be free, and they don't want to be seen. To identify those learners is simple; the learner won't be like another learner. She will isolate herself from the group.” **P1**

Some participants stated that they received direct reports from victims. Learners showed them the messages as evidence. For example, **T1** stated, *“It is easy to know that a child is being cyberbullied because a child can show me threatening messages or embarrassing images or videos”*, whereas **P3** stated, *“I come to know when a learner comes to me and shows me the messages, which indicates that the learner is being cyberbullied”*.

While the SBST participants in the focus group discussion notice cyberbullying incidents from the reports of learners, teachers, and parents who report changes in behaviour, a decline in academic performance, learners showing signs of social withdrawal, and visible distress. The SBST participants also mentioned that some people use anonymous reporting systems, whereas SBST members monitor conversations on social media platforms. For example, the participants stated the following:

“Most of the learners’ report cyberbullying to their friends or relatives, who in turn bring it to the attention of the school’s management, especially in cases where the cyberbullying negatively impacts the learner’s performance.” **SBSTm 3**

“Learners often report incidents to teachers or parents. We also observe behavioural changes such as withdrawal, anxiety, fear of using phones or social media, a sudden drop in academic performance, and visible distress signs that indicate that a learner may be a victim of cyberbullying. Some of the information may also come from peers or from monitoring school online platforms.” **SBSTm 4**

These responses indicate that although cyberbullies are anonymous, their actions toward victims’ behaviour are visible. The responses also show that adult participants were actively monitoring learners’ behaviour. They indicate that the victim's social and academic health is affected by the cyber bully’s actions (Ma et al., 2025). Scholars have reported that when teachers actively monitor and respond to cyberbullying, it is less likely to occur (Felk et al., 2025).

This study’s findings confirm the principle of observational learning under the social cognitive theory. This principle asserts that individuals learn from others by watching their behaviour (Bandura, 2023). The principle of observational learning is evident in the way participants were able to learn about victims of cyberbullying through observing learner behavioural change (Zhang et al., 2023). The implication is that

cyberbullying's effect on the academic performance of a learner can be manageable if it is noticed quickly and addressed. In contrast, Nappa et al. (2021) reported that teachers who did not notice the effects of cyberbullying on victims failed to address cyberbullying when it occurred. As a result, the chances of learners experiencing cyberbullying increased.

In summary, this theme explained the participants' understanding of and experiences with cyberbullying in primary schools in Vhembe West. The research results indicate that most participants understood the meaning of cyberbullying. The adult participants could identify the different forms of cyberbullying and associate their meaning with negative effects, whereas the learners could not. Grade 7 learners experience cyberbullying in the form of the use of mean comments and fake accounts to harass and intimidate victims. This finding confirms the social cognitive theory that cyberbullying has academic effects if it is modelled and reinforced through anonymity. The results also show that cyberbullying is visible in a victim's behaviour. However, this requires active monitoring of a learner's behaviour.

4.5.2 Theme 2: Understanding factors that contribute to cyberbullying in the Vhembe West District

Theme 2 examines the factors that contribute to cyberbullying in Vhembe West District. The aim of this theme was to examine the underlying issues that contribute to cyberbullying among Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West. As a result, the following subtheme emerged: Factors contributing to the cyberbullying experience.

4.5.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Factors contributing to the cyberbullying experience

During interviews with principals and teachers and focus group discussions held with SBST, the following question was asked: *What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying?* The question was designed to identify aspects that affect the prevalence of cyberbullying. The question was also designed to answer the research question: What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying in Vhembe West District? Identifying and understanding these factors could lead to the identification and development of supportive structures that prevent cyberbullying and, if it does occur, to the development of interventionist and supportive methods.

Among the 6 interviewed participants (**P1, P2, P3, T1, T2, and T3**), only five (**P2, P3, T1, T2, and T3**) mentioned that they were aware of the factors that facilitated cyberbullying. Moreover, the results from the SBST focus group discussions indicate that all 9 participants were aware of the factors that facilitated cyberbullying. The interviewed participants' responses indicated that the factors ranged from peer pressure, unsupervised internet access, lack of digital literacy, emotional distress at home, and desire for dominance or validation. For example, **T1** reported that the desire for dominance causes cyberbullies to

"...Seek attention by humiliating others so that they feel important, and learners who lack control in other areas of their lives, they bully others through controlling them. Peer pressure also facilitates cyberbullying through group dynamics, and cyberbullying also occurs due to abuse of social media by bullies."

Another participant (**T3**) mentioned that other factors, such as having access to the internet, seeking group acceptance, and wanting to have a sense of belonging, facilitate cyberbullying.

"Learners having cell phones with social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok, inviting everyone as friends, and having thousands of friends on Facebook and also people they don't know." **T3**

The responses from the SBST focus group discussion indicated that factors such as a lack of digital literacy, low self-esteem, peer pressure, the anonymous nature of online platforms, family problems, increased internet access, and poor supervision facilitated cyberbullying. For example, one participant indicated factors such as the following:

"Lack of awareness whereby some learners may not fully understand what constitutes cyberbullying or may tolerate behaviours that are harmful because they are unaware of their impact. In addition, with respect to mental health issues, learners facing mental health challenges may find themselves more vulnerable to cyberbullying, both because of their situation and the stigmas associated with mental health. Additionally, access to technology, such as increased access to smartphones and social media, can lead to more opportunities for bullying behaviour. The more learners spend time online, the greater the risk of encountering cyberbullying. Cultural and environmental

influences such as the home environment, cultural attitudes towards bullying, and lack of digital knowledge.” SBSTm 1

Another participant highlighted the following:

“The issue of unmonitored use of social media among teenagers was brought to light. Parents must take accountability for monitoring what their children share on social media at a certain age. It may seem small, but it creates room for accountability when children know they don’t have the absolute privacy to post irresponsibly. Others include social contextual factors: teenagers over relationships, friendships, and many other things.” SBSTm 6

SBSTm 9 also stated the following:

“The issue of anonymity, where fake profiles or pseudonyms shield perpetrators, is a pressing concern. The issue of peer pressure, which encourages others to participate in bullying. Lack of awareness, limited understanding of the consequences of online actions, easy access to smartphones and social media among learners, and social dynamics such as conflicts or jealousy among friends spilling over into online spaces”.

All the above mentioned factors, in turn, become breeding grounds for cyberbullying. The fact that other participants do not know the factors that contribute to cyberbullying means that they cannot recognise or may miss warning signs when cyberbullying is occurring among learners. This also means that these participants may not be sufficiently equipped to intervene in situations where learners may be experiencing cyberbullying; as a result, these participants may escalate the effects of cyberbullying through the bystander effect, where they just observe and do nothing, or unintentionally enable harmful behaviour.

On the other hand, the fact that many of the participants knew the factors that contributed to cyberbullying meant that they were well equipped to recognise warning signs of cyberbullying from the victims’ perspective and that they could also identify the root causes of cyberbully behaviour. These participants were more prepared to prevent cyberbullying and stop its continuous occurrence. They can effectively support both the victim and perpetrator. The victim is more likely to receive support from them without being blamed, whereas the perpetrator is more likely to receive support from them through the identification of negative behavioural enablers in the social environment.

These findings align with the findings of Jadedzweni et al. (2025). The fact that cyberbullying is facilitated by the cyber bully's own personal characteristics, such as low self-esteem and the desire for supremacy or validation, could be facilitated by external environmental factors that may affect the character of the cyberbully, such as the aspiration to please others through peer pressure and unstable family relationships, which can cause them to exhibit aggressive behaviour towards others (Jadedzweni et al., 2025).

Cyberbullying behaviour is enhanced by other technological factors, such as the lack of supervision of digital devices, increased access to the internet, the anonymous nature of online platforms, and poor digital literacy. Similarly, Kang et al. (2021) used a descriptive study to analyse the risk factors and predictors of cyberbullying among youth. Kang et al. (2021) reported that offline delinquency, violent behaviour, smartphone dependency, and smartphone usage on weekends predict cyberbullying.

The findings of this study differ from those of Choi et al. (2022). Choi et al. (2022) analysed the features that prompted the understanding of cyberbullying among Korean primary school learners in 2020 via a quantitative method. The authors reported that factors such as parent-child interactions, cyberbullying control in schools, and acknowledgement of cyberbullying as a problem influenced the cyberbullying experience (Zheng et al., 2025). Moral-García et al. (2025) noted that learners who devote additional time to playing online games and using mobile phones during the week are more prone to engage in cyberbullying because of their augmented knowledge and confidence in cyberspace. Unlike in the present study, Wang (2024) reported that users of social media platforms that offered instant messenger (IM) experienced cyberbullying more than other online technologies did and that the anonymous nature of the online platform was not a pertinent factor in cyberbullying.

Interestingly, the research findings differ from what the literature review chapter revealed. The previously reviewed literature highlighted that some factors that contribute to and facilitate cyberbullying are the desire to maintain a certain social status quo among peers, norms and behaviours that promote cyberbullying, power imbalances among learners, poor conflict resolution skills, and online platforms with a larger audience. Beyazit et al. (2017) reported that factors that contribute to cyberbullying include the age, gender, and grade of learners; the age and income

status of parents; ownership of a computer as opposed to mere access and usage of computers in public libraries or internet cafes; level of parental control over internet usage; and prior experiences of cyberbullying. Zhu et al. (2021) reported that factors such as race, health condition of the perpetrator, impulsiveness of the victim, and geographical location influence cyberbullying.

In the focus group discussions with the learners, the researcher asked the following question: *How did you feel after being cyberbullied, and why do you think you are experiencing cyberbullying?* The question was designed to develop an understanding of the effects of cyberbullying on the victim's feelings and to understand the reasons why the participants were targeted.

All 9 learner participants agreed that they were targeted by cyberbullies. The responses of the participants ranged from perceived differences among the learners, the appearance of other learners, the online activity of the learners, popularity, and the need to embarrass other learners. An overwhelming majority stated that they were cyberbullied because of their online activities. The participants reported that they were targeted because of their online activities, as one participant reported that she posted a video of herself dancing on TikTok and that other learners started laughing at her in the comments.

Some of the participants mentioned that the cyberbullies identified them at school and went online to bully them. **L1 stated:**

"A classmate took a picture of me in class (it was break time), and I was not sitting properly. She later posted the picture on her WhatsApp status and write an embarrassing mean false message. She was trying to be funny, but the joke went too far and hurt my feelings".

Some learner participants were targeted because of perceived differences; they stated, *"I think it's because I'm different from others, some people don't like the way I dress or the fact that I keep to myself" (L5)*. Another three participants mentioned that cyberbullies wanted to dominate others because they thought they were *"better than others" or they were seeking "popularity" (L3, L4, and L9)*.

The findings suggest that cyberbullies target learners for a variety of reasons, such as the victim's physical appearance, online activities, personal characteristics and desire to gain popularity and seek attention. It can also be interpreted that cyberbullies

are encouraged to intimidate others by victims because of their online presence and activities, their physical attributes and the cyber bully's personal insecurities, which are covered under the desire to dominate, to be seen, or to gain popularity.

Prince et al. (2024) also reported that victims are cyberbullied because of their appearance. They reported that females are victimised because of the shape of their bodies; as a result, they seek to modify their body appearance to improve their self-esteem and appreciation for their body (Prince et al., 2024).

Capurso (2017) stated that cyberbullies target other learners not only because of the victim's disposition but also because they themselves have behavioural problems, are hyperactive, have perception issues, have the need to retaliate against other negative actions, have anger issues, are insecure at school, and have poor social skills. Tanrikulu and Erdur-Baker's (2019) study further supports the point that cyberbullies who had experienced moral disengagement and aggression victimised others because they were seeking revenge. Gholami et al. (2025) argued that cyberbullies who experience moral disengagement and narcissism victimise others because they want to dominate.

The study's results affirm the principle of reinforcement under social cognitive theory. Factors such as peer pressure, unsupervised internet access, lack of digital literacy, desire for dominance or validation, low self-esteem, the anonymous nature of online platforms, family problems, increased internet access, and poor supervision of smartphones reinforce tendencies towards cyberbullying and exacerbate these behaviours. Bandura emphasised the importance of reinforcements during the learning process.

These results imply that different factors affect cyberbullying. At the personal level, factors such as age, gender, race, health condition of the perpetrator, level of self-esteem, need to maintain the status quo among peers, desire for dominance or validation, offline delinquency, prior experiences of bullying, and level of aggression influence the development of cyberbullying tendencies. There are several environmental factors, such as family problems, the impulsiveness of the victim, the socio-economic status of the cyber bully's family, the geographical location of the cyberbully and victim, the norms and behaviours of peers, the existence of power

imbalances among learners, and poor conflict resolution skills, which promote cyberbullying.

There are technological and regulatory factors such as unsupervised internet access, a lack of digital literacy, the anonymous nature of online platforms, increased internet access, poor supervision of smartphones, smartphone dependency, a lack of cyberbullying control in schools, and an acknowledgement of cyberbullying as a challenge, poor monitoring systems of social media platforms that offer instant messenger (IM) and a level of ownership of technological gadgets that consolidate cyberbullying behaviours (Ghosh et al., 2024). It is important to identify these factors and develop supportive structures that prevent cyberbullying and, if cyberbullying does occur, to develop interventionist and supportive methods.

Furthermore, these findings imply that victims tend to blame themselves for being a target; therefore, there is a need to empathise with them and help in the healing process. The other implication is that people need to understand the root causes of why cyberbullies target a certain victim. Knowing this information will help in the development of corrective action, and it helps shift the blame away from the victim and holds the perpetrator accountable.

In summary, the main factors contributing to cyberbullying among Grade 7 learners were peer pressure, unsupervised internet access, a lack of digital literacy, emotional distress at home, a desire for dominance or validation, a lack of digital literacy, low self-esteem, the anonymous nature of online platforms and family problems facilitating cyberbullying. The learners were mainly targeted because of their online activities.

4.5.3 Theme 3: Determining the effects of cyberbullying on the performance of Grade 7 learners in the Vhembe West District

Theme 3 explored the effects of cyberbullying on the performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District. This theme was designed to meet this research objective to determine how cyberbullying affects the performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District. The following subthemes were derived from the data: learners' experience of the emotional, social and psychological effects and the effects of cyberbullying on academic performance.

4.5.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: Learners' experiences of emotional, social and psychological effects

The researcher asked the following question in the focus group discussions with the learners: *How has cyberbullying affected you?* The question was intended to address the research question. How does cyberbullying affect the performance of Grade 7 learners in Vhembe West District? By unearthing the learner's experiences of the effects of cyberbullying, the researcher could understand the extent of harm that cyberbullying has on the physical, mental, and social wellbeing of learners and possibly develop preventive and supportive ways that are responsive to the mental, social, and physical wellbeing of learners.

All 9 participants in the learner's focus group mentioned that cyberbullying had social, psychological, and emotional impacts on them. **L8** mentioned that all the social, emotional, and psychological effects of cyberbullying directly affect academic performance. The responses of the participants ranged from feeling sad, embarrassed, and humiliated to forfeiture of sureness, low self-esteem, stress, and isolation. One thing that is of particular interest is that most of the participants stated that the effect of cyberbullying was that it left them socially isolated.

Four participants (**L2, L3, L5 and L7**) mentioned that they experienced low self-confidence and self-esteem. **L1** mentioned that being a victim of cyberbullying made them feel "*sad and insecure. I started doubting myself and didn't want to talk to anyone for a while.*" **L9** went on to say that "*It affected my confidence; I now have low self-esteem, I stress easily, I feel shameful, and I no longer trust people around me; I prefer being alone*".

The findings indicate that cyberbullying has undesirable effects on the mental, social and emotional wellbeing of a learner. Cyberbullying socially isolates some participants, resulting in severe or completely damaged relationships with their online peers. Some participants mentioned that they preferred to be alone and resolved not to use digital technology, which could be a sign that they were avoiding hostile online environments. Some participants mentioned that they were ashamed and embarrassed; it is most likely that they ultimately felt guilty and judged. It can be argued that negative feelings, sadness, loss of confidence and self-esteem, guilt, and shame can cause long-lasting trauma.

In the interviews and focus group discussions with adults, the following question was asked: *'What are the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance?'* The purpose of the question was to assess whether adults could identify the physical and social consequences of cyberbullying.

Most of the participants from the interviews and the SBST focus group discussion were aware of the effects of cyberbullying. The responses indicated that learners suffer from mental health problems and social isolation. The participants stated that learners who went through cyberbullying were most likely to have depression, anxiety, stress, suicide risk, and social withdrawal. **T1** stated the following:

"A learner may experience depression, anxiety, stress, and related disorders. Learners may commit suicide, experience mood changes, withdraw from friends and activities, and experience emotional stress during and after using social media."

While **P2** reported that:

"... Sometimes we may encounter suicide attempts from learners after the learner see that their performance has deteriorated."

While one member of the SBST reported that:

"Learners experience decreased concentration and focus in class, increased absenteeism or school avoidance, lower self-esteem and motivation to learn, and emotional distress, anxiety, or depression, which can impair cognitive abilities and academic achievement." **SBST4**

Importantly, out of all the participants from the interviews and focus group discussions, only one person did not know the effects of cyberbullying on learners. One could attribute this aspect to the participant's incomplete understanding of the dangers of cyberbullying. Most of the participants understood the effects of cyberbullying on learners' mental health and academic performance. This finding could be attributed to the reality that teachers, principals, and SBSTs play important roles in the development of learners, as they are accountable for teaching and the learning process. They are also responsible for enabling the social and emotional development of learners.

Research findings indicate that cyberbullying has a negative social, psychological, and emotional impact on Grade 7 primary school learners. The results indicate that

cyberbullying leaves learners feeling sad, embarrassed, and humiliated, leading to a loss of self-assurance, low self-esteem, stress, and social isolation. An effect such as low self-esteem could lead victims of cyberbullying to feel less confident. Van Rensburg (2015) stated that self-esteem is an important element in the development of a child. It is a positive assessment of oneself that comes from the value the person attributes to themselves after assessing their competence and self-worth. Self-esteem is enhanced or reduced by family and peers' affirmations.

Self-esteem can also be strengthened or decreased by academic performance and special talent (Zayed et al., 2024). As a result, learners deliberately and frequently look for a peer group that delivers recognition, irrespective of the deleterious conduct linked with that group (Zayed et al., 2024). The lack of positive affirmations from their peers online lowered the self-esteem of the participants in this research, which may have led them to feel rejected and socially isolated.

Similar studies conducted by Alkhayat (2023), Alotaibi (2019), Farhangpour et al. (2019), and Sinthumule and Ngonyama (2022) indicated that cyberbullying negatively affects the psychological, emotional, social, and academic development of learners. In the same vein, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 revealed that cyberbullying has academic, psychological, and social effects. However, its severity differs according to the age of the learner, availability of coping skills and support systems, online platform, safety and security features used, and duration of exposure to cyberbullying. Lu (2025) noted that the effects of cyberbullying are persistent, often hidden, and affected by the background in which it takes place.

Remarkably, the adult participants in the study knew that learners could suffer from mental health issues, depression, anxiety, stress, suicide risk, decreased academic performance, loss of interest in school, and social isolation after being cyberbullied. In contrast to this study's findings, Campbell et al. (2019) reported that adults, such as teachers and parents, could not accurately identify cyberbullying scenarios.

These findings align with the principles of social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 2023), especially the principle of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy affects a person's ability to achieve a certain performance. The study shows that the learner's self-efficacy to perform academic tasks was severely affected after experiencing cyberbullying.

4.5.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Learner's experience on the effects of cyberbullying on academic performance

All 9 learners mentioned that cyberbullying impacted their academic performance. Notably, the majority of the participants reported that their academic performance decreased after their cyberbullying experience. The other responses ranged from loss of concentration to skipping school and withdrawal from social participation.

Four participants (**L2, L4, L5, and L9**) mentioned that their concentrations decreased. **L2** remarked, *"I couldn't concentrate properly, and my marks dropped. I used to love school, but I started skipping because I didn't want to face people"*. Another participant reported that their decreased concentration subsequently led to a loss of interest in academic activities. **L5** said, *"I started to become less focused and did not pay attention to my schoolwork, and I also started being absent from school. This cyberbullying made me fail most of my tests and exams, and I ended up failing a grade"*. While **L4** reported the hardships they faced, which resulted in them not participating in class activities, they said, *"It's been really tough; my marks have gone down a bit, and I don't feel like participating in class so much"*.

These findings indicate that cyberbullying harms the academic performance of learners. Cyberbullying instils fear and low self-confidence; hence, the learner may struggle to engage in meaningful class discussions and fail to participate and complete learning activities. Continuous cyberbullying can lead to avoidance, and eventually, the learner withdraws from lessons or absents himself or herself from school or other school activities. Therefore, continuous emotional stress and poor concentration can cause learners' performance to decline. Similarly, Mabula (2025) reported that learners contemplate committing suicide if they continue to experience the critical negative effects of cyberbullying on their emotional and academic well-being.

These findings were further consolidated by the performance that was recorded in the Grade 7 learners' mark schedules and the minutes recorded in the SBST meetings. The average percentage mark from the mark schedules indicated that the learners' academic performance decreased. After further assessment, it seems that the learner's performance declined during the time they explained that they were cyberbullied. Although SBST meeting minutes only acknowledge cyberbullying as a problem, they did explicitly explain what actions were taken to identify and assist

victims. The minutes also do not explicitly indicate how cyberbullies can be identified and what action will be taken. Shefer and Ngabaza (2023) state that schools intervene when they notice cyberbullying incidents, but they often use informal or undocumented actions that arise from teachers' own initiative.

The interviews and SBST focus group discussions revealed that the adult participants knew that cyberbullying affected learners' academic performance. This is clear in the statement by **SBSTm 1**:

“The effects of cyberbullying are increased absenteeism, emotional distress, social isolation, behavioural changes, diminished participation, and a decline in academic performance: victims of cyberbullying often experience a drop in performance due to stress, distraction, and decreased motivation, leading to difficulties in concentrating on schoolwork.”

SBSTm 9 reported that

“Cyberbullying has a significant negative effect on the learners' academic performance, as the affected learners 'lose motivation to academically perform due to the ongoing stress. It causes a myriad of personal problems including poor self-esteem.”

Participant **SBSTm 4** stated:

“Learners experience decreased concentration and focus in class, increased absenteeism or school avoidance, lower self-esteem and motivation to learn, and emotional distress, anxiety, or depression, which can impair cognitive abilities and academic performance.”

On this basis, the participants were able to recognise the negative effects of cyberbullying, especially on the academic performance and cognitive development of a learner. Cyberbullying victims often become distracted, quickly lose concentration, lose interest in learning activities, avoid class participation, and frequently miss school. Therefore, they miss crucial lessons, which affect their performance. Kopecký and Szotkowski (2017) reported that the negative effects of cyberbullying affect learners' behaviour and interpersonal interactions. As a result, victims may experience effects such as loss of focus (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017).

The participants understood that negative mental health effects impact learners' ability to concentrate in class, their self-esteem, and their participation in learning activities. Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) reported that learners who experience negative mental health effects become distracted, passive, detached, and disinterested in learning. Learners with a positive mental health status tend to exhibit positive behaviour in school activities.

Some of the participants were capable of recognising the social effects of cyberbullying. This aspect could be attributed to the fact that these participants understood that learners need to learn how to improve their self-esteem and develop healthy relationships.

Cyberbullying instils anxiety and diminishes self-confidence, hence hindering the learner's ability to engage in substantive class discussions and participate in or finish educational tasks (Bailey, 2025). Persistent cyberbullying may result in avoidance, ultimately causing the learner to disengage from classes or be absent from them. Consequently, persistent emotional stress and inadequate focus may lead to a deterioration in learners' academic performance.

Beghin (2020) also stated that when learners have access to their smartphones, they can travel online and interact with others via social media during lessons. Once learners receive distressing messages from a cyberbully, this can harm their level of concentration. The continuous negative bombardment of negative messages prevents learners from developing an appropriate mentality for learning in class. Cyberbullying diverts learners' attention and adversely impacts their academic performance and marks (Ain, 2025).

Similarly, a review of the previous literature indicated that cyberbullying affects the academic performance of learners. The signs of cyberbullying include reduced concentration, poor participation in academic activities, low motivation, increased absenteeism, and declining grades. The long-term effects are that learners eventually disengage and drop out of school.

Vaghchipawala (2023) reported findings similar to those of the present study. Vaghchipawala (2023) studied the effect of cyberbullying on academic performance among high school learners in Surat and reported that cyberbullying affects the academic performance of high school learners. The present findings also indicate that

adults are able to recognise the negative effects of cyberbullying, especially on the academic performance and cognitive development of learners.

These findings align with Bandura's (2023) social cognitive theory principles of determinism and sense of capability. A sense of capability is a belief in one's proficiency in achieving a particular responsibility. In this study, self-efficacy negatively affected learners' decisions, confidence, effort, and perseverance after they were cyberbullied. Self-efficacy, or a learner's confidence in their own abilities, is critical for academic success and is harmed by cyberbullying.

Reciprocal determinism states that people not only are influenced by their sense of capability but also diligently shape them with the help of their behaviour and intellectual processes (Bandura, 2023). In this study, the learner's negative online experience shaped their thoughts and behaviour, which is why some of the participants became socially isolated, were absent from school, and felt like they were dropping out of school.

The results imply that Grade 7 learners, teachers, principals and SBST teams should be trained to understand how cyberbullying affects learners' physical, mental, and social well-being. They should be able to identify emotional and psychological signs as a result of cyberbullying, such as feelings of sadness, embarrassment, and humiliation, leading to forfeiture of trust, a lack of self-confidence, stress, and social isolation in learners who respond to these negative effects.

They should be able to identify signs of reduced concentration, poor participation in academic activities, low motivation, increased absenteeism, and declining performance, disengagement in school, and absenteeism on the performance of a learner and respond to these negative effects and possibly develop preventive and supportive ways that are responsive to the mental, social, and physical well-being of learners.

In summary, the research findings indicate that Grade 7 learners are adversely affected by cyberbullying, which has detrimental effects on their emotional well-being, social relationships and academic performance. Cyberbullying causes learners to be distracted, lose concentration, lose interest in learning activities, avoid class participation, and frequently miss school. As a result, the learner's academic

performance decreases. The results also indicate that victims felt sad, embarrassed, humiliated, had low self-esteem, stressed and isolated.

4.5.4 Theme 4: Identifying ways to prevent cyberbullying in the Vhembe West District

Theme 4 provides detailed information on ways to prevent cyberbullying in Vhembe West District. This theme was developed to meet the research objective of identifying ways in which cyberbullying can be prevented in Vhembe West District. Sub-themes, such as ways of preventing cyberbullying in primary schools and the management of cyberbullying in primary schools, emerged from the data.

4.5.4.1 Subtheme 4.1: Ways of preventing cyberbullying in primary schools

The researcher asked the following question in the interviews and focus group discussions: *What are the strategies that can be used to effectively prevent cyberbullying from happening?* The question was designed to draw on the participant's knowledge of the preventive methods used to manage cyberbullying. The following question was posed with the intention of addressing the research question: *“What can be done to prevent cyberbullying in the Vhembe West District?”* By identifying the preventive methods and measures of cyberbullying, the researcher is able to articulate areas of improvement.

The findings revealed that the participants from the interviews were well able to identify areas of improvement in terms of their current cyberbullying policies and procedures. The responses from the interviews revealed that suggestions to prevent cyberbullying include conducting digital literacy education; having awareness campaigns and programmes, for example, anti-cyberbullying campaigns and policies within the school; having parental and teacher supervision of digital devices and online conversations; encouraging reporting via anonymous systems; providing counselling support; and conducting workshops for parents (Nudin et al.,2024).

Other responses include staff and learners educating them about cyberbullying, having posters, teaching learners how to react when cyberbullying occurs, enforcing a school code of conduct, limiting phone use in school, promoting kindness, respect and empathy during online conversations, inducing community participation in preventing cyberbullying and having a positive school culture.

An overwhelming majority of the participants from the interviews and the SBST focus group discussions advocated for digital literacy. While eight participants advocated for more parental involvement in monitoring digital technology usage, five participants merely advocated for having open communication between learners, parents, and teachers; clear school policies about cyberbullying and consequence management systems; and awareness campaigns and programmes. One participant from the interview provided an insightful and comprehensive statement.

“Schools must educate appropriate online behaviour while also covering internet safety, privacy, and reporting processes. Clear regulations and a code of conduct against cyberbullying should be enforced, and everyone should be aware of the penalties. Parents and educators should communicate with learners about their internet experiences on a regular basis and oversee their digital activities. Schools should encourage compassion, recognise good behaviour, and teach learners and staff how to utilise tools such as blocking, reporting, and privacy settings. Using tools to detect hazardous information and involve the entire school community can help keep learners safe online”. **T3**

Another participant from the focus group stated that

“The school could promote digital citizenship whereby learners are taught to be responsible and respectful online and to think critically about their online interactions and the potential impact of their words. Schools can conduct regular assessments in the form of surveys to gauge the prevalence of cyberbullying within the school community. It can implement educational programmes and teach learners how to use technology wisely. The school can use monitoring software or tools to detect and address bullying behaviour, and it can even promote a positive school climate.”

SBSTm 7

The findings from the learners’ focus group discussions revealed that most of them would like to receive awareness programmes in the classroom and at school assemblies. Awareness programmes could also include working with sister departments such as SAPS, the Social Development Department, all stakeholders, and the whole community at large. One participant even remarked,

“At school, they need to teach us more about bullying (all types of bullying: physical bullying, verbal bullying, non-verbal abuse, emotional abuse, etc.) and the

consequences of bullying. Parents should take note of their children, ask questions, and know their children's day-to-day activities on social media.” L 9

Some of the participants from the learner focus group discussions reported that they wanted to see parental involvement in monitoring online interactions. Other learners mentioned that they wanted to receive emotional support, stricter school policies, better reporting systems, and access to therapy.

These findings from the interviews, SBST, and learner focus group discussions suggest that the suggested strategies for curbing cyberbullying are proactive and practical and involve the school and its community in preventing and addressing cyberbullying. The findings of Siddiqui and Schultze-Krumbholz (2023) also confirm that to prevent cyberbullying from occurring in schools, programmes such as digital literacy and social skills training are necessary. These suggested strategies are based on the participants' experiences and knowledge; therefore, they are more likely to appeal to other learners and teachers in the Vhembe West District.

The findings also indicate that some schools are responsive when cyberbullying occurs. The fact that some participants were aware of the preventive procedures of cyberbullying, such as conducting educational campaigns and displaying educational materials, shows that some schools have a formal commitment to ensure that online interactions are safe and respectful and that there is also a commitment to prepare learners and teach them about the dangers of using digital technology. Nawawi (2025) stated that schools that are serious about stopping cyberbullying must start by addressing the school environment to make a safe place. The educational environment lays the groundwork for all other elements of bullying prevention. The school environment allows learners to receive support in a structured way.

The principles of social cognitive theory (SCT) and findings from research regarding prevention could be used to reduce cyberbullying within schools. Using the principle of determinism, the school culture and environment must have a zero-tolerance policy towards cyberbullying, and there should be visual displays of antibullying information and reporting systems.

4.5.4.2 Subtheme 4.2: Managing cyberbullying in primary schools

The researcher asked in the interviews and focus group discussions the following question: *How do you handle cyberbullying issues at your school?* The question was

designed to draw from the participant's knowledge of the existing methods of managing cyberbullying. The following question was posed with the intention of addressing the research question: "What can be done to prevent cyberbullying in the Vhembe West District?" By identifying and understanding the ways cyberbullying is currently handled, the researcher is able to establish whether schools have existing policies, systems, and procedures for managing cyberbullying. Additionally, the researcher was able to establish whether those methods of handling cyberbullying actually work.

The findings of the study were that, out of the 6 participants (**T1, T2, T3, P1, P2 and P3**) who were interviewed, 4 participants (**T2, P1, P2 and P3**) stated that their school had policies and procedures for managing cases of cyberbullying. The responses of the 4 participants ranged from carrying out investigations and involving parents to collecting evidence of cyberbullying and conducting disciplinary hearings in extreme cases. One of the interviewed participants remarked,

"At our school, we have the following systems in place to combat cyberbullying: Both the cyberbully and victim would be called to the office by the disciplinary committee. They will be asked to make their statements. These statements are recorded, and both learners sign thereafter. If there is evidence, it will be taken and kept until the case is resolved. The cyberbully and the victim will be given parental letters to come with their parents on a specific date, which is determined by the committee. The witnesses will be called separately to come and give statements of what happened. They also write down their account of the event that occurred and sign. During the disciplinary hearing, we ensure that all learners feel valued, and at the same time, we ensure the learner who has been bullied gets the justice he/she deserves." **T2**

Another participant stated,

"We handle cyberbullying by encouraging learners not to respond to and/or not to forward cyberbullying messages... And we also encourage learners to block the person who is cyberbullying." **P3**

Participant **P1** reported that

"... We don't allow phones in school... we ask a child to take screenshots or print off a hard copy of a letter or online conversation. They must report cyberbullying to the police."

In contrast to the other responses, T3 stated that *“We can't handle that. This concept of cyberbullying, yes.”*, while T1 did not know how cyberbullying was handled at their school.

Notably, all the participants from the SBST focus group discussion responded that there were school policies and procedures for managing the cyberbully and the victim. The responses to the management of cyberbullying cases ranged from having approaches such as disciplinary action, counselling, parental involvement, referring to social services, and awareness education.

One participant remarked,

“At our school, we follow a multi-step approach: Listening carefully and empathetically to the learner involved. Reporting the case to the school-based support team (SBST) and involving parents or guardians. We provide counselling to both the victim and the perpetrator, if necessary. We educate learners about responsible online behaviour through Life Orientation lessons and awareness campaigns. We also involve relevant authorities if the incident is serious and requires further action.” **SBSTm 4**

Another participant stated that

“We provide support services such as counselling and supportive resources for victims of cyberbullying as well as for individuals who engage in bullying behaviour to help address the underlying issues. We promote open communication and try establishing a safe atmosphere where learners experience relaxed presenting incidents of cyberbullying, and also encourage learners to speak to trusted adults or peers about their experiences.” **SBSTm 8**

While another participant stated,

“We address the situation by inviting the victim to discuss their experience, reviewing any available bullying content, and then contacting the bully. We call in both parents prior to the disciplinary meeting, as some cases require the victim to receive support from home as well or to prevent extreme escalation outside of school. This is followed by a disciplinary hearing, for which the learner will be given the relevant penalty according to the school code of conduct. Cases may even be referred to social services for both the bully and victim if deemed necessary.” **SBSTm 7**

The majority of the participants from the interviews and SBST focus group discussions stated that procedures existed to directly manage cyberbullying incidents as they occurred. The procedures ranged from conducting investigations, parental involvement, collecting evidence, conducting counselling sessions, and referring the matter to social services. These findings indicate that some schools have a formal commitment to prevent cyberbullying and actively seek to protect and provide support to victims. Masoumi et al. (2024) reported that schools play a crucial role in managing cyberbullying. Managing cyberbullying requires a multiple-layered strategy involving teachers, parents, and education administration organisation because cyberbullying involves a complicated phenomenon affected by social factors.

The fact that two participants (**T1 and T3**) from the interviews did not know how cyberbullying can be managed indicates that some teachers do not understand certain processes of managing cyberbullying. This could also mean that the school itself does not carry out extensive training on methods for managing cyberbullying, and it does not actively guarantee that its teachers are furnished with tools, knowledge, and skills to manage cyberbullying. Masoumi et al. (2024) stated that schools must carry out adequate preparations to ensure that incidents of cyberbullying are reduced. Teachers play a key role in implementing anti-cyberbullying strategies and managing incidents because they spend more time with learners at school. Polillo et al. (2024) reported that although teachers admitted that cyberbullying was a problem, they did not have the trust and expertise to identify and handle cyberbullying incidents. They also reported that there were significant inconsistencies in reported management strategies to address cyberbullying. Teachers' expertise and understanding of bullying can impact their precautionary techniques to resolve the matter within the school (Fauzan & Sulaeman, 2024).

The researcher also asked learners in their focus group discussions how they felt helped or supported when they were cyberbullied. At least eight learners stated that they received help from teachers, parents, or principals. Others reported being ignored or not taken seriously. Those participants who received support reported that they received emotional support in the form of reassuring messages, listening in a non-judgemental manner, and discussions. One participant remarked,

“My teacher spoke to me and encouraged me. She referred the matter to the principal, and both our parents were called in for a meeting. My classmate was asked to

apologise to me. She was punished for carrying a phone at the school premises, and the principal made her read and teach about cyberbullying to the whole school at assembly” (L9).

Other participants reported that there were parental interventions, which resulted in discussions with school leaders. For example, one participant reported, “*The school Life orientation teacher spoke to me and helped me feel better. The school also had a talk with the learners and their parents and warned them to stop this bad behaviour*” (L2). In addition, disciplinary action was taken on perpetrators in the form of punishments, meeting with parents and schools, and leading cyberbullying awareness lessons. For example, one participant remarked, “*All the learners who bullied me where punished for what they did, and the principal called a meeting with their parents*” (L5).

The learners' responses indicate that they received some degree of support. However, support was not consistently provided. The findings also indicate that the learners were familiar with certain reporting procedures. For example, all the learners reported cyberbullying incidents to a sister, teacher, parent, or school principal. The findings are similar to those of the interviews with teachers and principals and SBST focus discussions in which schools have reporting procedures. There is remedial action for reported cyberbullying cases, which makes the learners feel valued and understood.

The findings of this research indicate that primary schools in Vhembe West had policies and procedures for managing cases of cyberbullying, which ranged from conducting investigations to parental involvement, collecting evidence, conducting counselling sessions, and referring to social services. These findings indicate the school's responsiveness and formal commitment to prevent and control cyberbullying and, at the same time, protect and provide support to victims. In contrast, Wright (2024) indicated that school districts should be involved in the management of cyberbullying and must address cyberbullying at all grades. If they want to achieve their objectives, such as ensuring that learners maintain good health and reach their potential for academic success (Tariq, 2025).

The responses from the learners in the study further confirm the above information and indicate that learners receive support from teachers, parents, or principals. Most participants reported that they received emotional support through discussions with

the teacher or principal, involving parents and taking disciplinary action against the perpetrator. In a similar study, DeSmet et al. (2015) reported that schools should engage in discussions with learners, seek professional assistance, involve parents, and offer supportive guidance to victims.

In contrast to this study's findings, Lorga et al. (2023) studied learners' views about coping methods and school measures for addressing bullying and cyberbullying events in London secondary schools. They reported that learners cope with cyberbullying by seeking help and asking advice, followed by searching for independent ways of dealing with cyberbullying and evading problems. The learners dealt with cyberbullying by venting out and internalising problems.

In this study, the learners stated that the most effective strategy for managing cyberbullying was the assistance of family members, particularly parents. Learners selected permanent suspension from school as the most effective solution for both conventional bullying and cyberbullying. Arguably, Awaah et al. (2024) reported that schools can manage cyberbullying through school punishments, disciplinary actions, informal and supportive approaches, and teaching about cyberbullying through the curriculum.

The principles of social cognitive theory (SCT) and findings from management research could be used to improve existing strategies and procedures for managing cyberbullying within schools. Using the principle of modelling, learners, teachers and principals can be taught how to manage cyberbullying through training and educational campaigns; digital literacy; educational materials; and counselling sessions for victims. Through the principle of reinforcement, schools can manage and prevent cyberbullying by having and enforcing school policies.

For example, for cyberbullies, schools can conduct disciplinary hearings, and for victims, schools can provide counselling and involve parents and the community. Using the principles of self-efficacy, teachers, SBSTs, and principals can set motivating elements to prevent cyberbullying, such as digital technology software that blocks internet use in schools, ensuring open and robust communication, and lessons on respect, tolerance, and kindness. Using the principle of determinism, the school culture and environment must have a zero-tolerance policy towards cyberbullying, and there should be visual displays of antibullying information and reporting systems.

In summary, this study revealed that the school had policies and procedures for managing cases of cyberbullying. These include conducting investigations involving parents, collecting evidence of cyberbullying, counselling, referring to social services, and conducting disciplinary hearings in extreme cases. The results indicated that the learners received help from teachers, parents, or principals. They received emotional support in the form of reassuring messages, listening in a non-judgemental manner, and discussions. The results also indicated that the main prevention strategies include more parental involvement in monitoring digital technology usage; open communication between learners, parents, and teachers; clear school policies about cyberbullying and consequent management systems; and awareness campaigns and programmes.

4.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the collected data from focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis processes from 24 participants. The participants selected were learners, teachers, SBSTs, and principals who had gone through or read reports about cyberbullying at their schools. In addition, the data analysis involved the thematic content data analysis method, which assisted the process of theme creation to be adopted in the interpretation of the data. The conversation also included quotes from the sampled participants, which were presented and explained comprehensively. The next chapter (Chapter 5) outlines the findings, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

With the widespread use of computers, mobile phones, tablets, and online platforms such as social media communication tools, cyberbullying in schools has become rampant among learners. The goal of this research was to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District. To meet the research goal, the preceding chapters identified, described and analysed the problem using relevant literature. The chapters also explained the research process. The previous chapter (Chapter 4) presented the research findings in relation to the study's primary research goal.

This chapter provides a summary of the research findings, recommendations and conclusions. It also offers directions for future researchers investigating cyberbullying in schools. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do Grade 7 learners experience cyberbullying in Vhembe West District?
2. What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying in Vhembe West District?
3. How does cyberbullying affect the performance of Grade 7 learners in the Vhembe West District?
4. What can be done to prevent cyberbullying in Vhembe West District?

5.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY

The results of this research add to the literature on how cyberbullying affects the performance of Grade 7 learners through the application of Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) (Irmayanti et al., 2024). Cyberbullying was reported to disrupt important personal indicators (e.g., self-esteem, emotional stability, and self-efficacy), which are, according to SCT, fundamental to learning behaviour (Güçlü-Aydoğan et al., 2025). This phenomenon of online victimisation led to an increase in anxiety, withdrawal, and reduced confidence in learners, all of which negatively impacted their cognitive processes, including concentration, memory, and motivation. These disruptions also validate what Bandura claims: personal psychological conditions are a direct

explanation for behavioural outcomes and account for the decline in class participation, incomplete schoolwork, and reduced academic engagement observed among victimised learners (Früge, 2025).

In particular, the study emphasises the mutually reinforcing relationships among personal variables, behaviour, and environmental factors, which emphasises interdependence in the developmental progress of learning (Mubarak et al., 2025). Khanyile and Ngema (2025) concluded that environmental factors such as weak parental supervision, inadequate school policies, and peer norms allowed cyberbullying to flourish, contributing to changes in learners' online and classroom behaviour. The results of SCT studies demonstrate that digital platforms have become part of the learning environment and that digital platforms significantly shape the behaviour of learners (Akram & Abdelrady, 2025). Thus, the research positions cyberbullying as a socio-emotional and environmental factor that disrupts learning processes, highlighting the importance of seeing academic performance as a product of complex interactions between learners and their digital and school ecosystems (Dailey & Roche, 2025).

5.3 GAPS IN LITERATURE RELATING TO CYBERBULLYING

The study identified key gaps in the understanding of cyberbullying among Grade 7 primary schools in Vhembe District from the reviewed literature.

- There is a pressing need for more research on cyberbullying and its educational effects, especially in rural school contexts such as South Africa's Vhembe West District (Makananise, 2025). The literature review indicated that most studies were based on Western cultures, and there has been extensive research on cyberbullying and antibullying interventions in urban and suburban settings (Xiao et al., 2025).
- Shireesha (2025) noted a knowledge gap regarding cyberbullying patterns and effects among socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, as well as the nature and scope of victimisation in rural, low-income schools.
- There is limited knowledge of the management of cyberbullying and the challenges and experiences of learners among primary school learners (Alkhayat, 2023).
- Previous studies on similar research topics have used a quantitative, cross-sectional study approach to measure learners' cyberbullying experiences and

academic performance (Mahmud et al., 2025). However, this study identified a methodological gap and a clear need for qualitative research to provide a deeper understanding of the issue (Lim, 2025).

- There is a lack of published and unpublished data about Vhembe West District studies investigating patterns, consequences, or interventions associated with cyberbullying among primary school learners (Malembe, 2024).

5.4 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.4.1 Theme 1: Participants' understanding of and experiences of cyberbullying in primary schools

In summary, Theme 1 revealed that learners, teachers, principals, and school-based support teams (SBSTs) understood online cyberbullying as a form of damaging behaviour (Zammit, 2025). These behaviours include abusive messages, the distribution of images or information without permission, social exclusion, threats and impersonation (Gashroo & Mehrotra, 2024). Grade 7 learners reported a constant sense of humiliation, predominantly with WhatsApp and other social media tools. A large number of victims have made decisions not to report instances of such incidents for fear, embarrassment, or distrust, which maintains abuse and aggravates its emotional effects (Mdletshe & Makhaye, 2025). Schools need to develop trusted, accessible reporting systems with enhanced emotional support systems for early identification and intervention (Clemmow et al., 2025).

5.4.2 Theme 2: Understanding factors that contribute to cyberbullying

In summary, Theme 2 revealed that the results of the study focused on particular elements of personal, social, and structural reasons for cyberbullying (Kim & Lee, 2025). Some of these factors include unsupervised access to digital devices, peer pressure, limited digital literacy, and inadequate parental monitoring (Richmond, 2026). Other environmental contributors, such as exposure to violent online content and inconsistent enforcement of school discipline, compounded the issue (Mythili & Nagamani, 2025). Amalia et al. (2025) argued that prevention must be achieved through a partnership within schools with parents, as well as comprehensive schooling in digital literacy and consistent implementation of school policies.

5.4.3 Theme 3: Determining how cyberbullying affects the academic performance of Grade 7 learners

In summary, Theme 3 revealed that cyberbullying negatively affects the academic performance of Grade 7 learners (Bhutoria et al., 2025) in a clear and significant way. Victims reported struggles in paying attention, a lack of motivation and emotional stress, which had consequences for poor schoolwork completion, insufficient group participation and poor academic performance (Badela et al., 2025). Teachers continued to witness fall-offs in classroom participation, drop-offs in attendance and a marked drop in learners' desire to learn for a long time. According to Koh (2025), emotional consequences from fear, embarrassment, and low self-esteem further compromise the cognitive processes that are necessary for effective academic functioning, negatively impacting memory, attention span, and problem-solving skills. Another concern found by the study was that learners were perceived as targets by peers because of their appearance, online behaviour, and personal characteristics, leading to both a hostile learning environment and worsening anxiety, which served to further reduce meaningful engagement in learning (Guo et al., 2025). With emotional distress, learners' academic performance is directly affected because they are unable to express ideas, remain focused and partake in class (Tariq, 2025). This information demonstrates that there is indeed a strong correlation between cyberbullying and poor academic performance, a scale of lowering the ability of learners to perform in academic discipline on the basis of the severity and duration of victimisation (Bhutoria et al., 2025). Although the social damage caused by cyberbullying is evidenced by these findings, emotionally based distress impedes learning by impeding cognitive performance and inclusiveness in the classroom settings of participants (Ziyan & Kadri, 2025). Early cyberbullying prevention and engagement are crucial for improving learning and social status and an optimal school climate (Williams & Halliday, 2025).

5.4.4 Theme 4: Identifying ways to prevent cyberbullying in primary schools

In summary, Theme 4 revealed that school responses included disciplinary measures, counselling, parental involvement and educational campaigns (Adu et al., 2024). There were inconsistencies with the implementation of strategies, insufficient follow-up and the unwillingness to report incidents among the learners, participants noted

(Ghasemi et al., 2025). SBST members acknowledge that the breakdown of communication often impedes early intervention and collaboration among teachers, parents, and support teams (Gwendoline, 2024). Mosala (2025) stated that formal intervention in schools must be integrated and policy coherent with strengthened SBST roles, along with systematic monitoring of cyberbullying incidents. Suggestions were made by participants regarding the need for toughening and full implementation of school codes of conduct, incorporating digital citizenship into Life Orientation lessons, better awareness and training of parents through parent workshops and the formation of confidential reporting mechanisms teams (Gwendoline, 2024). The SBST members emphasised how much counselling and action are required so that victims can be reached as early as possible in search of help. Schools must strive to lead with a positive, respectful culture and an open and regular policy against cyberbullying. This study was conducted to determine how to prevent cyberbullying in Vhembe West District. The results indicate that primary schools in Vhembe West currently have cyberbullying policies and procedures, which comprise an investigation-based policy, the inclusion of parents in evidence gathering, educational campaigns, educational materials, counselling service provisions and referrals to the social service department. These findings reflected the schools' responsiveness and their formal commitment to preventing and controlling cyberbullying while also protecting and offering support to victims.

5.5 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE STUDY

5.5.1 Strengths of the study

This study is supported by its strong theoretical framework of Bandura's social cognitive theory as a good foundation for considering the effects of cyberbullying on learners' academic performance (Bussey et al., 2025). Its qualitative case study design enabled an in depth, richer understanding of learners' experiences (Schad et al., 2025). The inclusion of participants from different social life groups (learners, teachers, principals, and SBST members) provided multilevel perspectives on the topic, ensuring the triangulation of the findings and the credibility of the results. Multiple data collection methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, ensured triangulation, which enhanced the depth, credibility, and reliability of the findings. Thorough thematic analysis enhanced the analytical rigour of the

research, and the focus on the Vhembe West District enhanced the contextual relevance (Sikhwetha & Makhado, 2025). This study also contributes to the current knowledge on cyberbullying experienced by Grade 7 learners in a rural South African environment, filling a gap in the field (Sibisi et al., 2025). Ethical standards were rigorously observed, and the results provide practical implications for schools, policymakers, and curriculum designers (Güneş & Kaban, 2025).

5.5.2 Limitations of the study

Although multiple data collection methods were used (e.g., semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis), the small sample size and the limited number of schools in Vhembe West District may restrict the generalisability of the findings. As the study relied primarily on self-reported data, its conclusions may be affected by bias resulting from poor recall or an unwillingness to reveal sensitive matters. However, qualitative research is based on the lived realities of the participants, which are regarded as their subjective truths (Lim, 2025). While document analysis was integrated into the study, it offered no direct observation of learners' online behaviour, which is an area that requires research. Shared experience can also be affected by school differences in digital access, but time restrictions may limit longitudinal analysis of academic success (Rani, 2025). Finally, researcher bias is still a potential limitation of qualitative analysis, as it is interpretative in nature.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following section provides recommendations to these stakeholders: the Department of Education, principals, teachers, learners and parents.

5.6.1 Promote digital literacy education in schools

Promoting digital literacy education for primary school pupils should be carried out by the Department of Education and schools. Digital literacy can be implemented in schools by integrating it into the curriculum. This will permit schools to deliberately prepare learners with understanding and skills to identify the hazards of cyberbullying as well as the ways in which they protect themselves from cyberbullying (Khanyile & Ngema, 2025). This includes creating lessons on digital literacy according to learners' needs. The Department of Education can provide curriculum geared towards age-appropriate digital literacy, such as age-appropriate learning that is reflective of the

development stage of learners, real-life situations, and topics of interest (e.g., cyberbullying, online safety, or responsible digital behaviour) that are interwoven in courses (e.g., Life Orientation) as indicated by Pei (2025). For example, a lesson in Grade 7 might include fundamental knowledge about cyberbullying, scenario-based role-play, and a conversation about what is safe when interacting with an offender, such as blocking the perpetrator, reporting the perpetrator, or turning to a parent for help. UNESCO (2023) proposed that digital literacy should not only develop understanding among learners about falsehoods and misinformation but also expose them to harmful content.

Fonseca and Borges-Tiago (2024) further noted that learners with such knowledge are empowered to identify cyberbullies and victims on the basis of the content posted. Ultimately, digital literacy will equip learners to adopt the right attitude towards online interactions and develop a consciousness of the content they post and how it can affect others. The Department of Education curriculum policy makers must include lessons on the different forms of cyberbullying noted in this study, which are *exclusion, cyberstalking, masquerading, trolling, sexting, dissing, fraping and catfishing* and the interventions available to victims (Fonseca & Borges-Tiago, 2024).

The lessons should equip learners with the knowledge to defend themselves, reduce the bystander effect, and intentionally advocate for marginalised individuals (Fonseca & Borges-Tiago, 2024). The lessons should also help learners build empathy and understanding for other learners. Learners should be taught ways to report cyberbullying and conflict-resolution processes (Istiqomah et al., 2024). Additionally, as noted by Chipangura and Dtendjo-Ndjindja (2022), learners should be taught the purpose and installation process of antivirus software, firewalls, and software updates. In light of these insights, it remains essential for schools to prioritise ongoing digital literacy education so that learners are equipped to navigate online spaces responsibly and securely (Charles-Zalakoro, 2025).

5.6.2 Promote anti-cyberbullying awareness campaigns in schools

To effectively reduce cyberbullying in schools, strengthening awareness efforts is essential. This recommendation focuses on how schools can actively promote anti-cyberbullying campaigns that educate learners, reinforce safe online behaviour, and

increase the visibility of existing departmental initiatives. To do this, the following actions are recommended:

- Schools should dedicate specific days and activities to promote anti-cyberbullying awareness.
- Although the Department of Basic Education has developed awareness programmes and partnered with mainstream media, schools must ensure that these programmes reach learners through assemblies, classroom activities, and commemorative events.
- As noted by Guzun (2024), successful campaigns must accommodate a clear target audience, a message strategy, and appropriate demographic and geographic reach.
- Schools should create engaging and informative cyberbullying messages, using appealing elements such as themes, logos, colours, and tones that capture learners' interest.

The study recommends that schools dedicate days and activities to promote anti-cyberbullying. However, the Department of Basic Education has developed anti-cyberbullying awareness and informational programmes and collaborated with mainstream media outlets (Khanyile & Ngema, 2025). Schools should promote awareness programmes such as poster competitions, debates, drama performances, digital literacy campaigns and cybersecurity workshops using school activities and commemoration days to ensure widespread awareness of the dangers of cyberbullying (Lorenz, 2025). Promoting awareness programmes through school events and commemorative days helps learners understand cyberbullying and encourages safer online conduct (Bharati, 2025).

Guzun (2024) stated that a successful campaign must include key elements, such as a well-defined target audience, a message strategy, and demographic and geographic reach. The school should design a cyberbullying awareness message that provides engaging information. The message elements should include themes, a logo, colour, and tone that are attractive and informative to learners.

5.6.3 Develop legislation prohibiting all Forms of bullying, including cyberbullying, in schools

The findings suggest that the Department of Education should develop age-appropriate digital literacy programmes that align content with learners' developmental level, use real-life scenarios (for example, real-life scenes in teaching and learning environments), embed topics such as cyberbullying into subjects such as Life Orientation, and using interactive strategies such as role-play, discussions, and school activities to encourage safe online behaviour in schools (Gcaza & Thomson, 2025). Cyberbullying policies in schools need to be standardised, teacher training should be ongoing and continuous, and parents and SBST members should collaborate to provide consistent support (Ganca, 2024). Further studies should involve both victims and perpetrators and examine context-specific causes of this problem, including among high school learners, to create age-appropriate interventions and evidence-based policies for learners. The study recommends that there should be laws prohibiting all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. Baidoo et al. (2025) suggested that having laws helps regulate cyberbullying behaviour and tendencies in and outside school parameters. However, the Department of Education created guidelines for the management and prevention of bullying, including cyberbullying in schools (Reddy, 2025). These measures are not enough, as cyberbullying occurs online outside school parameters.

5.6.4 Consolidate the enforcement of school codes of conduct

To address cyberbullying effectively, primary schools should consolidate the implementation of their school codes of conduct, as suggested by the study. Uniform disciplinary measures against learners should be implemented when online behaviour occurs both on and off school grounds. Cyberbullying incidents must be thoroughly investigated, with proper evidence collection and parents involved in the disciplinary process (Ganca, 2024). If cyberbullying is a criminal offence or causes serious harm to its victims, schools have a duty to consult external counsellors, social workers, and police to ensure the right course of action.

Marzano and Gizut (2018) stress the importance of having a zero-tolerance policy for bullying. Learners must know that any form of online misconduct inside or outside school will be met with stern disciplinary action. Schools enhance accountability by

requiring learners to sign a detailed legal agreement explicitly prohibiting cyberbullying, thereby clearly defining unacceptable behaviour and its consequences (Bisrat Yibas, 2024). Consolidating the application of school codes of conduct in this fashion builds on schools' robustness in preventing cyberbullying, safeguarding learners and fostering a safe and responsible digital space (Ghosh et al., 2025).

5.6.5 Improve reporting systems in schools

The study recommends that schools improve their reporting systems for cyberbullying. Reporting systems help schools manage cyberbullying behaviour. The Department of Education (2018) suggested that learners must learn how to detect and report cyberbullying incidents. Learners must report cases to school management teams, teachers and parents. The reporting system must protect the identity of learners who report incidents of cyberbullying. The school must document incidents on SA – SAMS and generate incident reports (Magunje & Chigona, 2024). The report system must have a link to the police (Department of Education, 2018). Schools' reporting systems should be strengthened to combat cyberbullying and streamline their use. Importantly, learners should know where to report, such as anonymous reporting channels, which are available (Lee et al., 2024). Aunger et al. (2024) indicated that staff should be trained to act on reports in a timely fashion, document their findings in a structured way and follow up to resolve concerns. Javed (2025) noted that good reporting systems lead to transparency, reducing the chance of repeat cyberbullying.

5.6.6 Increase parental supervision of digital devices and online conversations

While monitoring all learners' online conversations may be challenging, parents should receive training on how to monitor and regulate learners' behaviour. Parents must become digitally literate and receive training on how much online freedom they can provide their learners with (Pratiwi et al., 2022). They should receive training on software that is available to help them track and control their children's online activities (Chipangura et al., 2022). Parents should learn to reinforce empathy and respect during online interactions and help learners understand the consequences of their online posts (Suliantoro & Syakhrani, 2025). Schools can supplement this by offering training and guidance on digital safety, such as the use of healthy screen time limits, parental control software and early warning signs of

cyberbullying (Majebi & Drakeford, 2025). Through joint parental and school involvement, learners will adopt an understanding of online behaviours and be less exposed to potentially risky digital interactions.

5.6.7 Encourage a positive school culture

The study recommends that schools foster a positive culture that encourages kindness, respect, and empathy during online conversations to prevent cyberbullying. Schools can deter cyberbullying behaviour by intentionally implementing character education programmes that teach learners to resolve conflicts and engage with others empathetically and respectfully despite differences in opinion (Supiadi, 2025). It can intentionally implement character education programmes that teach learners to resolve conflicts and engage with others empathetically and respectfully despite differences in opinion (Supiadi, 2025). Schools can create a secure physical environment where open conversations about anti-cyberbullying can take place while promoting learner engagement in positive interpersonal relationships (Supiadi, 2025). School mentoring programmes, educational campaigns, school-wide awareness campaigns and more all have the power to rekindle good-sense behaviour (Tariq, 2025). A strong school culture nurtures resilience in learners, decreases the incidence of harassment and bullying, and encourages learner peers and adults to act responsibly (Rofiki et al., 2025).

5.6.8 Provide counselling for cyberbullied victims

Schools should offer immediate and ongoing psychological support to school learners who have experienced cyberbullying. Rožman et al. (2025) suggested that counselling interventions not only ameliorate adverse effects on academic performance but also contribute to the general state of mind and social interaction. Teachers and SBSTs must receive training in identifying victims, be there for the victims to help them cope with emotions, regain confidence and cope when engaging online (Metsing & Tlale, 2024). Putra et al. (2022) reported that counselling helps victims of cyberbullying cope with its adverse effects. It helps victims refrain from developing a sense of self-blame, self-defeating perceptions and mental conditions such as stress and depression as a result of cyberbullying. Counselling helps victims develop tolerance and boost self-esteem. It helps learners regulate their emotions and behaviour by understanding the interplay between ideas, emotions, and actions (Putra et al., 2022).

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study only targeted cyberbullying victims and did not include bullies; therefore, future researchers can investigate why cyberbullies in primary schools engage in this behaviour. The findings could reveal other context-specific causal factors that lead primary school learners to engage in online aggressive behaviour. For example, recent research in Spain with primary school learners (approximately 9–11) revealed the importance of moral disengagement in predicting levels of cyberbullying: over an 18-month period, learners who cyberbullied tended to increasingly rationalise or justify their aggressive behaviour online (Kendzora, 2025). In South Africa, a study of Grade 6 and 7 learners in Gauteng reported that those who are cyberbullying are more likely to report having authoritarian parenting, with family contexts that may influence their involvement in cyberbullying (Zheng et al., 2025). A second South African study considered the work of social crime prevention police in rural schools and demonstrated that developmental concerns about power dynamics and a lack of supervision are implicated in cyberbullying but also highlight the limitations of existing institutional responses (Bisrat Yibas, 2024). Mosler et al. (2025) reported that many studies depend on self-report measures or target older learners, not very young learners. Therefore, undertaking this study is important.

The study used qualitative methods to collect and analyse the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West District. This methodology is important for understanding the nature of cyberbullying in rural primary schools. This could have limitations in the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, future researchers could conduct similar studies using quantitative methods to generalise findings to a larger population of learners to ascertain prevalence rates and develop effective interventions to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying. Recent quantitative studies have shown that cyberbullying decreases academic performance among primary and Grade 7 learners, as moral disengagement, authoritarian parenting, and peer influence all facilitate the cycle of perpetration (Zheng et al., 2025). Jia et al. (2025) argued that many existing studies have limitations in their cross-sectional designs, reliance on self-reports, or ability to target older learners, thereby limiting causality and generalisability. Consequently, we argue that future research should use large-scale, quantitative, possibly longitudinal designs with Grade 7

learners to measure the prevalence of cyberbullying, including both victims and perpetrators, to measure academic performance and contextual factors such as the home environment, device access and school policies (Bhutoria et al., 2025).

The study focused on Vhembe rural primary schools. Future researchers need to consider conducting similar studies in urban primary schools. Such a study would help develop interventions applicable to both rural and urban primary schools.

The study's target population was mainly Grade 7 primary school learners. Future researchers could conduct similar studies on high school learners. Given the higher level of interaction and more complex social and emotional development of high school learners than Grade 7 learners, future research should study high school learners to explore the effects of cyberbullying on high school learners (Wu et al., 2025). Khanyile and Ngema (2025) indicated that the effect of cyberbullying on the academic performance of high school learners could be noteworthy, as it can affect long-term academic performance. These studies could be important for generating age-appropriate interventions and evidence-based policies for the prevention and mitigation of cyberbullying on the basis of the various stages of learning.

The study established that schools have cyberbullying management practices such as reporting procedures, counselling support, disciplinary measures, and awareness campaigns. Future researchers should explore the consistency of such practices and whether they can be standardised.

5.8 CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

According to the findings, cyberbullying has severe consequences for Grade 7 learners' academic performance. Such behaviour has a detrimental impact on learners' academic performance because students are driven by low self-confidence due to the fear they develop; therefore, they may be unable to participate in substantive classroom discussions and to actually participate in learning activities. The process of cyberbullying is more general, occurring at the primary level, when learners are shown mean comments and fake accounts. These factors contribute to primary school learners engaging in cyberbullying, including peer pressure, unsupervised internet access, a lack of digital literacy, dominance or validation, low self-esteem, anonymity in online platforms, family problems, increased access to the internet, and

a lack of oversight on smartphones. As the education sector addresses cyberbullying within primary schools in Vhembe West, it is imperative that there are policies and procedures for investigating reported cases. These findings show that the schools were responsive, taking responsibility for preventing and controlling cyberbullying while protecting and supporting the victims.

In conclusion, this research underscores the critical need for schools, families and communities to actively collaborate in shaping safer digital learning environments and, on the basis of this, sets new directions for research as well as informed measures for protecting and empowering primary school learners.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 12 October 2024

Ref: **2024/10/12/00000210/05/RB**

Name: **Mrs TSHILIDZI CAROLINE, MABIRIMISA**

Student No.: **18035337**

Decision: Ethics Approval form

Dear **Mrs TSHILIDZI CAROLINE, MABIRIMISA**

Researcher(s): Name: **Mrs TSHILIDZI CAROLINE, MABIRIMISA**

E-mail address: 18035337@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **072 563 6242**

Supervisor: Name: **Dr JS Rubbi Nunan and Dr S Mahan (Co-supervisor)**

E-mail address: rubbijs@unisa.ac.za and emahansj@unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **012 444 8891** and **012 429 2272**

Title of research: The Effects of Cyberbullying on Grade 7 Learners' Academic Performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province.

Qualification: **MED (CURRICULUM STUDIES) (98434)**

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above-mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period **2024/10/12** to **2027/10/12**.

*The **write risk level** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on **12 September 2024** in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



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3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2027/10/12**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **2024/10/12/00000210/05/RB** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Kind regards,



Prof RB Monyai
Acting Head: CEDU Research
monyarb@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean: CEDU
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Approved - decision template – updated 16 Feb 2017

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APPENDIX B: PERMISSION APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE LIMPOPO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

CONFIDENTIAL



OFFICE OF THE PREMIER

Office of the Premier

Research and Development Directorate

Private Bag X9483, Polokwane, 0700, South Africa

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LIMPOPO PROVINCIAL RESEARCH ETHICS

COMMITTEE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

REVIEW DATE: 27 NOVEMBER 2024

PROJECT NUMBER: LPREC/119/2024: PG

SUBJECT: THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON GRADE 7 LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN VHEMBE WEST DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE.

RESEARCHER: MABIRIMISA TC

Acting Chairperson: Dr. M Maebane

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M Maebane".

Acting Chairperson: Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee

The Limpopo Provincial Research Ethics Committee (LPREC) is registered with National Health Research Council (NHREC) Registration Number **REC-111513-038**.

Note:

- i. This study is categorized as a Low Risk Level in accordance with risk level descriptors as enshrined in LPREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)
- ii. Should there be any amendment to the approved research proposal; the researcher(s) must re-submit the proposal to the ethics committee for review prior data collection.
- iii. **The researcher(s) must provide annual reporting to the committee as well as the relevant department and also provide the department with the final report/thesis.**
- iv. The researchers will be required to make presentations of the study findings and recommendations at the Provincial Research Conference/Departmental Research Day.
- v. The ethical clearance certificate is valid for 12 months. Should the need to extend the period for data collection arise then the researcher should renew the certificate through LPREC secretariat. PLEASE QUOTE THE PROJECT NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

APPENDIX D – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION



Date: 23 September 2024

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

My name is Mabirimisa Tshildzi Caroline, and I am doing research under the supervision of Dr. J.S Rubbi Nunan, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Early Childhood Education and Development towards a Masters in Education (MEd) at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled:

THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON GRADE 7 LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN VHEMBE WEST DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to collect important information that could be utilized to develop programmes to support district officials and school managers to work collaboratively toward school effectiveness.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited because your experiences and insights related to cyberbullying in Grade 7 learners are valuable, making your school/you well-suited for this study and will form an information-rich population, which will allow for productive data collection. I obtained your contact details from the Limpopo Department of Education. The approximate number of total participants in this study will be 24.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The participant in this study is expected to share their experiences on the topic. This study involves individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The questions to be asked will focus on the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance in Vhembe West Limpopo Province.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent (adult)/ assent (participant younger than 18 years old) form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without any consequences.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This study is expected to gather information on the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance and strategies to alleviate cyberbullying from happening. The findings will help Grade 7 teachers, Principals, and SBSTs to effectively manage cyberbullying.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

As this study is a medium-risk study, there might be a foreseeable risk of participants becoming uncomfortable to share about their experiences of cyberbullying. Should this occur, the researcher will immediately stop the interview and check on the well-being of the participant. The interview will only proceed if the participant is ready. The SBST members will also be on standby to offer support.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. The identity of all participants will remain anonymous, in other words, will be kept private and any other personal information will remain confidential to protect participants from any exposure or harm. Your responses will be presented using a code and your name will not be mentioned in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. Your personal information will remain confidential. Information shared anonymously will be presented anonymously in a research report or journal article.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet for future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. If necessary hard copies will be shredded and/or electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the hard drive of the computer using a relevant software programme).

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Participants in this study will not be paid for participating in this research.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

Application to conduct this study has been made to the Research Ethics Review Committee of Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?


If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact the Researcher on 072 563 6242 or 18035337@mylife.unisa.ac.za.

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Mabirimisa Tshildzi Caroline on 072 563 6242 or 18035337@mylife.unisa.ac.za.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr JS Rubbi Nunan on 0124448891 or rubbijs@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Yours sincerely

 (signature of researcher)

Mabrimisa Tshlidzi Caroline (Name of the above signatory)

Researcher (Signatory's position)

APPENDIX D: LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION FROM PRIMARY SCHOOLS TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS IN SCHOOLS

Request for permission to conduct research at Primary School IN Vhembe District

Dear Sir/Madam

I, Mabirimisa Tshilidzi Caroline, am administering a research project under the supervision of Prof JS Rubbi Nunan from the University of South Africa. I am inviting you to participate in this research project entitled as follows “The effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners’ academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province”. The main aim of this study is to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners’ academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province.

The research project will start from September to November 2024. The researcher will visit three (3) sampled public primary schools to observe and interview principals, class teachers, learners and SBSTs on the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners’ academic performance in primary schools. Throughout data collection tools such as face-to-face semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion, and document analysis will be used. When the research project is completed, the researcher will go back to the schools and discuss the findings with the principal, SBST members and class teachers.

This research project will be beneficial as it will be easier for principals, class teachers and SBSTs to manage the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners’ academic performance in primary schools. It will also be of benefit to the parents because the learner’s performance will improve. From the learners’ point of view, it can also be a beneficial as learners will discontinue cyberbullying each other. As a result, the quality of teaching and learning may increase in South Africa because there will be a decline in learners dropping out and most, principals and teachers will become motivated to work since they will now have an understanding that cyberbullying has negative effects on the performance of in primary schools. There will be no reimbursement or any incentives for participation in the research.

Feedback procedure will be made in the form, of findings and recommendations of the project.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Yours sincerely

Mabirimisa TC MED student (Unisa)

APPENDIX E: A LETTER REQUESTING PARENTAL CONSENT FOR MINORS TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Dear Parent

Your son/daughter is invited to participate in a study entitled
“The effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners’ academic performance in Vhembe
West District, Limpopo Province”

I am undertaking this study as part of MED degree the University of South Africa. The purpose of the study is to explore the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners’ academic performance in Vhembe West District, Limpopo Province. The possible benefits of the study are the improvement of good behaviour among learners. I am requesting for permission to include your child in this study because I want to investigate my topic. I expect to have two other learners in this school participating in the study.

If you allow your child to participate, I will request him/her to:

- Take part in an interview. He/she will be interviewed face-to-face. The interview will take place after school in order not to disturb the school programme and the venue will be at the school. The interview will take only 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews allows one to ask a participant to clarify a point that she/he is making and provides a more detailed explanation, for example, his/her view of a specific question that one has asked. As a researcher, I will ask more in-depth questions about the aspects that interest them, which allows for more flexibility in the research process, I also ask permission to use an audio-recorder during the interviews.
- Participate in focus group interviews: Your child will be informed of the purpose of focus group interviews and an explanation of what will happen with the data collected. He/she will be informed of how long and where the interviews will take place and permission to audio record the conversation will be requested.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission. His/her responses will not be linked to his/her name or your name or the school’s name

in any written or verbal report based on this study. Such a report will be used for research purposes only.

There are no foreseeable risks to your child by participating in the study. Your child will also receive no direct benefit from participating in the study. However, the possible benefits to education are better knowledge on how to overcome bullying when it happens to him/her. Neither your child nor you will receive any type of payment for participating in this study.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not affect him/her in any way. Similarly, you can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty.

The study will take place after regular classroom activities with the prior approval of the school and your child's teacher. In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. Both you and your child will be asked to sign the assent form which accompanies this letter. If your child does not wish to participate in the study, he/she will not be included and there will be no penalty. The information gathered from the study and your child's participation in the study will be stored securely on a password locked computer in my locked office for five years after the study. Thereafter, records will be erased.

The benefits of this study are to educate and give a better knowledge to the learner on how to overcome bullying when it happens to him/her. There are no foreseeable potential risks for your child by participating in the study. There will be no reimbursement or any incentives for participation in the research.

If you have questions about this study, please contact me or my study supervisor, Prof JS Rubbi Nunan at the Department of Early Childhood Education and Development, College of Education, University of South Africa. My contact number is 072 563 6242 and my e-mail address is 18035337@mylife.unisa.ac.za. The e-mail of my supervisor is rubbijs@unisa.ac.za. Permission for the study has already been given by the DET principal and the Ethics Committee of the College of Education, UNISA.

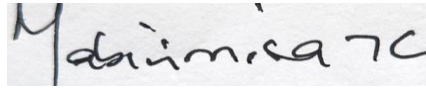
You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have

decided to allow your child to participate in this study. You may keep a copy of this letter.

Name of parent

Parent Signature.....

Tshilidzi Caroline Mabirimisa

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to be 'Mabirimisa TC' written in a cursive style.

Researcher's name (print)

Researcher's signature

Date: 18/09/2024

APPENDIX F: LEARNER PARTICIPATION ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant's name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and the possible inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or it has been explained to me) and understand the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications, and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

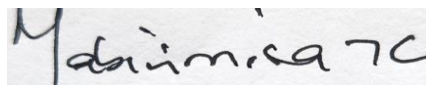
I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interview (face-to-face).

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname (please print)

Yours sincerely

Tshilidzi Caroline Mabirimisa



Researcher's name (print)

Researcher's signature

Date: 23/09/2024

APPENDIX G: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to participate in this research has informed me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

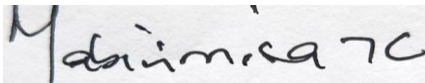
I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. (insert specific data collection method).

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname (please print)

Participant Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Name & Surname (please print) Mabirimisa Tshilidzi Caroline

Researcher's signature  Date 23/09/2024

APPENDIX H: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE - LEARNERS

Learner participants will be asked the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the concept of cyberbullying?
2. How have you experienced cyberbullying?
3. How has cyberbullying affected you, and particularly your academic performance?
4. What factors do you think contributed to you experiencing cyberbullying?
5. How has the school supported you?
6. How do your school's principal, class teachers, and SBST react to cyberbullying?
7. Explain how you felt after being exposed to a cyberbullying experience.
8. What do you think can be done to prevent cyberbullying?

APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - TEACHERS

Teacher participants will be asked the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the concept of cyberbullying?
2. What are the forms of cyberbullying that you know?
3. How did you come to know that learners are cyberbullied?
4. How do you handle cyberbullying issues at your school?
5. What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying?
6. What are the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance?
7. What are the strategies that can be used to effectively prevent cyberbullying from happening?

APPENDIX J: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - SBST

SBST participants will be asked the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the concept of cyberbullying?
2. What are the forms of cyberbullying that you know?
3. How did you come to know that learners are cyberbullied?
4. How do you handle cyberbullying issues at your school?
5. What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying?
6. What are the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance?
7. What are the strategies that can be used to effectively prevent cyberbullying from happening?

APPENDIX K: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - PRINCIPALS

Principal participants will be asked the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the concept of cyberbullying?
2. What are the forms of cyberbullying that you know?
3. How did you come to know that learners are cyberbullied?
4. How do you handle cyberbullying issues at your school?
5. What are the factors that contribute to learners experiencing cyberbullying?
6. What are the effects of cyberbullying on Grade 7 learners' academic performance?
7. What are the strategies that can be used to effectively prevent cyberbullying from happening?

APPENDIX L: TURNITIN ORIGINALITY REPORT

Similarity Report

PAPER NAME

Dissertation 18035337.docx

AUTHOR

TSHILIDZI CAROLINE MABIRIMISA

WORD COUNT

74071 Words

CHARACTER COUNT

471136 Characters

PAGE COUNT

239 Pages

FILE SIZE

4.6MB

SUBMISSION DATE

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Feb 25, 2026 10:10 AM GMT+2

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- Manually excluded sources

APPENDIX M: EDITING CERTIFICATE

LANGUAGE & TECHNICAL EDITING CERTIFICATE

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certifies that the work titled

**"THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON GRADE 7
LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN
VHEMBE WEST DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE."**
authored by **Mabirimisa Tshilidzi Caroline**

has been edited and proofread to improve grammar, consistency,
readability, flow, and logic.

25 JANUARY 2026



Mr KM Leshaba, Managing Editor
bkeditorials@gmail.com



**European Association of Science
Editors Membership 5471**

APPENDIX N: TECHNICAL EDITING

TECHNICAL EDITING CERTIFICATE

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authored by MABIRIMISA TSHILIDZI CAROLINE

has been formatted to maintain consistency in sub/headings, line
spacing, and to ensure one-to-one correspondence between in-
text citations and the reference list.

10 FEBRUARY 2026



Mr KM Leshaba, Managing Editor
bkeditorials@gmail.com



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Editors Membership 5471**