



The Gendered Perspective of Cyberbullying: The Case of a Rural University in Limpopo

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has heightened misuse of internet-based technologies by young people. Besides increased integration due to availability and access to mobile communication technologies, students today indulge in cyberbullying where they harass, insult and stalk each other. Scholars have researched extensively on cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning globally and how victims try to cope with the problem. However, there is a dearth of literature on the gendered perspective of cyberbullying in institutions of higher learning in Southern Africa. Using the Social Information Processing Theory, the study examined the phenomenon of cyberbullying at a rural university in South Africa. The key questions of the study were: How do male and female victims perceive cyberbullying? How do male and female victims react to cyberbullying? Does cyberbullying have the same effects on students of different gender? Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires targeted at male and female victims of cyberbullying at University of Venda. Findings revealed inconsistencies in how male and female victims perceived and reacted to cyberbullying.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, Gender, Mobile Communication Technologies, Social Information Processing Theory, Students.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in institutions of higher learning in South Africa has increased exponentially in the age of digital technologies (Jabulani & Edward, 2021). While bullying is not a new phenomenon, the introduction of new information technologies such as the internet and mobile phones have resulted in a new kind of bullying known as cyberbullying. The term "cyberbullying" is a collective term used to define all forms of bullying or harassment where perpetrators aggressively use digital technologies to intentionally harm others (Sleglova & Cerna, 2011:1). Cyberbullying can be done openly or anonymously by the perpetrators, depending on their motive and intentions.

Cyberbullying is a modern-day phenomenon that is not selective regarding gender, race, class, and age, occurring by means of Information Communication and Technologies (ICTs). The birth of ICTs offers communication tools that have enhanced interaction globally and has touched people of all age groups, surpassing traditional methods of communication at a rate of expansion and popularity much faster than ever anticipated (Farhangpour, Maluleke & Mutshaeni, 2019:1). Young people are more active in using ICTs, particularly mobile phones, to expand their communication reach, making them more susceptible to cyberbullying as perpetrators or victims. Conceding to this assumption, Michael Thomas posits that:

...young person who was born after 1980 and grew up in a world in which the use of digital technologies and especially the Web has been normalized... people belonging to this generation are 'native' to a digital world and a 'digital lifestyle', as opposed to 'digital immigrants', who were born before 1980, and have therefore been asked to adapt themselves to new technologies (Thomas, 2011:1).

Therefore, most students at institutions of higher learning fall under the "digital natives" category as they rely on the internet for communication purposes. They are techno-savvy because they were born into a technology-driven world which increases their chances of indulging in cyberbullying activities, unlike the older generations who are technological novices.

Scholars globally have extensively researched the prevalence of cyberbullying among students (Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009; Farhangpour, et al., 2019; Sam, Bruce, Agyemang, Amponsah & Arkorful, 2019; Soyemi, Olorunfoba & Okafor, 2015). In a study by Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fischer, Russel and Tippett (2008) on high school students in London, the incidence of cyberbullying was high because every student had a cell phone. The African continent is also encountering an influx of mobile phones, creating fertile ground for cyberbullying. A study by Burton and Mutongwizo (2009) attests to this trend. About 92.9% of the selected sample of young people in South Africa either owned or had access to a cell phone, and most of them had encountered one form or another of cyberbullying.

The findings of a research study conducted between 2006 and 2009 in 24 study locations across three African countries, namely Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, established that although access to ICTs among youth is increasing in poor communities, digital technologies such as mobile phones and laptops were symbols of success, and usage was based on shared access, rather than individual ownership (Porter, Hampshire, Abane, Munthali, Robson, Mashiri & Tanle, 2012). Shared ownership somehow deters some of the youth from freely using their gadgets for cyberbullying, which is contrary to what was happening in more developed parts of the world. A study by Faucher, Jackson and Cassidy (2014), which focused on four Canadian universities, revealed that individual ownership of mobile phones among poor and affluent students had increased, creating more room for the misuse of these gadgets to cyberbully others. In line with this, a study done in 2018 by Martin, Wang, Petty, Wang and Wilkins, focusing on two schools in the south-eastern region of the United States, revealed that students are among the frequent users of digital technologies, making them more prone to cyberviolence as either perpetrators or victims.

Although conducted on different continents at different times, the above three studies attest to the speed at which access to technologies is rapidly spreading. This is feared to have outpaced the policy efforts government and other stakeholders to monitor or control the harmful usage of these gadgets by young people, particularly in developing countries where dealing with cyberbullying is not among the top priorities, even though it is recognised as a problem (Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009). Developing countries still struggle to provide people with necessities such as infrastructure, hygiene improvement, education, and food (United Nations [UN], 2017). Given the above, this study is pertinent since it focuses on the issue in the context of a developing country.

Responses and reactions such as anger, anxiety and self-blame seem to be common among victims and vary depending on the context, background, gender and age, among other factors. Online harassment may cause psychological agitation, emotional distress, and other unexpected behavioural responses (Yahner, Dank, Zweig & Lachman, 2015). These can derail the victim's interest in being with others, such as their peers, who might be aware of the humiliation they have experienced after being cyberbullied and decide to mock them. This has a severe disruptive effect on the academic performance of the victim, who might refrain from attending classes to avoid meeting other students and or the perpetrator/s, which further has a negative impact on the developing nations' education priorities.

Some scholars, such as Musharraf & Anis-ul-Haque (2018), have revealed gendered responses and reactions to cyberbullying. They established that females were more vulnerable to being the victims of cyberbullying than males, who are prone to being the bullies. At the same time, Myers and Cowie (2017) ascertained that high-profile female students were more affected by gendered and sexualised

cyberbullying in universities than ordinary female students. High-profile students were defined as learners well known by other students, who thus garner much attention, such as models and student leaders. In contrast, bullies do not target male students.

A study conducted in 2017 by Orel, Campbell, Wozencroft, Leong and Kimpton exploring the coping strategy and intentions for cyberbullying at an Australian university shows that victimisation, status, and gender influence cyberbullying. The study revealed that female victims opted to seek help or block perpetrators as their coping strategies in response to cyberbullying, whereas males retaliated as a preferred coping strategy. In another study, Faucher, Jackson and Cassidy (2014) also assert that female students were more willing to share their experiences than male students. However, they were concerned as to why girls seem to have a greater interest in, or willingness to, engage with this topic than males do but failed to explore the issue in-depth. However, Raskauskas and Huynh (2015:119), in their study of students from the USA and other European countries, identified problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping as the three coping strategies employed by both male and female participants. They defined problem-focused strategies as the action taken by victims to try and change the stressful situation, either alone or in collaboration with others who can help alter the situation or provide support to cushion them from the adverse effects of the bullying. Emotion-focused coping strategies refer to situations when victims internalise the painful emotions, hence victims are likely to be more depressed. Avoidant-focused coping strategies include "distancing coping", in which one avoids or removes oneself from the stressful situation, either physically, by walking away or blocking upsetting messages.

Although studies on the gendered perspective on cyberbullying have been done before, only a few have delved deeper to unveil the possible motivations of these differences. While hinting at male and female students' different behaviours about cyberbullying, none of the scholars tried to establish why participants responded or reacted to cyberbullying the way they did. In addition, among all the studies that were carried out on gendered bullying, none were done in Africa. Most studies focused on students from developed nations such as Canada, the UK, the USA, Australia and Turkey. These studies, therefore, leave a gap in the literature on the gendered perspective on cyberbullying among students in African universities. This study was interested in the gendered perspective of cyberbullying among students in a rural African university. Thus, this research sought to understand the responses and reactions of students of different genders who have encountered bullying at the University of Venda, a rural university in South Africa. The study analysed the gendered responses of participants to explore cyberbullying perceptions, gendered coping strategies and the effects thereof. The findings would provide gender and context-specific recommendations to help find solutions to gendered cyberbullying among students in African universities.

GENDER AND CYBERBULLYING INTERPRETATIONS

Researchers have proposed disparities in how female and male students encounter and respond to cyberbullying. Females are assumed to be at the receiving end as victims, while males are labelled as perpetrators of cyberbullying (Faucher et al., 2014). In their study, Ringrose and Barajas (2011) posit that boys are likely to encounter cyberbullying through their search for pornographic content, hence they do not take offence at it, while girls consider receiving pornographic content as offensive, making them upset.

Some scholars argue that traditional and modern-day bullying occurs when there is an imbalance of power between the bully and the bullied (Menesini, et al., 2012; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Menesini, Nocentini, Palladino, Frisén, Berne, Ortega-Ruiz, Calmaestra, Scheithauer, Schultze-Krumbholz, Luik and Naruskov (2012:459) assert that "If the bully attacks and the victim is upset and does not know how to defend him or herself, then this creates the imbalance within the dyad and, by definition, a bullying attack". This usually leaves the female victims at the mercy of their attackers, while male victims, in some cases, can stand up to defend themselves (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018).

Many people are still grappling with understanding and defining cyberbullying; however, scholars put

forward different definitions. The first definition conceives cyberbullying as an "aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith et al., 2008:376). Cyberbullying is "inappropriate, unwanted social exchange behaviours initiated by a perpetrator via online or wireless communication technology and devices" (Piotrowski, 2012:45). Willard (2007:1) also defines cyberbullying as being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using digital technologies. In addition, Strom and Strom (2006:21) define cyberbullying as "electronic forms of peer harassment". Van Ouytsel, Lu, Ponnet, Walrave and Temple (2019:217) argue that cyberbullying includes sexting, which refers to sending sexually explicit content through a phone text message, photograph or video. When girls post semi-naked selfies to try and solicit their peers' attention, showing off that they are sexually attractive, they provide fertile ground for negative comments. This study, therefore, conceptualised cyberbullying as an unwarranted, unsolicited hurtful cyberattack by known or faceless perpetrators with or without the intention to offend the targeted person or people.

This study adopted the Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) to try and understand the gendered ways university students receive, process and respond to cyberbullying messages.

SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING THEORY

SIPT, propounded by Joseph Walther in 1992, seeks to understand how interpersonal communication occurs via computer technologies instead of face-to-face contact (Walther, Loh & Granka, 2005). SIPT emphasises that cultural factors are essential to any computer-mediated communication (CMC) interaction (Olaniran, Rodriguez & Williams, 2012:45). SIPT questions how children receive, process and respond to ordinary online messages or derogatory remarks.

Aggressive behaviour in children is related to how victims interpret the online messages they have received. Thus, what one person may consider an attack, another may not, depending on various social indicators such as age, gender, cultural beliefs, educational level and previous experiences, among others (Coccaro & Ridder, 2019). According to SIPT, how a bullied person proceeds to generate a behavioural response is informed by the mental operations deployed. Runions, Shapka, Dooley and Modecki (2013:10), quoting various scholars, propose that SIPT focuses on "the real-time cognitive and emotional processes that influence how children make sense of their social experiences and respond behaviourally to social stimuli". Dodge and Rabiner (2004) maintain that emotion is the energy that drives, organises, amplifies, and weakens cognitive activity. However, Joseph Walther argues that message interpretation is not a singular reaction but a complex process that goes through the following six steps:

(1) encoding (i.e., selective attention to internal and environmental cues such as facial cues and verbalizations); (2) interpretation and mental representation of these cues (e.g. attributions of intent, a function of attention to particular cues); (3) clarification of goals (i.e., selecting desired goals and outcome of the situation); (4) response access or construction (i.e., generation of possible responses); (5) response evaluation and decision (i.e., determination of the quality of each alternative response and evaluation of the likelihood that each alternative will produce the desired outcomes), and (6) behavioural enactment (i.e. behavioural response) (Coccaro & Ridder, 2019).

At the end of each process, the victim's database is updated. Everyone has a repository referred to as a database where experiences which influence their information-processing capabilities next time they receive new messages are stored. The stored experiences form associations, memories, and schemata which are used in processing new information received in the future (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

University of Venda (UNIVEN), located in the semi-rural historically disadvantaged town of Thohoyandou in Limpopo Province, was the selected institution for the case study to achieve the set objectives. UNIVEN draws most of its students from the surrounding rural communities. Limpopo province, where UNIVEN is, is known by many as the food basket of South Africa, producing 60% of the country's fruit, maize and

wheat. It is also one of the poorest provinces in the country – with almost 80% per cent of its population living below the national poverty line (Oishimaya, 2018).

Data for this study were collected from 2019 to 2020 through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires (consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions) targeted at male and female students who had fallen victim to cyberbullying after enrolling at UNIVEN. Volunteer sampling was used to select questionnaire respondents and interview participants. Volunteer sampling is a form of purposive sampling whereby participants voluntarily participate in a study. "It is used especially in sensitive research when it is necessary to rely on those who are willing to answer requests to provide data" (Jupp, 2006:323). A purposive sampling method involves identifying and selecting proficient and well-informed participants with a phenomenon of interest (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016:2). As a result, only male and female victims of cyberbullying were selected to participate in this study.

Initially, 120 (60 males and 60 females) respondents were selected from UNIVEN students who had encountered cyberbullying while enrolled at this tertiary institution. However, despite the researcher's rigorous effort to track the respondents, only 108 questionnaires were returned; female respondents returned 58 (97%) questionnaires and only 50 (83%) male respondents managed to return completed questionnaires.

Males were reluctant to participate in the face-to-face interviews. Most male participants preferred the anonymity offered by the questionnaire. However, the researcher conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with three male and six female victims of cyberbullying to supplement questionnaire data. Among the interviewees, two participants (male and female) were former beauty pageant winners who had also encountered cyberbullying after being crowned the beauty finalists at this University, while the rest were ordinary students. Although few students opted to be interviewed individually, both genders reached saturation points. Saturation is the stage at which interviewees are no longer giving new information from what has already been provided by other interviews (Hennink, Kaiser & Marconi, 2017:592). The interviewees did not know the questions before the interviews. The interviewees were not given the questions to avoid premeditated responses, which would negatively impact on the validity of the study findings.

Each interview took between 15 to 20 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' permission. The audio recorded data were later transcribed and coded for analysis, allowing the researcher to pick direct quotes from the interview data. While data from the questionnaire were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Data presentation includes tables and verbal descriptions to help the readers understand the findings. Alphabet letters were used as pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

FINDINGS

Reflections on the gendered responses of participants

Of the 108 participants who responded to the questionnaire, the 20 years and below age range were dominated by females, while older males were more dominant. For instance, 38 (66%) of the females were below 21 years old, while only 10 (20%) of the male participants were below 21 years of age. The breakdown of the participants' ages is in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Breakdown of the ages of the participants

Participants Gender		Age								Total	
		17-20		21-25		26-30		31-35			
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	Male	10	20	14	28	22	44	4	8	50	100
	Female	38	66	17	29	3	5	0	0	58	100
Total		48	44	31	29	25	23	4	4	108	100

While all the female respondents encountered cyberbullying through their cell phones, 30 (60%) of the male participants said they experienced cyberbullying through their computers or laptops, with only 20 (40%) encountering cyberbullying through their cell phones. Although technologies vary considerably across different genders, Roberts, Yaya and Manolis (2014:254) state that nowadays, both male and female users are driven by the desire to connect socially and now spend comparatively more time with technology and less with fellow humans, which renders them vulnerable to cyberattacks.

The gender disparities in technology choices revealed by questionnaire respondents intrigued the researcher to probe interviewees. Female interviewee A said, *"I was bullied using the cell phone since the cyberbullying started while I was being crowned a modelling winner. The audiences used their cell phones to take bad photos, which they started sharing on the University Facebook page."* Female interviewee C believed females use cell phones more than computers since they are portable and user-friendly. However, Male Interviewee B reasoned, *"I prefer using my laptop more than my phone. The computer helps me to avoid destructions (sic) of social media chats on my cell phone and which are addictive."* A Female respondent argued, *"We are not addicted because we make time for who we want to talk to or what we want to talk about."* Female Interviewee F argued that, indeed, most female students enjoy spending time on social media. *"Most gals waste too much study time chatting, and some can't resist responding to WhatsApp messages during lectures which disturbs their concentration, so I do agree that these gadgets are addictive"*, she lamented. A study by Bain and Rice (2006) contends that females view the computer as a tool, less interesting and more difficult to use, while males view the computer as more of a toy for fun. Thus, women utilise the cell phone more since they mainly see it as a social tool of communication than men, who focus on its instrumental use (Roberts, Yaya & Manolis, 2014).

The questionnaire responses showed that even though all the participants admitted to being active WhatsApp and Facebook users, not all the participants used Instagram and Twitter. Twitter was the least popular social networking platform among UNIVEN students. Data from the questionnaires revealed that 49 (85%) females compared to 32 (64%) males were active Instagram users, whereas 27 (54%) males and only 18 (31%) females had Twitter accounts. However, even though cyberbullying among UNIVEN students transpired through the various social media platforms, not all users encountered cyberbullying on all the platforms they used. Also, some victims were cyberbullied on more than one social media platform.

Table 2: Platforms that were used for cyberbullying

Participants Gender	WhatsApp		Instagram		Twitter		Facebook	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Female	30	52	43	74	0	0	32	55
Male	22	44	0	0	7	14	23	46

The interview responses revealed the same traits as shown by questionnaire respondents in Table 2 above. The female participants said that although cyberbullying was initiated on one platform, it quickly spread to other platforms, since users tend to share messages using different social media applications. *"This triples the humiliation"*, bemoaned female respondent E. The three male participants concurred to being bullied mainly via Facebook, where perpetrators wrote rude comments or girls sent seductive messages. While two of the male interviewees said they also received rude remarks on Twitter, one received an attack via a WhatsApp class group.

The disparities between male and female users of Twitter, where females are less active on Twitter than males, are also mentioned by Messiah, Vikatos and Benevenuto (2017). They asserted that there are fewer black and white female users on Twitter than females of Asian descent. Whereas the few active female tweeps tend to follow males and not fellow female users, males generally follow males, which further lowers female activities on this platform.

Gendered cyberbullying techniques

The questionnaire data showed that most females were victimised via social media applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook for their skin tone and physical appearance. Thirty (52%) females and only 4 (8%) males were insulted for their skin tone and physical appearance. The questionnaire data also revealed that 10 (17%) of the female participants were told that they were obese and shapeless, and 9 (16%) of the females said they were labelled sex workers when they posted their pictures on social media because of their clothing choices and light complexion. In contrast, only 2 (4%) of the 50 male respondents received attacks about their weight, and no male participant reported being called sexually promiscuous. Six (10%) females were stalked, and 3 (5%) said their sex tapes were leaked by their previous partners, whereas no males admitted to being stalked or having sex tapes leaked. However, males reported mainly being attacked via Facebook and WhatsApp, and none mentioned Instagram. Seventeen (34%) male participants said they were called thick or academically weak through the WhatsApp class groups and Facebook posts, and 10 (20%) received comments that they were too short, especially when they shared their pictures on social media. Twelve (24%) males were called drunkards, 3 (6%) said they were insulted for being economically poor and 2 (4%) highlighted receiving xenophobic insults via social media, whereas no females indicated that they had experienced such attacks.

Interview data also revealed similar traits to the questionnaire responses. Male interviewee A said, *"Almost every local universities shared the ugly photos taken during the pageant saying, look at these winners; how can the judges choose these kinds of people"* he recounted. Male interviewee B said he was insulted by the class WhatsApp group for raising irrelevant points. His groupmates took this to his Facebook page, where he was insulted for posting pictures and enjoying time with friends, yet he struggled to cope at university. Though Male Respondent A maintained that when news reporters said he was bullied for being short, he felt they were trying to balance their story because perpetrators were targeting his female counterpart and not him. *"The haters said I was unbecoming and did not deserve to have been crowned the face of the University since I am too dark and that I was wearing a horrendous*

dress at the pageant”, Female Respondent A bemoaned. She further explained how a local comedian took the bullying to his show, where he mockingly commented that the crowned lady was a joke; instead of modelling, she should go to the bush to fetch firewood. All the other females interviewed claimed body shaming was central to their attacks, since the perpetrators felt they were not beautiful due to their skin tone and physical appearance. Female Respondent D said, “usually, the smaller ethnic group endures a lot of attacks from the bigger and more dominant groups. I am Pedi, and here we are fewer since we are more dominant in the Capricorn district. Each time I post my picture, they always call me a prostitute. At the same time, some say I skin bleach.” Of the same view, Chauke (2020:76) asserts, “the minority groups are often perceived as inadequate and are also given a subordinate status that signals their lack of functionality in a given society”.

PREVIOUS BULLYING

The questionnaire respondents were asked if they had a history of bullying and if it related to the current cyberbullying encounters. Fifty (86%) of the female questionnaire respondents and 30 (60%) male respondents agreed to previous bullying. The table below shows the participants’ bullying history.

Table 3: Participants’ who had a bullying history

Participants Gender		Method of bullying				Total	
		Physical		Cyberbullying			
		N	%	N	%	N	%
	Male	20	40	10	20	30	60
	Female	45	78	5	9	50	86
Total		65	60	15	14	80	74

Data showed that most victims of cyberbullying had a history of being bullied. Most of the participants have repeatedly encountered bullying even though the methods of bullying have changed from traditional to cyberbullying for most victims. Revealing the same trends, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) established that most youths were orthodox bullying victims, and most cyberbullies were traditional bullies.

Interview respondents were also asked, “Before this bullying, have you ever encountered bullying? If yes, explain”. All the female interviewees acknowledged to have encountered physical bullying from childhood. “I have always been referred to as the ugly one even in our family, so I am not surprised with what is happening, but it still hurts” said Female Respondent D, sobbing. “Many people openly said I was ugly because I look like my dad and not my mom” bemoaned Female Respondent A. Even though Male Respondents A and C said they did not have a history of being bullied, Respondent A said he got used to being told that he was short since childhood. “Hence being told I am short now is not really bullying because I am fully aware of it” he maintained. Male Respondent B said he had been called names because he is from a minority ethnic group.

EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING

Table 4: Victims' responses/reactions to cyberbullying

Reaction	Embarrassed		Scared		Angry		Felt ugly		Revenge		Cried		Suicidal		Indifferent	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Female	42	72	14	24	8	14	18	31	15	26	40	69	5	9	2	4
Male	20	40	2	4	25	50	1	2	30	60	8	16	0	0	10	20

In Table 4 above, it is reflected that some respondents identified more than one reaction. For instance, the five female respondents who identified as suicidal identified other responses as well. All the respondents who were suicidal were embarrassed and cried, and one also mentioned that the bullying angered her. The results showed contrasts between male and female responses. For instance, more females cried, felt unattractive and were ashamed than males. However, more male victims were angered by the attacks and thus felt the urge to take revenge, unlike the female students. These emotional reactions were also revealed in a study by Harris-Cik and Steyn (2018), stating that girls experience more negative consequences of cyberbullying than boys. While Barrett, Robin, Pietromonaco and Eyssell (1998:556) posit, "Women are believed to experience and express most emotions more intensely and more frequently than are men; men if they are emotional at all, are believed to experience and express more anger."

The researcher further probed the interviewees on how they felt after being bullied. Female Respondent A said, "This bullying affected me. I felt ashamed and scared. I could not walk around freely for fear of further attacks." Contrary to Female Respondent A's comment, Male interviewee A maintained that he was not bullied, so he had no reason to be affected by the bullying. He said he did not mind standing with his partner, who was being bullied after the pageant. Thus, he rejected that he was personally attacked, even though he agreed that some perpetrators said he was too short. Male interviewee B said, "To me, the attack made me angry because it was uncalled for. I wanted to meet the faceless person and revenge, but the details were fake, so I resorted to cyber-revenge." The other female respondents, B, C, D, E and F, stated similar feelings to those in table 4. Respondents C and F said they felt suicidal after the attack. However, Male Respondent C said he felt nothing and ignored the attacks. He said, "People who choose to cyberattack me are aware that what they are saying is not true so why should I worry, genuine people are supposed to come and tell me to my face". A study by Forssell (2016) revealed that women are more likely than men to label their negative experiences as bullying, which explains some of the interview responses.

The interviewees were asked if the bullying they encountered affected their studies. Female Respondent A said, "Yes, it did. I even failed my first test after the bullying because I failed to study like I usually do, since I was afraid to walk alone." Female Respondents C, E and F also said the bullying affected their studies. Female Respondent D said, "I was ashamed, so I decided to skip group discussions." Male respondent B said he felt ashamed and missed some lessons, which made him fail two of his modules. However, Male Respondents A and C maintained that they were not affected by the attacks.

VICTIMS' COPING STRATEGIES

Table 5: Victims' coping strategies

Participants gender	Blocked		Closed account		Ignore		Isolate myself		Positive attitude		Revenge Physically		Revenge online		Sought for help		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	4	8	5	10	8	16	2	4	3	6	24	48	4	8	0	0	50	100
Female	7	12	0	0	0	0	10	17	0	0	0	0	10	17	31	54	58	100

As shown in Table 5 above, most male participants responded differently to the cyberbullying than their female counterparts, who were mainly open to seeking assistance from friends, family and staff members and divulging their experiences to the researcher. These findings align with Harris-Cik and Steyn's (2018) claim that although there are instances where male and female victims respond in the same way, boys and girls may follow different decision-making strategies due to the variance in their emotional processing capacity and ability to control their feelings, hence their social reaction pathway differs.

The coping strategies for male and female participants varied per the interview responses. For instance, while female respondents alluded to being "broken" at first by some of the comments and sought out help, male Respondents A and C maintained that they did not need a coping strategy. Instead, they just ignored the attacks. Respondent A said, *"I wasn't bullied. The attacks were mainly on my female counterpart; the journalist who wrote the first article on the cyberbullying incident brought out the issue that people were saying I was short to balance the article."* However, as the interview progressed, he alluded to the fact that there were comments about his height that went viral. *"Before I joined the pageant, I knew I am short, so I was prepared"*, said Male Respondent A. The awareness of his flaws helped him cope with the cyberbullying he encountered after winning the beauty pageant. However, Male Respondent B, who accepted that he experienced cyberbullying, said he revenge-cyberbullied the attackers, since he did not know who they were. Raskauskas & Huynh (2015) propound that victims who refuse to acknowledge that they were bullied use denial as a coping strategy and do not seek help and hence may suffer severe depression.

DISCUSSION

The development of social media sites is often endorsed as democratic spaces that foster public discussion. Many applauded, appreciated and treasured this innovation for the speedy dissemination of information, yet cyberbullying has continued to advance and transform on these platforms, making them dangerous.

The SIPT adopted in this study propounds that age, gender, and cultural factors such as patriarchal beliefs predominant among South Africans influence how participants perceive, interpret and respond to cyberbullying. In this study, female participants were generally younger, more open, and willing to speak out about their cyberbullying encounters, unlike their male counterparts, which somewhat confirms the SIPT assumptions. Furthermore, it is generally believed among South Africans that females mature faster

than males, which could be the reason why younger female participants were bold enough to speak out about their bullying encounters, in contrast with their male counterparts (Dawes, Bray, Kvalsvig, Kafaar, Rama & Richter, 2004:60; Kotze, 2019:14). Contrary, Goyal, Blazey, Su, Couture, Durbin, Bateman, Benzinger, Morris, Raichle and Vlassenko (2019) aver that mentally females do not mature faster; instead, their brains appear to be about three years younger than the male brain of the same chronological age. In line with SIPT, this study can safely claim that gender and cultural beliefs have contributed to the disparities between male and female participants' levels of openness.

The male and female participants also received, processed and responded to cyberbullying differently. Where females preferred cell phones, males preferred computers; when female students were mostly hurt and cried, male students mainly felt anger and fought back. The type of attacks inflicted on victims also differed. Females were mainly cyberbullied through body shaming, stalking, and character assassination, while males were mostly called short, dumb and drunkards. Thus, the attacks were directly and indirectly influenced by the social beliefs of the study participants, which maintain that beauty and character matter more for females than for males, the latter being exempted from terms such as "prostitute", "ugly", and "shapeless".

Another interesting issue raised by Barrett et al. (1998), which aligns with the findings of this study, is that females were willing to disclose their emotions and seek help, while their male counterparts opted to deal with their feelings individually and opting for revenge. This behaviour is also in line with patriarchal socio-cultural beliefs, which assert that women are weaker than men. Patriarchal beliefs also assume that women are more emotional and cannot fight back (Hossen, 2020). Although participants' responses aligned with these gender stereotypes, various scholars reject the view that women are emotional and weak. Instead, they believe women are oppressed and disempowered by patriarchal cultures. For instance, Barrett et al. (1998:557), argue that when women recall their experiences, they are influenced by the socially accepted beliefs: "I am a woman, and women are emotional, therefore I must be emotional, whereas men think, I am a man, and men are not emotional, therefore I must not be emotional!" Thus, the responses of female participants to cyberbullying in this study can be ascribed to how they were socialised. However, though women are socialised to behave in certain ways, they are also active recipients who can also be perpetrators (Netshitangani, 2019:27).

The SIPT propounds that how a person who has been bullied proceeds to generate a behavioural response is informed by the mental operations deployed. By crying, speaking out about their pain and seeking help, female participants managed to deal with the pain constructively. In contrast, male participants chose to ignore cyberbullying, keeping it to themselves or denying it, thereby failing to control their anger. However, they ended up responding harshly to their perpetrators by fighting back.

CONCLUSION

Even though the cyberbullied participants used different strategies to cope with the attacks, they could not permanently delete the remnants of the bullying incidents they endured, which correlate with the SIPT adopted for this study. However, the most exciting finding of this study is the gendered interpretations and responses to cyberbullying. This study revealed how female and male students intentionally or innocently conformed to social beliefs regarding gender-stereotyped reactions to bullying. Females felt embarrassed, scared, cried and were open about their attacks to get help more than their male counterparts, which aligns with the weaker and vulnerable social patriarchal stereotypical characteristics associated with the female gender. Contrary, some male participants were cyber resilient. Several male students opted to confront their attackers physically, which is expected of men in the African context. The actions of females and males in this study aligned with the expected social behaviours revealed by other scholars in various studies analysed. Thus, the main question emerging from these findings, namely "What is the motive behind responses and reactions of different genders to cyberbullying?" remains. Therefore, more studies are required on this phenomenon to unravel why participants responded in line with sociocultural beliefs and stereotypes.

Note

In this study “youth”, “students” and “young people” were used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people. While “female students”, “females” and “women” were used interchangeably to refer to female participants and male participants were called “men” or “males”.

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