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Cyberbullying in high school: a study of Soweto high school learners' behaviours and beliefs about the phenomenon

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Abstract

This study explored high school learners' beliefs and behaviours with regards to the phenomenon of cyberbullying. The Social Learning, Social Dominance, and the Social Presence Theories were used in an attempt to understand the learners' behaviours and beliefs in relation to cyberbullying. The study adopted a quantitative approach. A survey research design was used to collect data. Data was collected from 221 Grade 10, 11 and 12 learners (104 males and 116 females) aged between 14 years old and 21 years old. Data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were employed to explore how learners react to cyberbullying, what learners do when they witness cyberbullying, their perceptions about the phenomenon, and the reasons cybervictims choose not to report the incidents. A t-test was employed to determine if there were significant relationships between gender and learners' cyberbullying experience. Furthermore, a One way ANOVA was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the grades on how learners experience cyberbullying.

The results revealed that most learners found masquerading and outing as the most upsetting forms of cyberbullying. Most learners (23.5%) indicated reporting the cyberbullying to someone who can help the victim while a small fraction (4.5%) stated that they joined in the cyberbullying. For the most part, learners agreed that if someone was being hurt by cyberbullying, it was important to tell a responsible adult, however, most (73.3%) also contradicted themselves by indicating that things that happened online should stay online. This revelation was important in highlighting that due to the learners' beliefs, most incidents may go unreported. Furthermore, it was noted that most learners did not report cyberbullying incidents because they were of the opinion that adults would not be able to help them. Such findings can inform parents and school authorities to be pro-active when dealing with cyberbullying in order to gain the trust of the youth. The results of the study further suggested no gender differences to how learners experience cyberbullying as a whole except that females reacted by being more upset with regards to cyberbullying compared to males. No grade differences were noted on how learners perceived and experienced cyberbullying.

When designing intervention strategies against cyberbullying, policy makers should take cognisance that most learners do not report cyberbullying incidents to parents and teachers, prefer to keep online activities within the cyber environment, and some witnesses tend to join in the cyberbullying perpetration. Based on this, it can be seen that parents need to have open

communication with their children about online activities and use in order to build rapport and trust. Furthermore, they need to acquaint themselves with technological gadgets used by their children to effectively supervise their children's online activities and provide positive support when cyberbullying occurs. On the other hand, the schools need to provide workshops and training for the teachers and school administrators with regards to effective ways to deal with cyberbullying incidents. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education policy makers should include anti-cyberbullying programmes for schools aimed at shifting attitudes of learners towards willingness to intervene by reporting cyberbullying incidents. Thus, a collaborative effort from learners, parents, school authorities, and policy makers is needed to curb and prevent cyberbullying incidents in schools.

Key Words: belief, behaviour, cyberbullying, cybervictim, bystander, anonymity.