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Title: Social Media Driven Child Abuse; A Case Study of Mbare

DECLARATION

I, Tinashe Mwasoya studying for the Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Social Work, cognizant of the facts that plagiarism is a serious academic offence and that falsifying information is a breach of ethics in Social Work research, truthfully declare that:

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Thank you all.

APPROVAL FORM

I certify that I supervised **Tinashe Mwasoya (B223953B)** in carrying out this research titled: **Social media driven child abuse** in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Science, Honours Degree in Social Work and recommend that it proceeds for examination.

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Chairperson of the Department Board of Examiners

The departmental board of examiners is satisfied that this dissertation report meets the examination requirements of a Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Social Work and therefore I recommend to Bindura University of Science Education to accept this research project by **Tinashe Mwasoya** titled: **Social media driven child abuse** in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor of Science, Honours Degree in Social work.

Chairperson

Name:……..

Signature……

Date: **11/06/ 2026**

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my beloved parents, whose unwavering support, trust and belief in me have constant source of strength. Your faith and encouragement even during the most difficult times have carried me through. To my siblings Mitchell and Michael thank you for your continuous love and support through this journey. Finally, my friend Aaron your steadfast encouragement and presence have meant more than words can express. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the intersection of social media and child abuse in Mbare, a high-density urban suburb of Harare, Zimbabwe. Guided by Systems Theory and social constructivism, the research employed a case study design with semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving 25 participants, including children aged 10–18 years, caregivers, teachers, social workers, community health workers, law enforcement officers, and community leaders. The study addressed three objectives: to examine the forms of social media-driven child abuse prevalent in Mbare; to analyze the implications of such abuse on children's wellbeing; and to propose social work-related interventions. Findings revealed that cyberbullying, online grooming and sexual exploitation, exposure to pornographic content, sextortion, and doxing are prevalent forms of abuse affecting children through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. The study documented severe psychosocial consequences including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, social withdrawal, and significant educational disruption manifesting as declining academic performance, school avoidance, and disengagement. Structural vulnerabilities including poverty, limited parental digital literacy, weak institutional responses, and inadequate legal frameworks were identified as key enablers of children's online victimization. The research recommends multi-level social work interventions encompassing community-based digital literacy programs, strengthened counselling and psychosocial support services, legal and policy reform, school-based child protection initiatives, and enhanced platform accountability. The study contributes context-specific evidence to the growing body of literature on digital child protection in sub-Saharan Africa and underscores the urgency of integrating digital safety into mainstream social work practice, policy, and education in Zimbabwe.

ACRONYMS

UNICEF — United Nations Children's Fund

WHO — World Health Organization

ITU — International Telecommunication Union

POTRAZ — Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe

NCMEC — National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

IWF — Internet Watch Foundation

ECPAT — End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International

IAWG — Inter-Agency Working Group

APC — Association for Progressive Communications

MISA — Media Institute of Southern Africa

ZIMSTAT — Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency

NCPC — National Child Protection Committee

IFSW — International Federation of Social Workers

OECD — Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

GSMA — Global System for Mobile Communications Association

INTERPOL — International Criminal Police Organization

IAC — Internet Advisory Committee

AU — African Union

CEOP — Child Exploitation and Online Protection (UK)

NGO / NGOs — Non-Governmental Organization(s)

C-SEMA — Tanzania's National Child Helpline

ZICOP — Zimbabwe Inter-Agency Committee on Online Protection

UNCRC — United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

CRC — Convention on the Rights of the Child

CESA — Continental Education Strategy for Africa

CDPA — Cyber and Data Protection Act (Chapter 12:07), Zimbabwe, 2021

FGD / FGDs — Focus Group Discussion(s)

TIC — Trauma-Informed Care

SAMHSA — Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

PTA — Parent-Teacher Association

AI — Artificial Intelligences

MWC — Mobile World Congress

Wi-Fi — Wireless Fidelity

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to assess the forms of social media driven child abuse, its implications to children living in Mbare and possible social work interventions to address this challenge. Social media platforms once considered as tools of connection and offer remarkable opportunities for education, civic engagement, and social development but however it simultaneously created new and evolving pathways through children experiencing harm, exploitation, and abuse. In sub-Saharan Africa, the rapid expansion of mobile internet access has accelerated children's entry into digital spaces, often without the parallel development of digital literacy, safety infrastructure, or culturally grounded protective mechanisms. Zimbabwe, like many countries in the region, has experienced significant growth in children social media engagement, yet remains critically under resourced in terms of child centered digital protection policies, specialized law enforcement capacity, and community based prevention programs. High density urban communities such as Mbare characterized by poverty, overcrowding, limited institutional support, and complex family structures present particularly acute contexts in which the risks of social media driven child abuse converge with preexisting social vulnerabilities. This study is situated at the intersection of child protection, digital technology, and social work practice. It responds to an urgent need for localized, empirical evidence that can inform contextually appropriate interventions, policies, and professional practice responses to the emerging crisis of online child abuse. By focusing specifically on Mbare, the research seeks to move beyond generalized narratives of digital risk and generate nuanced understanding of how social media platforms facilitate abuse, how such abuse affects children across psychological, educational, and social domains, and what role social work can play in prevention, intervention, and advocacy. The following background situates this inquiry within broader global, regional, and national trends, establishing the rationale for a focused examination of social media-driven child abuse in this particular

1.1Background of the Study

This study seeks to critically examine the effects of social media on children, with particular emphasis on its intersection with various forms of child abuse. While social media has become an integral part of modern communication and learning, its rapid expansion has outpaced the capacity of caregivers, institutions, and regulatory systems to adequately safeguard children.

In many developing countries, caregivers often lack the digital literacy, time, or resources required to effectively monitor children's online activities (UNICEF, 2022). As a result, children are increasingly navigating complex digital environments with minimal guidance, thereby exposing them to significant risks. Social media, when used irresponsibly or without supervision, can be harmful despite its potential benefits such as access to information, educational resources, and social connectivity. Children are now exposed to a range of harmful experiences including cyberbullying, online sexual exploitation, grooming, peer violence, and "sharenting," where parents or guardians overshare children's personal information online (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). These forms of digital abuse are associated with serious psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, addiction, and suicidal ideation (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020). Therefore, addressing the negative implications of social media use among children is not only a social imperative but also a critical step toward safeguarding their long-term well-being and development.

In the Western context, a growing body of literature highlights both the transformative and detrimental effects of social media on children's lives. Scholars widely acknowledge that while social media has reshaped communication patterns and enhanced peer interaction, it has simultaneously created unprecedented opportunities for exploitation and abuse (Boyd, 2020; Livingstone, 2021). For instance, Livingstone (2021) reports that approximately 82% of children aged 10–17 in the United States and Europe engage with social media platforms daily, illustrating the extent of digital immersion among minors. However, this high level of engagement is accompanied by significant risks, as 29% of these children report experiencing online harassment or grooming, while 17% have encountered explicit content such as pornography. The UNICEF (2022) Global Online Safety Report further reinforces these concerns, indicating that one in five children globally experiences some form of online abuse before reaching adulthood. The anonymity, accessibility, and global reach of digital platforms significantly increase the vulnerability of minors, allowing perpetrators to exploit children across geographical boundaries (Boyd, 2020). In response, Western governments have begun implementing stricter regulatory frameworks; for example, the United Kingdom's Online Safety Act (2023) aims to hold technology companies accountable for protecting users, particularly children, from harmful content. Despite these efforts, scholars argue that policy interventions alone are insufficient without parallel efforts in digital education and parental involvement (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

Across Africa, the rapid growth of internet access and social media use among young people has introduced both opportunities and challenges. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2023), internet penetration among African youth increased significantly from 18% in 2013 to 43% in 2023, reflecting a decade of accelerated digital adoption. While this expansion has improved access to information, education, and economic opportunities, it has also exposed children to various online risks. Empirical studies conducted in countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya reveal that between 30% and 35% of children under the age of 18 have encountered online threats, cyberbullying, or explicit content (Abubakar, 2021; Moyo, 2022). In Kenya, for instance, the Communications Authority (2022) found that 27% of children had been approached online by strangers, while 12% had unknowingly shared personal or sensitive information, highlighting gaps in digital awareness and online safety practices. Scholars across the African context emphasize that weak regulatory frameworks, limited enforcement mechanisms, and low levels of parental digital literacy exacerbate children's vulnerability (UNICEF, 2022). Furthermore, socio-economic disparities often limit access to digital safety tools and education, making it difficult for families and communities to effectively protect children in online spaces. Consequently, there is a growing consensus that addressing online child abuse in Africa requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, educators, families, and technology companies.

In Zimbabwe, the proliferation of social media among young people reflects broader global and regional trends, but with unique local dynamics. The Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ, 2023) reports that approximately 54% of youths aged 13–19 are active social media users, with usage continuing to rise annually. Platforms such as WhatsApp (89%), Facebook (76%), and TikTok (63%) dominate the digital landscape, serving as primary channels for communication, entertainment, and information sharing. While the integration of digital technologies into the education system particularly through curriculum reforms that encourage the use of mobile devices represents progress, it has also increased children's exposure to online risks (POTRAZ, 2023). Childline Zimbabwe (2023) reports that 21% of child abuse cases in urban areas now involve social media interactions, indicating a significant shift in the nature and context of child protection concerns. In high-density areas such as Mbare, educators and social workers have observed increasing incidents of cyberbullying, grooming, exposure to pornography, and doxing, where children's personal information and images are shared without consent. These practices not only violate

children's rights to privacy and safety but also have long-term psychological and social consequences. The situation is further compounded by limited awareness among caregivers and inadequate institutional capacity to monitor and regulate children's online activities.
Given these developments, there is an urgent need for targeted interventions that address the intersection between social media use and child abuse.

This study, therefore, aims to generate comprehensive insights into how social media contributes to various forms of child abuse while also identifying practical strategies to mitigate these risks. By examining both global and local perspectives, the research seeks to inform policy development, enhance community awareness, and support the efforts of government agencies, educators, and child protection organizations. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to the creation of safer digital environments that promote the healthy development and well-being of children in Zimbabwe and beyond.

1.2Problem statement

The growing popularity of social media among children in Mbare has created risks for abuse and exploitation of children. Reports from local NGOs, Childline Zimbabwe (2024) and schools indicate that minors or children are being manipulated, exposed to doxing, online grooming, sextortion, live streaming abuse as well as sexual exploitation, cyberbullying among other abuses. According to Alice Campbell (2025) this has caused severe mental health issues in children such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. This has also result in physical harm thus self-injury, addiction, social isolation and anti-behaviors such as addiction to social media, theft due to peer pressure, school dropout among other negative Impacts. Despite national laws such as the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021), enforcement and awareness remain minimal. The lack of localized empirical research has left a knowledge gap regarding how social media facilitates child abuse and how communities can respond effectively. What is the standard vs what is the reality This study seeks to analyze the extent, patterns, and implications of social-media-related child abuse in Mbare

1.3Aim

The aim of this study seeks to examine social media driven child abuse in Mbare, Harare

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the forms of social media child, abuse prevalent in Mbare, Zimbabwe.

2. To analyze the implications of social media child, abuse in Mbare, Zimbabwe.

3. To proffer possible social work related interventions to address abuse of children through social media in Zimbabwe.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What forms of social media child abuse are prevalent in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

2. What are the implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

3. What social work related intervention can be instituted to address abuse of children through social media in Zimbabwe?

1.6 Assumptions of the Study

1. It is assumed that in Mbare, there is high social media penetration and widespread among children and adolescents

2.It is assumed that children in Mbare are vulnerable to online exploitation and abuse, particularly those with limited parental supervision.

3.It is assumed that many cases of social media related child abuse in Mbare go un reported and that the victim may not have access to support services.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to the expanding body of academic knowledge on the intersection between technology, child welfare, and social protection within the Zimbabwean context. By focusing specifically on Mbare, a densely populated and low-income urban community, the research offers context-specific insights into how social media platforms influence patterns and experiences of child abuse. Unlike many global studies that tend to generalize online safety risks, this study situates the problem within the socio-economic and

cultural realities of Zimbabwe. It critically examines how factors such as poverty, limited digital literacy, weak parental supervision, and evolving social norms shape children's online interactions and vulnerabilities. In doing so, the study fills a significant gap in locally grounded research and provides a nuanced understanding of how global digital trends manifest in specific communities.

Secondly, the study holds considerable value for policymakers and government institutions responsible for child protection and digital regulation. Key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Public Service, Labor and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, and the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) stand to benefit from the findings. The research provides empirical evidence that can inform the formulation of targeted child protection policies, digital safety frameworks, and awareness programmers aimed at safeguarding minors in online spaces. Furthermore, the study offers practical insights that can strengthen the implementation and enforcement of existing legal frameworks, particularly the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021). By identifying gaps in prevention mechanisms, reporting systems, and institutional responses, the research supports the development of more effective, responsive, and contextually relevant policy interventions.

Thirdly, the study is highly beneficial to practitioners who interact directly with children on a daily basis, including educators, parents, and social workers. By providing a deeper understanding of the nature, prevalence, and evolving forms of online abuse such as cyberbullying, grooming, doxing, and exposure to harmful content the research equips these stakeholders with the knowledge needed to identify early warning signs and respond appropriately. For educators and community leaders in Mbare, the findings can serve as a foundation for designing school-based interventions, digital literacy programs, and community awareness campaigns that promote safe and responsible use of social media. Additionally, parents and guardians will be better positioned to guide and monitor children's online behavior, thereby reducing their exposure to potential risks.

Lastly, the study carries broader social significance as it promotes a culture of shared responsibility in protecting children from emerging digital threats. By engaging community members in Mbare, the research encourages open dialogue around sensitive and often overlooked issues such as online grooming, sexual exploitation, and cyberbullying. This participatory approach not only raises awareness but also fosters community-driven solutions

that are sustainable and culturally relevant. The recommendations derived from this study are expected to contribute not only to national child protection strategies but also to the development of safer, more informed, and resilient communities. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of collective action in adapting to the rapidly evolving digital environment while ensuring the safety and well-being of children

1.8 Key definition's

1.8.1 Child

According to WHO any person under the age of 18 years

1.8.2 Child Abuse

Any form of physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological maltreatment, neglect, or exploitation of a person under the age of 18 that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity. In the context of this study, child abuse encompasses both traditional offline forms and emerging digital manifestations facilitated through social media platforms.

1.8.3 Social Media

Internet-based applications, websites, and digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange content, ideas, and communication in virtual communities and networks. For the purposes of this study, social media includes platforms commonly used by children in Zimbabwe, specifically WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

1.8.4 Social Media-Driven Child Abuse

Forms of child abuse that are initiated, facilitated, amplified, or sustained through social media platforms and digital communication technologies. This includes but is not limited to cyberbullying, online grooming, sextortion, exposure to harmful or explicit content, doxing, online sexual exploitation, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

1.8.5 Digital Literacy

The knowledge, skills, and competencies required to safely, effectively, and critically use digital technologies, including the ability to navigate social media platforms, understand privacy settings, recognize online risks, protect personal information, evaluate digital content, and respond appropriately to harmful online interactions.

1.9 Chapter summary

Chapter One provided a comprehensive introduction and orientation to the study on social media driven child abuse in Mbare, Harare. Its establish the research context, highlighting the rapid proliferation of social media use among children globally and in Zimbabwe specifically, and identifying the protection gaps that have emerged as digital adoption has outpaced regulatory and institutional safeguarding capacity. The problem statement articulated the urgent need for this study by detailing the specific risks facing children in Mbare including cyberbullying, online grooming, sextortion, doxing, exposure to explicit content, and live-streaming abuse and identifying the structural barriers that compound children's vulnerability, such as poverty, limited parental digital literacy, weak enforcement of existing legislation, and the absence of community level protective mechanisms. Three corresponding research questions were formulated to guide the inquiry, and three assumptions underlying the study were articulated. The significance of the study was elaborated across multiple dimensions academic, policy, practice, and social demonstrating how the research would contribute to knowledge, inform legislative and institutional responses, equip practitioners and caregivers with evidence-based insights, and promote community dialogue and collective responsibility for child protection in digital spaces.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Social media has become integral to children's daily communication, learning, entertainment, and peer interaction. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and online games now shape how children form friendships and participate in social life. However, these same digital spaces have created new routes through which children can be abused. UNICEF notes that children face technology-facilitated exploitation, cyberbullying, online hate, manipulation, misuse of personal data, and harmful commercial practices in digital spaces.

The problem is escalating as internet access expands globally. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2024) reported that 5.5 billion people were online in 2024, representing 68% of the world population, though access remains unequal: 93% in high-income countries compared with only 27% in low-income countries. Youth are particularly exposed ITU (2025) found that 82% of people aged 15–24 used the internet globally, compared with 72% among the rest of the population. In low-income countries, young people are 1.9 times more likely to use the internet than other population groups. For a community such as Mbare, this is relevant because children may be active online while caregivers have weaker digital skills, less monitoring capacity, or limited awareness of online risks. This literature review is organized according to the three study objectives. The first part examines forms of social media-driven child abuse. The second analyses implications for children. The third reviews social work-related interventions.

2.1 Theoretical frameworks

A theoretical framework according to Imends (2014) serves as the conceptual lens through which a researcher views and interprets their study, providing a structure that guide the entire research process from problem formulation to data analysis and interpretation. It involves establishing theories, principles and models from existing scholarship that under pin the investigation enabling the researcher to situate their study within broad academic discourse and build upon previous knowledge rather than starting from a vacuum, this study is going to employ systems theory by Lundwig Bertalaffy.

2.1.1Systems Theory

The study proposes to use Systems Theory. Systems Theory, developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) and further applied to social work by Bronfenbrenner (1979) through the ecological systems model, views individuals not in isolation but as part of interconnected systems that mutually influence one another. In the context of this study, Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how social media-driven child abuse in Mbare emerges from the dynamic interaction of multiple systems, namely the child's microsystem (family, peers, school), the mesosystem (relationships between these environments), the exosystemic (community institutions, digital platforms), and the macro system (national policies, cultural norms, and legal frameworks). This theory is particularly relevant because it allows the researcher to examine how structural vulnerabilities at each systemic level, including poverty, limited parental digital literacy, weak institutional responses, and inadequate regulatory frameworks, interact to heighten children's exposure to online abuse. Systems Theory also directs attention toward intervention at multiple levels simultaneously, supporting the argument that addressing social media-driven child abuse in Mbare requires coordinated responses from families, schools, community structures, social work practitioners, and policymakers rather than focusing on the individual child alone. Furthermore, the theory acknowledges that a change in one part of the system, such as increased caregiver digital literacy or improved institutional reporting pathways, will have ripple effects across the other systems involved in a child's life (Payne, 2014). This holistic perspective is essential for designing effective and sustainable social work interventions in high-density urban communities like Mbare, where multiple overlapping vulnerabilities converge to create conditions conducive to child abuse and exploitation. Systems Theory thus enables the study to move beyond a deficit-focused analysis of individual children and their families toward a structural critique of the systems that fail to protect them (Healy, 2014).

2.2 Forms of Social Media Driven Child Abuse Prevalent Among Children

This section reviews literature in relation to the forms of social media driven child abuse such as cyberbullying, online grooming, exposure to explicitly and harmful content and sextortion and blackmailing as explained below.

2.2.1 Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying has been extensively documented internationally. Tokunaga (2010) defined it as behavior performed through digital media that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort. Hinduja and Patchin (2014) found that approximately 27% of young people in the United States had experienced cyberbullying, with victims significantly more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2014) argue that anonymity afforded by social media compounds severity by emboldening perpetrators and removing social inhibitions. boyd (2014) contends that children's engagement with social media exposes them to risks they are often not developmentally equipped to manage. The permanence of digital content means a single abusive post can continue harming a child long after it is first shared. WHO (2020) recognizes cyberbullying as a public health concern with effects comparable to physical violence.

In Africa, the African Child Policy Forum (2018) highlighted that affordable smartphones and mobile data had increased children's exposure to online risks without corresponding increases in child protection infrastructure. In South Africa, Badenhorst (2011) found cyberbullying prevalent among school-going children, with girls more frequently experiencing sexual harassment online and boys more often receiving threatening messages. UNICEF reported that over 95% of South African children had regular internet access, 70% used it without parental consent, 25% had added strangers to contacts, and 18% had sent photos to unknown individuals. Prinsloo (2021) noted that WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok had created new avenues for peer-to-peer and adult-to-child exploitation where parental digital literacy remained low. In East Africa, Nyang'au (2014) documented Kenyan children targeted through Facebook and WhatsApp via fake profiles. ECPAT International (2020) found that poverty, limited digital literacy, and weak regulatory frameworks made African children particularly vulnerable. Makinde et al. (2017) similarly found children in low-income urban West African settings disproportionately affected due to unsupervised shared device access.

In Zimbabwe, MISA Zimbabwe (2021) reported growing cyberbullying among school-going children in urban areas, with Harare most affected. The Cyber and Data Protection Act (Chapter 12:07), enacted 2019 and operationalized 2021, provides a framework for addressing cybercrimes, though critics argue its provisions are insufficiently specific for child protection and enforcement capacity remains weak (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). UNICEF Zimbabwe (2021) noted that children in urban informal settlements are particularly vulnerable because

they frequently access the internet through shared devices, public Wi-Fi, or older siblings' phones with minimal adult supervision. In Mbare specifically, children's use of WhatsApp groups, TikTok, and Facebook occurs largely outside parental awareness, creating conditions where cyberbullying can go unreported. This answers the first objective by identifying cyberbullying and online harassment as major forms of abuse occurring through messages, posts, images, fake accounts, and group interactions.

2.2.2 Online Grooming and Manipulation

Winters, Kaylor, and Jeglic (2017) define online grooming as a process through which an offender gradually gains a child's trust to facilitate sexual abuse. Their research found grooming is rarely impulsive but rather a calculated process unfolding over weeks or months. Whittle et al. (2013) identified strategies including flattery, gift-giving, desensitization to sexual content, isolation from family, and creation of secrecy. Lalor and McElvaney (2010) argue technology has removed geographic barriers between perpetrators and victims. Kloess, Beech, and Harkins (2014) note that private messaging, pseudonymous profiles, and encrypted communication provide offenders tools to approach children while evading detection. NCMEC (2024) reported its CyberTipline received 20.5 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation, representing 29.2 million separate incidents when adjusted; 84% resolved outside the United States, demonstrating the transnational nature of online exploitation.

In Africa, Surtees (2017) noted groomers increasingly use social media to target vulnerable children, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds susceptible to offers of money, mobile data, or gifts. ECPAT International (2018) found WhatsApp, Facebook, and increasingly TikTok were primary platforms for initial contact, with girls aged 12–17 disproportionately targeted. Mwangi (2016) found children in urban informal settlements faced heightened grooming risks due to limited supervision, high mobile phone sharing, and low digital safety awareness. The IAC (2019) highlighted that cultural norms of deference to adults could make children less likely to question inappropriate communications. Terre des Hommes (2019) found children in Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, could be contacted and targeted within minutes of profile creation.

In Zimbabwe, ZIMSTAT (2022) reported significant increases in mobile phone ownership and internet use among youth aged 15–24, with urban youth most connected. ChildLine Zimbabwe

(2021) noted increased technology-facilitated abuse reports, predominantly involving adolescent girls manipulated through sustained social media communication. Mushunje (2018) observed that in low-income urban communities, children's social media use is frequently unsupervised because parents lack digital literacy or are absent for work. In Mbare, promises of financial assistance, mobile data, or material gifts can significantly lower children's defenses against manipulation..

2.2.3 Sextortion and Online Blackmail

Sextortion involves threatening, pressuring, or blackmailing a child through online communication. NCMEC (2024) reported nearly 100 reports of financial sextortion per day. Wittes et al. (2016) defined sextortion as exploitation where perpetrators threaten to expose sexual images or information unless victims comply with sexual or financial demands. Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) distinguished sexually motivated sextortion from financially motivated sextortion, the latter growing significantly and increasingly carried out by organized criminal networks. IWF (2023) reported increased child sexual abuse material produced through coercion, noting AI-generated manipulated images introduced new dimensions by enabling fabricated explicit material for blackmail even when no real images were shared. NCMEC also reported child sex trafficking reports increased 55% from 2023 to 2024 following the REPORT Act's expansion of mandatory reporting.

In Africa, the African Parliamentary Forum on Children (2021) identified sextortion as one of the fastest-growing forms of technology-facilitated child abuse, with poverty, limited digital literacy, and weak law enforcement enabling perpetrator impunity. Stardust et al. (2019) found South African girls frequently targeted by older males on Facebook and WhatsApp, with many victims not conceptualizing their experience as criminal abuse due to shame and cultural narratives. Meinck et al. (2017) found children who experienced online harassment and blackmail reported significantly higher mental health difficulties than those experiencing only offline violence, with disclosure rates considerably lower. Child Helpline International (2022) reported increased sextortion reports across African members since 2019, with COVID-19 school closures creating a sharp inflection point.

In Zimbabwe, the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) provides some legislative basis for prosecuting image-based abuse, though enforcement is hampered by limited digital forensics

capacity and low awareness (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2022). Zvobgo (2020) argued that patriarchal norms, economic inequality, and digital anonymity create conditions conducive to sextortion in Zimbabwe. In Mbare, the closely knit social fabric paradoxically intensifies harm fear that explicit images could spread rapidly through tight community networks creates powerful silencing mechanisms. Rurevo and Bourdillon (2003) identified shame and community reputation as central organizing values in high-density Harare suburbs. UNICEF Zimbabwe (2021) identified caregiver digital literacy as a critical gap, recommending community-based education initiatives.

2.2.4 Exposure to Explicit and Harmful Content

Children may be abused through exposure to violent material, sexually explicit content, hate content, harmful challenges, and content normalizing abuse. UNICEF notes children can be exposed to online hate, discrimination, manipulative commercial practices, misuse of personal data, and dark patterns. Livingstone and Haddon (2012), through EU Kids Online, found significant proportions of children encountered sexual, violent, or hateful content online, often before age thirteen, introducing the distinction between content risks, contact risks, and conduct risks. Peter and Valkenburg (2016) found repeated exposure to sexually explicit material associated with distorted attitudes toward sexuality, gender roles, and consent, particularly among boys consuming violent pornography. Raffoul et al. (2021) documented dangerous viral challenges amplified by auto play and recommendation features, exposing children to content encouraging self-harm. IWF (2022) documented self-generated child sexual abuse material circulating on mainstream platforms, meaning victims could encounter their own abusive images in feeds.

In Africa, the African Child Policy Forum (2019) noted rapid mobile internet expansion created conditions where children encountered harmful content at younger ages with less adult mediation. In South Africa, UNICEF found 67% of children who had seen sexual images were exposed via online devices. Prinsloo and Walton (2018) found exposure typically began between ages 10–13, often accidental via social media or messaging, with content frequently shared through WhatsApp groups. Badenhorst (2011) found children in low-income urban communities disproportionately likely to encounter harmful content due to unsupervised shared device access. Makinde et al. (2017) found regular consumption of violent or sexually explicit content associated with desensitized attitudes toward violence and sexual coercion.

In Zimbabwe, a news report covering a child online safety study stated 44% of children aged 8–18 had been exposed to adult content online. The Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) provides broad protections but was designed primarily for physical media; Kaseke and Dhliwayo (2020) argue the framework requires urgent updating for technology-facilitated harms. In Mbare, smartphones are frequently shared among siblings and peers, mobile data is used without adult supervision, and WhatsApp groups serve as informal distribution networks for explicit content. Murwira (2021) found peer pressure to watch and share explicit content was significant, with refusal sometimes resulting in social exclusion.

2.2.5 Doxing, Privacy Violations, and Misuse of Personal Information

Doxing involves exposing a child's personal information without consent, including names, school details, family information, images, addresses, and private messages. Douglas (2016) defined doxing as intentional public release of private information to cause harm. Hooper (2020) argues children are especially susceptible because platforms encourage information sharing, and children's developmental tendencies toward trust and peer validation make them willing participants in sharing details that can be weaponized. Lupton and Williamson (2017) examined the "datafied child," noting that location check-ins, school affiliations, family photographs, and friendship networks collectively constitute exploitable personal profiles. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 25 (2021), recognized privacy violations as harms incompatible with children's rights, calling for child-specific data protection legislation.

The South African Kids Online Study found 68% of caregivers concerned about children revealing personal information online, and 25% of children had added strangers to contacts. Calandro and Berger (2017) noted most African countries lacked robust child-specific data protection legislation, with platforms collecting children's data under inaccessible terms of service. Phiri and Abrahams (2020) documented doxing as peer-based harassment in South African schools, with girls disproportionately affected. APC (2020) documented cases across Southern and East Africa where children's shared personal information was used by adults to facilitate offline abuse.

In Zimbabwe, the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) establishes general data protection principles but lacks child-specific provisions (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, 2022).

Dube and Ncube (2021) found most Harare secondary students had limited understanding of privacy settings, routinely sharing school names, neighborhoods, and personal photographs without risk awareness. In Mbare, social media use in communal settings shared devices, collective mobile data purchases, public Wi-Fi hotspots increases unintended exposure. Murwira (2021) observed photographs and personal information were frequently reposted and circulated without consent, normalized as social commentary. UNICEF Zimbabwe (2021) identified community-level norm change around digital privacy as necessary for comprehensive child online protection. This answers the first objective by identifying privacy violation as abuse occurring when personal information is collected, shared, misused, or used to humiliate and manipulate children.

2.3 Implications of Social Media-Driven Child Abuse

This section reviews literature in relation to the implications of social media such as as psychological, education effects and school participation, social and family implications, physical safety and online risk.

2.3.1 Psychological and Emotional Effects

Globally, research consistently associates frequent social media use with lower self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and mental health challenges (Liu et al., 2024). Cyberbullying specifically leads to anxiety, depression, loneliness, social withdrawal, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidality (Xu & Zheng, 2022). UNICEF (2020) links online hate, peer-to-peer violence, and digital discrimination to heightened risks to children's emotional wellbeing, framing social media-driven abuse as a serious mental health and child welfare crisis.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 34% of young people reported experiencing online bullying, with excessive social media use linked to addiction, social isolation, sleep disturbances, and chronic stress (We Are Tech Africa, 2025). Victims experience severe emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, with the pervasive nature of online harassment making escape difficult (Dateline Health Africa, 2023). Desai et al. (2025) note that societal pressures and online judgment contribute to increased anxiety among African adolescents.

In Zimbabwe, research among Harare youth found social media use led to social isolation, emotional distress, toxic interactions, cyberbullying, and loneliness, with mental health effects including suicides and drug abuse (Africa China Reporting Project, 2021). Ndawana and

Chisambiro (2024) highlighted increasing psychological abuse and online abuse during COVID-19, with victims suffering psychosocial problems from hate speech and harassment. Chitereka (2021) argues adolescence in Zimbabwe is characterized by emotional instability, making children in Mbare particularly vulnerable. For these children, effects likely manifest as fear, withdrawal, poor self-confidence, anger, sadness, and reluctance to engage in school and community activities.

2.3.2Educational Effects and School Participation

Social media-driven abuse affects education through declining concentration, school avoidance, and disrupted peer relationships. Tokunaga (2010) found victims experienced significant declines in academic performance, reduced classroom engagement, and increased absenteeism. Beran and Li (2007) introduced the concept of "crossover harm," where digital abuse bleeds into physical school environments through shared peer networks. UNICEF's global poll found one in five young people had skipped school because of cyberbullying. Vaillancourt et al. (2017) found negative effects on academic achievement were persistent impairments affecting educational trajectories well beyond active victimization. Livingstone, Mascherano, and Stensrud (2018) argued digital exclusion carries its own costs, shifting responsibility to adults, institutions, and technology companies.

In Africa, the African Union's CESA (2016–2025) identifies safe learning environments as prerequisites for educational quality. Badenhorst (2011) found South African cyberbullying victims reported difficulties concentrating, declining performance, and school avoidance. Prinsloo (2021) examined how school-based WhatsApp groups created new harassment arenas extending beyond school hours. Nyang'au (2014) found Kenyan students who experienced online harassment showed measurable declines in participation, homework completion, and examination performance, with girls disproportionately affected. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's School Improvement Plan addresses physical safety but largely omits technology-facilitated peer abuse. Dube and Ncube (2021) found Harare students who experienced cyberbullying reported significant difficulties with concentration, motivation, and attendance, with school-related WhatsApp groups creating particular technological entanglement. In Mbare, schools are large and under-resourced, with classrooms accommodating forty or more students; counselling services are severely overstretched. Murwira (2021) observed student-to-counsellor ratios making meaningful individual support

largely inaccessible. UNICEF Zimbabwe (2021) identified schools as priority settings for online protection programming, recommending integration of digital literacy into the national curriculum.

2.3.4 Social and Family Implications

Social media-driven abuse affects family and community relationships. Barlinska, Szuster, and Winiewski (2013) found most child victims did not tell trusted adults, with fear of parental overreaction particularly device removal among the most common barriers. Lazuras et al. (2013) found family communication quality was one of the strongest protective factors; children from families with open, supportive communication were more likely to disclose and seek help promptly. Sasson and Mesch (2014) found active parental mediation (dialogue, guidance, shared use) significantly more effective than restrictive mediation in reducing vulnerability and facilitating disclosure. UNICEF South Africa found only 41% of children had received online safety information, and exploited children often preferred not to share experiences. Finkelhor et al. (2011) found online abuse among the least reported forms of child victimization.

In Africa, Surtees (2017) noted cultural expectations that children should not discuss sexual matters with adult's compound disclosure barriers. Meinck et al. (2017) found family responses to online abuse were often inadequate, with negative caregiver responses associated with significantly worse psychological outcomes. The African Child Policy Forum (2019) identified caregiver digital literacy as one of the most significant gaps in child online protection, with the generational digital divide creating structural conditions for non-disclosure. Phiri and Abrahams (2020) found image-based abuse frequently resulted in community gossip, stigmatization, and social exclusion of victims rather than perpetrators.

In Zimbabwe, Mushunje (2018) found caregivers in low-income households were frequently absent or preoccupied with economic survival, leaving children to navigate digital social lives without guidance. When abuse was discovered, responses were often characterized by anger, shame, or device restriction rather than empathetic support. Zvobgo (2020) observed that disclosure of online abuse involving sexual content frequently resulted in reputational stigmatization of the victim's entire family, creating strong social incentives to suppress rather than report abuse. Rurevo and Bourdillon (2003) documented the powerful role of community

reputation in high-density Harare suburbs. ChildLine Zimbabwe (2021) reported many children contacting its helpline had not disclosed to any family member, citing fear of punishment, shame, and anticipated disbelief.

2.3.5 Physical Safety and Offline Risk

Social media-driven abuse creates offline danger when online grooming leads to physical meetings, privacy violations expose locations, or false friendships arrange unsafe encounters. Davidson and Gottschalk (2011) documented the online-to-offline escalation pathway, finding significant proportions of child sexual abuse cases originated through social media contact. Wolak et al. (2010) found most cases involved relationships where children had been conditioned to perceive encounters as consensual, reframing physical danger as manipulated compliance rather than violent abduction. IWF (2022) documented how sharing location data, school affiliations, and routines provided perpetrators actionable intelligence. NCMEC (2024) reported an average of 50 urgent reports per day involving imminent danger, and over 51,000 escalated to law enforcement. Lanning (2018) argued digital grooming was increasingly efficient, with perpetrators simultaneously targeting multiple victims.

In Africa, APC (2020) documented cases across Southern and East Africa where children were physically located and abused by individuals met through social media. Terre des Hommes (2019) found children in Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, could be contacted within minutes of profile creation, with many willing to share locations and photographs within first exchanges. Badenhorst (2011) documented South African children physically assaulted, sexually abused, or trafficked following initial social media contact, with economically disadvantaged children disproportionately represented. The IAWG (2020) reported trafficking networks increasingly using social media for recruitment through false employment, educational, or romantic opportunities.

In Zimbabwe, ChildLine Zimbabwe (2021) reported cases of physical harm following social media-initiated contact, identifying urban high-density communities as areas of particular concern. The U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report (2023) classified Zimbabwe as Tier 2, noting girls from economically vulnerable households were at risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation, with social media recruitment an emerging vector. In Mbare, dense population, busy markets, and informal transport hubs make children accessible to individuals who

identified them online. Murwira (2021) noted children moved through public spaces independently from a young age. Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019) observed Zimbabwe Police Service lacked specialized digital crime units, meaning institutional intervention often occurred only after physical harm.

2.4 Social Work-Related Interventions

This section reviews literature in relation to the social work related interventions to social media driven child abuse such as digital literacy education for children, parental guidance and caregiver digital awareness, community child protection communitee, strengthening reporting referral pathways, platform accountability and safety by design as explained below.

2.4.1 Digital Literacy Education for Children

Digital literacy has emerged globally as a critical intervention. Livingstone and Haddon (2012) established that children receiving structured digital literacy education were significantly better equipped to identify and resist online risks. Bulger and Davison (2018) argued digital literacy must include understanding of data privacy, digital footprints, and predators' psychological tactics. UNICEF (2020) emphasizes teaching children to understand privacy settings, manage safe communication, recognize harmful content, resist manipulation, report abuse, block dangerous contacts, preserve evidence, and understand stranger risks delivered through sustained, age-appropriate, culturally relevant programs across schools, youth clubs, and religious institutions. Walsh and Farrington (2021) note social workers are increasingly trained as digital literacy facilitators.

In Africa, Naidoo and Rautenbach (2016) argued African children face dual vulnerability: increasing exposure without adequate supervision, yet digital literacy programs confined largely to well-resourced urban schools. The African Child Policy Forum (2019) found fewer than 30% of school curricula included structured online safety components. Osei-Hwere (2019) found West African children as young as nine regularly using WhatsApp and Facebook without supervision, recommending programs address local cultural dynamics abusers exploit. Wekesa (2020) documented Kenyan community-based initiatives where social workers collaborated with NGOs to deliver online safety workshops, showing measurable improvement in children's risk identification.

In Zimbabwe, Murairwa (2014) noted the child protection system historically addressed physical abuse with limited attention to digital risks. Chitukutuku (2021) observed Mbare's shared devices and community internet facilities make individual supervision structurally difficult, making community-level digital literacy essential. The NCPC (2020) acknowledged digital literacy must be incorporated into child protection programs, though implementation has been slow due to limited funding and trained personnel. Dube and Chirisa (2019) identified social workers as ideal facilitators in Mbare, recommending university social work curricula incorporate digital literacy as a core competency. Moyo (2022) argues programs must be delivered in Shona and Ndebele, referencing specific platforms Zimbabwean children use. This addresses the third objective by identifying digital literacy as a foundational preventive and responsive social work tool.

2.4.2 Parental Guidance and Caregiver Digital Awareness

Parental involvement is one of the strongest protective factors, yet significant gaps exist between children's digital activity and adult awareness. The South African Kids Online Study found 70% of children used the internet without parental consent and only 41% had received online safety information. Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) identified three parenting approaches restrictive, supportive, and disengaged finding supportive caregivers produced significantly better disclosure outcomes. Bossler and Holt (2010) emphasize that caregiver response quality to disclosures is as important as prevention; punitive responses internalize shame while supportive responses create psychological safety. Smahel et al. (2020) found active parental mediation positively correlated with children's ability to recognize and resist risks.

In Africa, Phyfer, Burton, and Leoschut (2016) found most South African caregivers had limited understanding of social media platforms. Wurtele and Kenny (2011) argue caregiver training must move beyond awareness to practical skill-building: initiating conversations, setting boundaries without creating secrecy, monitoring appropriately, and responding supportively. The African Child Policy Forum (2019) documented shared devices among multiple family members as complicating individual monitoring. Mudavanhu (2014) found NGO-led programs combining digital safety with broader parenting support were more effective than standalone campaigns.

In Zimbabwe, rapid urbanization, economic hardship, and child-headed households mean many Mbare children grow up with limited adult supervision. Zvobgo (2019) found Harare caregivers aware their children used social media but lacked knowledge to distinguish safe from unsafe behavior, expressing helplessness at children's superior technological knowledge. Dube and Chirisa (2019) identified Mbare as urgently needing caregiver programs, recommending engagement through churches, residents' associations, school PTAs, child protection committees, and health clinics. The NCPC (2020) recommends all child protection social workers be trained to deliver standardized caregiver education. Moyo (2022) adds that effective programs must acknowledge caregivers own economic marginalization and social stress.

2.4.3 Community Child Protection Committees

Community child protection committees are essential grassroots structures complementing formal systems. Fontes and Plummer (2010) argue they are critical because formal institutions are often inaccessible or distrusted. The UN CRC (2011) emphasizes community structures must be formally integrated into national frameworks. UNICEF South Africa emphasizes collaborative approaches bringing together children, caregivers, technology industry, academia, government, and victim support services. Wachter, Snyder, and Barber (2019) found committees receiving structured social work support demonstrated significantly higher abuse identification and referral rates. Wessells (2015) argues committees are particularly effective for abuse carrying social stigma because they can challenge harmful norms and reframe abuse as community responsibility.

In Africa, Olwig and Gullov (2003) note community structures carry particular legitimacy operating within recognized social hierarchies. Witter and Ssewanyana (2016) found Ugandan committees formally linked to government systems achieved measurable improvements in awareness, reporting, and coordination. Jamieson, Sambo, and Samuels (2011) documented South African township committees reducing social isolation of abused children and facilitating access to services. Odhiambo (2018) found Kenyan committees incorporating online safety reported significantly higher community knowledge about social media risks. In Zimbabwe, Muzvidziwa (2013) documented high-density Harare committees' critical role in identifying at-risk children and facilitating referrals, though most were established for physical abuse and had not developed capacity for digital risks. Chirwa (2018) argues existing

committees in Mbare urgently need retraining to include online safety within their mandate. Dube and Chirisa (2019) highlight committees' potential to bridge families and formal institutions in Mbare, where economic hardship and distrust of authorities create barriers to reporting. The NCPC (2020) recommends expanding committee training to cover digital risks with social workers facilitating and supervising. Moyo (2022) notes committees can reduce stigma by framing online abuse as a perpetrator responsibility, shifting community attitudes. This addresses the third objective by demonstrating community-based structures are central to social work intervention.

2.4.4 Strengthening Reporting and Referral Pathways

Globally, robust child-friendly reporting systems are recognized as cornerstones of digital-age child protection. NCMEC (2024) data reveals the scale of urgency: over 51,000 urgent reports escalated to law enforcement, and online enticement reports reached over 546,000 — a 192% increase from 2023. Secondary victimization through institutional traumatization further deters reporting.

In Africa, the African Union's Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy (2024) calls for accessible reporting channels across member states. Tanzania's C-Sema National Child Helpline (116) provides a direct reporting mechanism, though outreach revealed persistent knowledge gaps. Edwards et al. (2024) found children more likely to confide in trusted community adults than access formal systems. IWF (2024) noted many African children and parents do not know where to turn for help. In Zimbabwe, ChildLine Zimbabwe operates the primary child-dedicated helpline (116), offering psychosocial support, counselling, and referrals. However, research found caregivers rather than children are more central to reporting sexual violence, and adolescent girls face blame and stigma when disclosing. ChildLine's Screen Online Project targets prevention and improved access to justice. Newsday Zimbabwe (2026) called for government collaboration with mobile operators to zero-rate reporting portals, particularly relevant for low-income Mbare children where data costs bar access.

2.4.5 Legal and Institutional frameworks

Globally, legal frameworks have evolved to reflect online exploitation as serious criminal conduct. The WeProtect Global Alliance's Model National Response (2021) provides comprehensive frameworks encompassing legislation, law enforcement training, prevention,

and capacity development. The UK's CEOP and the U.S. REPORT Act (2024) exemplify coordinated multi-agency and legislative adaptation.

In Africa, the AU's Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy (2024) identifies legal framework development as central, though the Institute for Security Studies (2025) warns most states report significant gaps in cyber investigative and prosecutorial capability. Tanzania, Kenya, and Ghana have enacted cybercrime legislation, yet community awareness of these laws remains limited. In Zimbabwe, the Cyber and Data Protection Act [Chapter 12:07] (2021) criminalizes cyber-grooming, child sexual abuse material, non-consensual intimate image transmission, and exposing children to pornography. The Criminal Law Amendment (Protection of Children and Young Persons) Act (2024) further criminalizes cyberbullying under Section 164B. Zimbabwe established ZICOP, signed the WeProtect Call for Action, and ratified the UNCRC Optional Protocol. However, Musimwa (2026) notes laws only work when communities know them, institutions enforce them, and victims can access support realities remaining aspirational in Mbare. Social work intervention must include legal awareness campaigns, referral education, and coordination with police victim-friendly units, the Department of Social Welfare, and ChildLine Zimbabwe.

2.4.6 Platform Accountability and Safety by Design

UNICEF (2024) states children need platforms that are safe by design, with clear rules holding technology companies accountable. The OECD (2024) identifies eight components including age assurance, accessible complaints, proactive content moderation, and harm-mitigation integrated from the outset. NCMEC (2024) data reveals uneven accountability: only 296 companies submitted reports, with 10 providers accounting for over 95% of all reports. Alarmingly, AI-generated child sexual abuse material reports increased 1,325% from 4,700 (2023) to 67,000 (2024). In Africa, ChildFund International and the African Child Policy Forum (2024) found over 60% of unidentified victims were young children including infants, with 65% being girls. Heavy dependence on global platforms with inadequate African language content moderation creates particular exposure. The AU's Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy (2024) makes Africa the first region with a continental child online safety policy. The 2025 Africa Taskforce on Child Online Protection launched at MWC Kigali brings together UNICEF, GSMA, major telecoms, INTERPOL, and IWF.

In Zimbabwe, the Cyber and Data Protection Act requires parental consent for processing children's personal data. New legislation is being considered to regulate social media platforms more broadly. Scholars argue the best strategy is safer participation through mandatory child-safety-by-design standards, age-appropriate privacy defaults, and focused enforcement against predators. For Mbare, social work interventions should extend to advocacy for safer platforms, community education about reporting harmful content, and collaboration with technology companies.

2.5 Research Gap and Relevance to Mbare

The reviewed literature establishes social media-driven child abuse as a global, regional, and local problem. Global evidence from ITU, UNICEF, NCMEC, and ChildLine demonstrates increasing online risks. Regional evidence from South Africa confirms high internet access, weak parental oversight, stranger contact, and harmful content exposure. Zimbabwean evidence shows emerging academic and however, limited neighborhood-level research exists on how social media-driven child abuse affects children in specific Zimbabwean communities such as Mbare. National and global statistics show scale but do not fully explain how Mbare children experience online abuse, which platforms are most involved, how caregivers respond, how child protection committees operate, and what interventions suit this community This study fills this gap by focusing on Mbare as a specific case study, generating local evidence on forms of abuse, effects on children, and social work interventions needed. Effective child protection must be grounded in the lived realities of children, caregivers, schools, social workers, and community protection structures.

2.6 Chapter summary

The literature shows social media-driven child abuse takes many forms: cyberbullying, online harassment, grooming, sextortion, exposure to harmful content, doxing, privacy violation, and manipulation. These occur through digital platforms children use daily. The implications are serious, affecting children psychologically, emotionally, educationally, socially, and physically, while weakening family trust, increasing stigma, reducing reporting, and pressuring child protection systems. Interventions must be multi-layered: digital literacy, parental guidance, school-based protection, community child protection committees, reporting pathways, legal awareness, institutional coordination, and platform accountability. For Mbare,

the most effective response should combine children's voices, caregiver awareness, school involvement, professional social work support, and community-based protection systems.

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CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This section presents the research methodology that was employed or that was used to gather information. According to Croswell (2018), research methodology refers to a systematic process of steps used to collect and analyses information to increase understanding of a topic or issue. Parwanto (2018) state that it is the systematic, planned and scientific, yet value neutral way to solve a research problem, encompassing the entire process from data collection to analysis. Research methodology is also referred to the systematic framework or roadmap used so solve research problems.

3.1 Research philosophy

Research philosophy refers to system of beliefs and assumptions guiding how knowledge is created, collected, analyzed and used, influencing a researcher's worldview, methods and interpretation of data (Saunders et al., 2019). It addresses fundamental questions about reality (ontology) and how we know what's true epistemology. The study adopted the social constructivism philosophy which is defined as research philosophy that views social reality as subjective and socially constructed rather than objective and fixed (Johnson et al 2008). Using the philosophy allow the researcher to understand the nature and reality social media driven child abuse that are being faced by children living in Mbare such as online grooming, sextortion and cyberbullying and their consequences or their effect on children. In addition to above, child abuse is a subjective reality nature, which means it's not static it's something that is a lived experience and for the researcher to understand the nature and consequences of the problems, the researcher should understand the victims, guardians and community members and the history of social media driven child abuses in Mbare in order to have a full detailed analysis that's why the researcher applied the constructivism philosophy.

3.2 Research approach

According to Creswell (2018) research approach refers to the master plan or the overall strategy that guides how a study is conducted. The study used qualitative research approach. According to Moser & Korstjens (2002) qualitative research approach refers to a method that explore in depth, providing deeper insight into real world problems by analyzing perception and behaviors. This was also defined by Creswell as an" approach for exploring and

understanding the meaning individuals or group's ascribe to social or human's problem" (Creswell 2018). According to Pathak (2017) using qualitative research method on this study was important because it explains beyond statistical trends giving understanding to complex issues which are behind online victimization. It explains the how and the why part thus giving a clear analysis on the causes and the nature of social media driven abuses. It also gives room for the researcher to understand which platforms between tiktok, Facebook, twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram has the highest correlation with reported incident. Unlike Quantitative which tells how often, qualitative tells how the children are being abused, it narrates the whole incident, henceforth this clearly shows the reason why the researcher used qualitative research method over quantitative in terms of this research.

3.3 Research design

Research design refers to the overall plan that guides how a study is conducted, including how data will be collected, organized, and analysed in order to answer the research questions (Leedy, 1997). It provides a link between the research problem and the practical steps followed during the study. This study used case study research design. According to Gay and Airasian (2000), a research design is the general strategy used to conduct a study. This is defined as an empirical inquiry that investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real world, natural context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and the context are not clear evident. A case study design was appropriate because it allows the researcher to examine a real-life issue within a specific and bounded setting. Creswell and Poth (2018) define a case study as a qualitative design in which the researcher explores a contemporary bounded system over time through detailed and in depth data collection from multiple sources. The case study design was chosen because this research focuses on social media-driven child abuse in Mbare, Harare. The design allowed the researcher to study how social media contributes to child abuse within this particular community, rather than treating the problem as a general national issue. This was useful because children's online risks are shaped by their local environment, including poverty, caregiver supervision, digital literacy, peer influence, school settings, and available child protection services.

The design was also suitable because the study seeks to understand the forms, implications, and possible social work interventions related to social media driven child abuse. These issues require detailed explanations from participants such as children, caregivers, teachers, social

workers, and community leaders. A case study design allowed the researcher to collect rich information through interviews, focus group discussions, reports, and relevant online or community based evidence.

Furthermore, the case study design helped the researcher to examine platform-related risks such as online grooming, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, doxing, and other forms of digital abuse affecting children in Mbare. It allowed the study to explain how these abuses occur, why children are vulnerable, and how families, schools, and social work practitioners can respond. Therefore, the case study design was appropriate because it provides an in-depth, contextual, and practical understanding of social media driven child abuse in Mbare

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3.4 Research setting

According to Creswell (2014) research setting refers to the specific physical social or virtual environment where a study is conducted, encompassing the location, context and condition that influence data collection. The study was taking place in Mbare, a highly populated area with estimated population of 300000 according to census (2022) which is found in Harare the capital city of Zimbabwe. The study was done to address the rising problem of child abuse as a result of social media such as addiction, exposure to explicitly content, peer pressure, doxing, cyberbullying as well as privacy and safety risk which has resulted in development of anti-social behaviors such as development of suicidal thoughts, mental health problems thus stress, depression, and severe emotional distress, among other unlisted results.

3.5 Study Population

According to Hulley et al. (2013), a study population refers to a specific group of people from whom the researcher intends to collect data and to whom the findings of the study are expected to apply. In this study, the researcher was targeting mainly the children living in Mbare, parents or guardian's members of child protection committee of the respective community. Children were the primary target population because they are the group most directly affected by social media driven child abuse. The study was done to understand the experiences, forms, and consequences of abuse that children encounter through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Children were therefore central to the research because they are the victims and direct users of these digital platforms. Their experiences and perceptions provide important information on issues such as cyberbullying, online grooming,

sextortion, exposure to explicit content, and online harassment. Focusing on children also helped the researcher to understand how social media affects their emotional, psychological, behavioural, and social well-being.

The study was also including members of the child protection committees in Mbare because they play an important role in safeguarding children within the community. These members were involved in identifying, reporting, and responding to cases of abuse affecting children. Their inclusion was important because they provide community based perspectives on the prevalence of social media related child abuse, existing protection mechanisms, and challenges faced when dealing with online abuse cases. They also contribute valuable information on how communities respond to child protection issues and the effectiveness of current interventions. Caregivers and parents are included in the study because they are responsible for supervising and guiding children's behaviour both offline and online. They provided important information regarding children's use of social media, parental monitoring practices, and the challenges faced in protecting children from online risks. Focus group discussions were used to gather detailed views from caregivers concerning children's exposure to harmful online content and social media related abuse.

3.6 Sampling Techniques

A sampling technique refers to the method used by a researcher to select participants from a larger population in order to obtain information relevant to the study (Siewan Khalid Ahmed, 2024). This study used non-probability sampling techniques, namely convenience sampling and purposive sampling as explained below.

3.6.1Convenience Sampling

Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on their availability, accessibility, proximity, and willingness to participate in the study rather than through random selection (Rahi 2017). In this study, convenience sampling was used mainly to select children living in Mbare who are easily accessible to the researcher through schools, community centres, youth programs, and local child protection organizations. The researcher approached children who were available and willing to participate, provided that parental or guardian consent has been obtained. This technique was appropriate because children were the primary group affected by social media driven child

abuse, and the study was seeking to gather direct experiences and perceptions from them. According to Rahi (2017) convenience sampling was useful because it provided quick and cost effective access to participants, especially in this study involving vulnerable groups such as children.

Convenience sampling was suitable for this study because accessing children who have experienced or witnessed social media related abuse can be difficult due to ethical concerns, fear, stigma, and privacy issues. Therefore, selecting participants who are readily available and willing to participate helped the researcher to gather relevant information within the available time and financial resources. The technique was also able to reduces logistical challenges since the researcher was focusing on participants found within accessible locations in Mbare.

Furthermore, convenience sampling also allowed the researcher to quickly identify children who actively use social media platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, since these platforms are central to the study. The method was therefore important because it enables the researcher to obtain first-hand information on issues such as cyberbullying, online grooming, sextortion, exposure to explicit content, and online harassment from participants who have direct knowledge or experience of these issues. This sampling method was appropriate because the study was qualitative in nature and was focusing on obtain detailed and in depth information from participants who were directly relevant to the research topic.

3.6.2 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences that are relevant to the objectives of the study. In this study, purposive sampling was used to select members of the child protection committee such as teachers, caregivers, community leaders, and representatives from child-related NGOs operating in Mbare and guardians or parents. These participants were selected because they possess specialized knowledge, professional experience, or direct involvement in dealing with social media driven child abuse cases.
The researcher was purposively select the mentioned participants because they regularly handle cases involving cyberbullying, online exploitation, sextortion, online grooming, and other forms of abuse affecting children. Their professional experiences helped the researcher to understand the patterns, causes, and impacts of social media driven child abuse, as well as the

interventions currently being used to address the problem. Teachers and caregivers were also purposively selected because they interact closely with children on a daily basis and are often the first people to observe behavioural changes associated with online abuse, such as depression, withdrawal, anxiety, aggression, or poor academic performance. Their inclusion was therefore important in providing important information regarding children's online behaviour, parental supervision, and the challenges faced in monitoring social media use.

Community leaders were purposively selected because they are actively involved in community safety and child welfare programs. They provide valuable information on community responses to child abuse, reporting systems, awareness campaigns, and challenges faced in protecting children from online risks within Mbare. Purposive sampling was therefore appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to gather detailed and reliable information from participants who have direct experience, knowledge, and involvement in issues related to social media driven child abuse.

3.7 Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria refer to the specific characteristics that potential participants must possess in order to qualify for participation in a study (Patton, 2015). In this study, the inclusion criteria were deliberately aligned with the research objectives to ensure that only those with direct relevance and lived experience of the phenomenon under study were selected. For children, inclusion required that participants be between the ages of 10 and 18, reside in Mbare, have access to or experience with social media platforms and have either directly experienced or witnessed social media driven child abuse. For Child Protection Committee, inclusion required active membership in a recognized child protection structure within Mbare and physical residence or regular presence within the Mbare community. This location-based criterion was essential to ensure that participants possessed firsthand contextual knowledge of the socio-cultural environment in which social media driven child abuse occurs, thereby guaranteeing the relevance and depth of the data collected.

3.8 Exclusion Criteria

Exclusion criteria are the characteristics that disqualify potential participants from being included in a study, and they are equally important in safeguarding the quality, relevance, and ethical integrity of the research (Bryman, 2016). In this study, children below the age of 10 were excluded due to developmental and cognitive limitations that may affect their ability to

meaningfully engage with the research questions and provide informed assent. Children who had no prior exposure to social media platforms were also excluded, as they would not possess the experiential knowledge necessary to contribute meaningfully to the study. Child Protection Committee members who did not reside or regularly operate within Mbare were excluded, as their limited familiarity with the local community context would compromise the contextual richness of the data. Any potential participant who showed visible signs of acute psychological distress at the time of data collection was also excluded to uphold the ethical principle of protection from harm.

3.9 Sample size

According to Creswell (2018), sampling is the process of selecting participant for a study from the total population. Since it is impossible to study every single person in a group or community researcher selected a sample to represent them. Creswell mentioned that, qualitative sample sizes are generally small and depend on the research design, focusing on in depth understanding rather than generalization hence this study applied qualitative research samples. As noted by Creswell the research used a sample size of approximately 25 participants and this helped in ensuring rich, and qualitative data. This include, 10 children aged 10 to 18 years, 4 social works, 4 caregivers or parents, 2 teachers or headmasters, 2 community health care and 2 social community leaders and 1 law enforcement officer.

3.10 Data collection Method

According to Creswell (2018), data collection methods refer to the specific procedures and techniques used by a researcher to gather information that answers the research questions. Taherdoost (2021) also defines data collection as the systematic process of gathering information in order to gain understanding and insight into a research problem. In this study, the researcher used semi structured in depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) as the main data collection methods.

The researcher used these methods because the topic under study was sensitive and involves children's personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions regarding online abuse. Methods such as questionnaires may not provide detailed explanations or allow participants to freely express their experiences. Semi structured interviews and FGDs therefore allowed the

researcher to obtain rich, descriptive, and detailed information that directly addresses the research objectives.

3.10.1 Semi structured in-depth interview

Semi structured interviews refer a flexible form of qualitative data collection that balances structure with openness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi structured in depth interviews were used to collect data children, parents and all child protection committee in Mbare. The researcher prepared 3 separate interview guides, one for the children with simplified language, flexible ordering to match the cognitive and linguistic ability of the age and the other for the child protection committee, containing key themes and questions related to social media use, online abuse, digital safety, and child protection and the other for the parents or caregivers. However, participants were allowed to explain their experiences freely, while the researcher asks follow-up questions were clarification or further detail is needed. The researcher selected the method because the study was qualitative in nature and was able obtain detailed information regarding social media driven child abuse in Mbare. This method was suitable for sensitive topics such as child abuse. Children who have experienced cyberbullying, online grooming, sextortion, or exposure to harmful content were given a safe and private environment to express themselves comfortably. Semi structured interviews therefore create flexibility and allowed the researcher to build trust and rapport with participants. This increased the chances of obtaining honest and detailed responses. The method was also important because allowed the researcher to explore the “how” and “why” aspects of social media-driven child abuse. For example, the researcher asked participants how abuse occurs online, why children become vulnerable, how social media affects their mental and emotional wellbeing, and how families or communities respond to such cases. These are issues that cannot be fully captured through closed ended methods.

Furthermore, semi structured interviews allowed the researcher to gather first hand experiences directly from children and professionals dealing with child protection issues. Social workers and teachers provided professional insights into the patterns and effects of online abuse, while children provided lived experiences and perceptions regarding social media risks in Mbare. This makes the method appropriate because it was able to generates detailed and reliable qualitative data relevant to the study objectives.

3.10.2 Focus group discussion

Focus group discussion refers to a qualitative research method in which a small group of participants discuss a specific issue under the guidance of the researcher (Magaldi and Berler ,2020). Focus group discussions were used to sample the child protection members such as teachers, social workers and community leaders. This method was selected because the study is qualitative in nature and its seeks to obtain detailed information regarding social media driven child abuse in Mbare. The researcher used this method because the topic under the study is sensitive and involves children's personal experiences, emotions and perception regarding online abuse. This method was also selected in this study because issues of child protection and social media use are community-related issues that involve different perspectives from parents, teachers, and community leaders. Through group discussions, participants were able to exchange opinions, compare experiences, and raise issues that may not emerge during individual interviews. Methods such as questionnaires may not provide detailed explanations or allow participants to freely express their experiences. FDGs therefore allowed the researcher to obtain rich, descriptive and detailed information that directly addresses the researcher objective.

3.11 Data collection tools

Data collection tools according to Mosweu & Mosweu (2020) refers to the specific instruments and systematic processes used to gather information, observation and insights necessary to address a study research question. In this study qualitative approach was employed to explore social media driven child abuse. This study used focus group discussion and semi structured in depth interviews.

3.11.1 Semi structured in depth interview guide

Semi-structured in depth interview guides are a qualitative data collection instrument that combines a set of predetermined open ended questions with the researcher's flexibility to probe further into emerging themes, clarify responses, and explore unanticipated areas of significance as the conversation unfolds. This study employed three semi structured in depth interview guides one designed for children (Appendix 6) and another for Child Protection Committee members to capture the lived experiences and institutional perspectives on social media-driven child abuse in Mbare (Appendix 7) and the other for the parents or caregiver(Appendix 8) .Each interview guide in this study was structured into three thematic sections an introductory

section consisting of rapport building and ice breaking questions aimed at creating a safe and comfortable environment for the participant, a core thematic section containing open ended questions directly aligned with the study's research objectives and sub questions and a closing section designed to allow participants to reflect, add anything they may have omitted, and conclude the interview on a positive and affirming note. The decision to develop two separate guides rather than a single universal instrument was deliberate and methodologically grounded. Children and Child Protection Committee members occupy fundamentally different positions in relation to social media-driven child abuse children are the direct experiencers of the phenomenon while committee members engage with it through a professional, protective, and institutional lens. This necessitated age appropriate, trauma sensitive, and role-specific language in the children's guide, while the committee guide adopted more formal and policy-oriented questioning. The semi structured format was preferred over fully structured interviews because the sensitive and complex nature of child abuse demands a degree of responsiveness and adaptability from the researcher participants' disclosures can be deeply personal, emotionally charged and unpredictable and a rigid instrument would risk silencing important narratives. (Bryman, 2016; Patton, 2015).

3.11.2 Focus group discussion guides

A focus group discussion guide is a qualitative data collection instrument structured around a carefully sequenced set of open-ended questions, discussion prompts, and probing statements that are designed to stimulate group dialogue, debate, and the co construction of meaning among participants, rather than eliciting individual responses in isolation(Krueger,1988) This study used one Focus Group Discussion guide, administered exclusively to Child Protection Committee members, to generate collective insights, shared understandings, and community level perspectives on social media driven child abuse within the Mbare context (Appendix 9). The FGD guide used in this study was organized into four clearly defined sections that is group information, followed by an opening segment that introduced the research topic, established group discussion norms, obtained verbal consent from participants, and created a psychologically safe environment for candid engagement, a main discussion segment comprising thematic questions and probes targeting the committee's collective experiences, community responses, challenges, and interventions related to child abuse facilitated through social media platforms and a closing segment that summarized the key discussion points, invited participants to make final additions or corrections, and formally concluded the session.

The guide was structured in this progressive manner to ensure that group discussions moved organically from general community awareness to specific case experiences and ultimately to recommendations, thereby producing data that is both contextually rich and practically grounded. The FGD guide was deliberately reserved for Child Protection Committee members rather than children for several critical ethical and methodological reasons. Group settings inherently compromise the confidentiality, psychological safety, and freedom of expression of child participants, particularly when disclosing abuse related experiences that may carry stigma, shame, or fear of retaliation. Children are also at risk of being influenced by dominant voices within a group, which would undermine the authenticity and individual depth that this study sought to achieve through the semi structured interview process. Child Protection Committee members, by contrast, function as a professional and community body whose collective knowledge, shared institutional memory, and group deliberation are best captured through interactive group dialogue, where one member's contribution can stimulate deeper reflection, challenge assumptions, and build upon the insights of others (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The FGD thus served as a complementary tool to the semi structured interviews, providing a broader community and institutional perspective that enriched and triangulated the individual narratives collected from child participants

3.12 Data analysis technique

Data analysis according to Bruan and Clarke (2006) refers to systematic methods used to inspect, clean, transform, and model data to discover useful information, derive insight and reach evidence-based conclusion. This study employed thematic analysis as the primary data analysis technique, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clark is a flexible and widely used qualitative method that allows the researcher to identify, analyses, and report patterns within data. Since this study was sensitive and exploratory nature thematic analysis deemed to be the most appropriate technique, as it accommodates rich, descriptive data and does not confine the researcher to any single theoretical framework.

3.12.1 Stage1: Familiarization with the Data

The first stage according to Braun, involved immersing the researcher in the data through repeated reading of transcripts, field notes, and interview responses gathered from participants in Mbare. This process allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the data

before any formal coding began. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that familiarization is a critical foundation, as it ensures the researcher develops an intimate knowledge of the data content and begins to notice patterns organically and in this study it allows the researcher to understand the nature of social media related child abuse as well as its consequence's.

3.12.2 Stage 2: Generating Initial Codes

This is the second stage of thematic analysis and according to Bruan and Clark it is the systematic process of identifying, labeling and organizing segments of data such as interviews transcript that are relevant to the study. In this second phase, the researcher systematically coded the entire dataset. Coding involved identifying and labelling meaningful segments of data that were relevant to the research questions concerning social media and child abuse. Every piece of data was given equal attention to ensure no significant information was overlooked. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst, and this phase produces a long list of codes across the full dataset.

3.12.3 Stage 3: Searching for Themes

This stage comes after coding, the researcher collated all relevant codes into potential themes. Related codes were grouped together to form broader themes that captured something significant about the data in relation to the research problem. For instance, codes related to online grooming, cyberbullying, and exploitation were clustered together under overarching themes. This phase was involving sorting the coded data into potential themes and gathering all data extracts relevant to each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.12.4 Stage4: Reviewing Themes

The fourth phase according to Braun and Clark, involved refining the themes. The researcher reviewed the themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to assess whether they accurately reflected the data. Some themes were merged, split, or discarded were they lacked sufficient data support or were not clearly distinct. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as a recursive process in which the researcher satisfies themselves that the themes work in relation to both the coded extracts and the full dataset.

3.12.5 stage5: Defining and Naming Themes

This phase involved identifying the essence of each theme what is it about and what aspect of the data it captured in the context of social media driven child abuse in Mbare. Each theme was given a concise, informative name that immediately conveyed its meaning to the reader. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, defining and naming themes produces clear definitions that explain the scope and content of each theme.

3.12.6 Stage 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved weaving together the analytical narrative by selecting vivid and compelling extract examples from the data, and relating the analysis back to the research questions and existing literature. The write up presented the themes in a coherent and logical manner, demonstrating how they collectively addressed the phenomenon of social media-driven child abuse among children in Mbare. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that this phase goes beyond merely summarizing the data and offers an interpretation that advances scholarly understanding of the topic.

3.13 Research Procedure

The research procedure outlines the step-by-step process that the researcher followed in conducting this study from its inception to completion. The first step was the identification of the research problem, which centered on the growing prevalence of social media driven child abuse in Mbare. This was followed by a comprehensive review of existing literature to establish the theoretical and empirical foundation for the study. Following the literature review, the researcher developed the research instruments, namely the semi structured interview guides and focus group discussion guides, which were designed to elicit detailed responses aligned with the three research objectives. Prior to data collection, the researcher sought and obtained ethical clearance from the relevant institutional review body at Bindura University of Science Education, as well as written permission from community gatekeepers and organizational representatives in Mbare. Informed consent and assent were obtained from all participants before interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Data collection was carried out through in depth interviews with children, care givers and child protection member and focus group discussions with community child protection committee members. All sessions were audio recorded with participant permission and supplemented by researcher field notes.

Following data collection, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated from Shona to English where necessary. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify patterns, themes, and sub themes emerging from the data. The findings were subsequently analyzed and interpreted in relation to the study objectives, theoretical framework, and existing literature. The final step involved the write up of findings, conclusions, and recommendations as presented in this research proposal.

3.14 Delimitations of the Study

The study was limited to Mbare, a high-density suburb located in Harare, Zimbabwe. The research was focus mainly on children aged 6 to 18 years, because they are the group directly affected by social media driven child abuse. The study also includes caregivers or parents and members of child protection committees in Mbare, since these groups are involved in supervising, protecting, educating, and supporting children. The study was examining only forms of child abuse linked to social media use. These include cyberbullying, online grooming, sextortion, doxing, exposure to harmful content, online harassment, and the sharing of children's images or personal information without consent. The study was not focus on all forms of child abuse in general, unless they are connected to social media platforms. The research was also focusing on platforms commonly used by children in Mbare, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and other digital communication platforms. The study was using qualitative approach, meaning that it was focusing on participants' experiences, views, and explanations rather than statistical measurement. Data was collected mainly through semi structured interviews and focus group discussions. The findings were therefore providing an in depth understanding of social media driven child abuse in Mbare, but they were not being used to generalize the situation to the whole of Zimbabwe

3.15 Limitation of the study

The study face challenges related to underreporting of abuse cases. Some children fear disclosing their experiences because of shame, fear of punishment, fear of being blamed, or lack of trust in adults. Caregivers also underreport cases because of stigma or fear of damaging the family's reputation. The researcher also faces limited access to affected children because child abuse is a sensitive issue. Ethical requirements such as parental consent, child assent, confidentiality, and child protection procedures reduced the number of children available for participation. Some participants also withdrawal from the study whenever they feel uncomfortable discussing social media-related abuse.

Another limitation was possible bias in self-reported data. Participants forget details, exaggerate experiences, hide information, or give answers they think are acceptable. Teachers, caregivers, and community members also provide responses based on personal beliefs rather than actual experience. Time and financial constraints also limit the sample size and the number of areas covered within Mbare. Since the study was limited to one community, the findings may not fully represent children in rural areas, low density suburbs, or other urban communities in Zimbabwe. However, the study was still providing valuable local evidence on how social media driven child abuse affects children in Mbare

3.16 Trustworthiness of data

Trustworthiness of the data refers to the degree to which the data is accurate, credible, and dependable, ensuring the research finding are worthy of attention and consideration. In qualitative research, Creswell 2016, emphasize trustworthiness encompassing criteria such as credulity, tangibility and dependability. These aspects were important in research because they ensure that findings are believable, applicable to another context.

3.16.1 Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is the equivalent of internal validity in quantitative studies and refers to the degree to which the research findings accurately represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, credibility was ensured through member checking, whereby preliminary findings were shared with selected participants to verify that their experiences had been accurately captured and interpreted. Additionally, the researcher employed prolonged engagement with the research context in Mbare, ensuring sufficient familiarity with the community dynamics surrounding social media-driven child abuse before and during data collection. Triangulation was also applied by using multiple data collection methods semi structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to cross-verify emerging themes and reduce the risk of researcher bias distorting the findings.

3.16.2 Dependability

Dependability is the qualitative counterpart of reliability and refers to the consistency and stability of the research process and findings over time and across conditions (Guba & Lincoln,

1994). To ensure dependability, this study maintained a detailed audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, changes made during the research process, and the rationale behind those changes. The researcher kept reflexive field notes throughout the data collection and analysis phases, providing a transparent record of how the study evolved. The interview and focus group discussion guides were also reviewed and refined through peer debriefing with the research supervisor before deployment, ensuring that the instruments consistently measured what they were intended to measure across all participant groups.

3.16.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the research findings are shaped by the participants and the data rather than by the researcher's own motivations, interests, or biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, confirmability was achieved through reflexivity, where the researcher consciously acknowledged and bracketed personal assumptions and pre-existing views about social media and child abuse in Mbare to avoid imposing them into the data. A confirmability audit was maintained, documenting the raw data, analysis notes, and interpretive decisions, so that an external reviewer could follow the researcher's reasoning and verify that the conclusions drawn were firmly grounded in the participant's responses. Negative case analysis was also employed, whereby disconfirming evidence and divergent participant views were actively sought and included in the findings rather than dismissed, thereby strengthening the objectivity and balance of the study.

3.16.4 Transferability

Transferability is the qualitative equivalent of external validity or generalizability and refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied or related to other contexts, settings, or populations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While qualitative research does not seek statistical generalization, this study enhanced transferability by providing thick, rich descriptions of the research context, participant profiles, and the socio-cultural environment of Mbare in which social media-driven child abuse occurs. These detailed descriptions enable readers and future researchers to make informed judgements about the degree to which the findings resonate with or are applicable to similar urban communities or child protection contexts elsewhere in Zimbabwe and beyond. The purposive sampling strategy employed in this study also contributes to transferability, as participants were selected based on their direct relevance and

knowledge of the phenomenon, ensuring that the data produced is deeply contextualized and informative for comparable studies.

3.17 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are moral principles and guidelines that a researcher followed to protect the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of participants throughout the study (DuBois & Antes 2017).

3.17.1 University Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was formally sought from the Bindura University of Science Education Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of any fieldwork. This approval process was essential to ensure that the study complies with established ethical standards governing research involving human participants, particularly vulnerable populations such as children. In addition to institutional clearance, the researcher obtained permission from relevant local authorities thus the city council, and any other gatekeepers within Mbare, to ensure that the study respects both formal and informal structures of authority. This step was critical in fostering trust, legitimacy, and cooperation within the community. Furthermore, the researcher ensure that the study aligns with national legal frameworks and international ethical guidelines on child protection and research ethics, thereby reinforcing the credibility and integrity of the research process.

3.17.2 Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study were strictly voluntary, and all individuals were given the freedom to decide whether or not to take part without any form of coercion, manipulation, or undue influence. Informed consent were obtained from all adult participants after they have been provided with detailed information about the study, including its purpose, objectives, procedures, potential risks, and expected benefits (Appendix 3). For participants under the age of 18, assent was obtained from the children themselves(Appendix5), in addition to written consent from their parents or legal guardians (Appendix 4). The researcher takes deliberate steps to ensure that all information is communicated in a clear, simple, and culturally appropriate manner, taking into account varying levels of literacy and understanding. Participants were also being informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative consequences, penalties, or loss of benefits. This approach ensured

that participation was based on autonomy, respect, and full understanding of the research process

3.17.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity was rigorously upheld throughout the entire research process, from data collection to reporting and dissemination of findings. The researcher ensured that no personally identifiable information such as names, addresses, or contact details were included in any research outputs. Instead, pseudonyms or coded identifiers were used to protect the identities of participants. All data collected, including interview transcripts, recordings, and field notes, were securely stored using password protected devices and, where necessary, encrypted storage systems. Access to this data was strictly limited to the researcher, and it was used exclusively for academic purposes. In addition, the researcher was mindful of indirect identifiers that could potentially reveal participants' identities, especially within a close knit community such as Mbare, and will take appropriate measures to minimize this risk. The confidentiality of participants was maintained even after the completion of the study, and data was disposed of in accordance with institutional guidelines after a specified retention period.

3.17.4 Non maleficence

The researcher prioritizes the principle of non-maleficence by ensuring that no harm whether physical, emotional, or psychological comes to any participant as a result of their involvement in the study. Given the sensitive nature of topics such as child abuse, cyberbullying, and online exploitation, particular care was taken in the design and administration of research instruments. Questions were framed in a sensitive and non-intrusive manner, and participants were required to disclose information that makes them uncomfortable. Interviews and discussions were conducted in safe, private, and supportive environments, especially when engaging with children. The researcher was remaining attentive to signs of distress and was to pause or terminate the interaction if a participant becomes uncomfortable. Where necessary, participants were provided with information about available support services, such as counseling or child protection organizations, to ensure their wellbeing beyond the scope of the study.

In instances where participants disclose experiences of abuse, neglect, or any form of harm, the researcher act in accordance with ethical and legal obligations by following appropriate referral and reporting procedures. This was involve reporting the case to relevant child protection authorities, social services, or organizations such as Child line Zimbabwe, in line with national child protection laws and institutional ethical guidelines. The researcher handled such disclosures with the utmost sensitivity, ensuring that the safety and best interests of the

child remain the primary concern. At the same time, balancing the need for confidentiality with the duty to protect vulnerable individuals from harm

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents, analyses and discusses the findings obtained from the field study conducted in Mbare, Harare, on the social media driven child abuse. The chapter is guided by the objectives and research questions outlined in Chapter One and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions and interpretations regarding social media-related child abuse. In line with the constructivism philosophy adopted by this study, the chapter focuses on understanding the meanings participants attach to their experiences and social realities rather than merely presenting statistical patterns. The qualitative nature of the research enabled the researcher to gather detailed narratives and personal accounts from participants directly affected by or involved in issues related to child protection and social media use. The findings presented in this chapter were generated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion conducted in Mbare. Participants included children aged between 10 and 18, caregivers and child protection members. The chapter is organized according to themes that emerged from the data collected during fieldwork. These themes include forms of social media-related child abuse prevalent in Mbare, the implications of social media-related abuse on children, and possible social work interventions that can be implemented to address the problem. Direct quotations from participants are included throughout the chapter to ensure that participants' voices and experiences are adequately represented.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This section presents the demographic participants of children, caregivers and members of the child protection committee

4.1.1 Demographic Information of Child Participants

This section presents the demographic profiles of the ten child participants who took part in this study. The demographic information collected covers age, sex, caregiver status, device ownership, and social media platform preference. This information provides important context

for understanding the participants' online environments and their relative vulnerability to social media-driven child abuse in Mbare, Harare.

Table 1

N0.	Age	Sex	Caregiver status	Device ownership	Platform preference
P01	12	female	Both parents	Own smart phone	Facebook , you tube
P02	14	Male	Single mother	Share phone	Instagram, twitter
P03	10	Female	Grandmother	Own smart phone	Whatsapp , tiktok
P04	15	male	Both parents	Own smartphone	Instagram tiktok
P05	13	female	Single father	Borrowed device	Whatspp, facebook
P06	16	male	Both parents	Own smartphone	Instagram , YouTube
P07	12	female	Single father	Shared phone	Tiktok WhatsApp
P08	14	male	Single mother	Own smart phone	Facebook WhatsApp
P09	13	female	Grandmother	Borrowed device	Tiktok YouTube
P10	15	male	Child headed	Shared phone	Whatsapp facebook

Source; primary data

4.1.2 Summary of Demographic Findings.

As shown in above table, the ten child participants ranged in age from 10 to 16 years, with the majority falling between 12 and 15 years. This age range reflects the typical demographic of children in Mbare who are most actively engaged in social media use. The sample comprised five female and five male participants, providing a balanced gender representation. With regard to caregiver status, the findings reveal considerable diversity in household composition among

the participants. Three participants lived with both parents, three with a single mother, two with grandparents or extended family members, one with a single father, and one in a child-headed household. This diversity underscores the varied levels of adult supervision available to children in the community and highlights the heightened vulnerability of those in non-parental or extended family care arrangements. In terms of device ownership, four participants owned their own smartphones, four accessed social media through shared household phones, and two relied on borrowed devices. This pattern indicates that a significant proportion of children in the study accessed social media without exclusive control over a device, which has implications for both privacy and parental monitoring. WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook emerged as the most commonly used platforms, consistent with the broader social media landscape among young people in urban Zimbabwe.

4.1.3 Demographic Information of Caregiver Participants

This section presents the demographic profiles of the four caregiver participants who took part in this study. The demographic information collected covers age, relationship to the child, digital literacy level, and employment status. Understanding these characteristics is essential for contextualizing caregivers' capacity to monitor, guide, and protect children from social media-driven abuse in Mbare, Harare.

Table 2

No.	**Age**	**Relationship**	**Employment status**	**Digital literacy**
CG01	38	Mother	Informal trader	low
CG02	45	Father	Security Guard	moderate
CG03	67	Grandmother	Unemployment	None
CG04	34	Aunt	Domestic worker	Low

Source; Primary data

4.1.4 Summary of Caregiver Demographic Findings

As shown in Table above, the four caregiver participants ranged in age from 34 to 67 years. The sample included a mother aged 38, a father aged 45, a grandmother aged 67, and an aunt

aged 34. This diversity of caregiver types reflects the complex household structures commonly found in high-density urban communities like Mbare, where extended family arrangements and non-parental caregiving are widespread due to economic pressures, migration, and family breakdown. The digital literacy findings are particularly significant for this study. One participant, the grandmother aged 67, had no digital literacy at all, being unable to use a smartphone or access any social media platform. Two participants, the mother and the aunt, demonstrated low digital literacy, meaning they could perform basic phone functions but had no meaningful knowledge of social media platforms, privacy settings, or online safety features. Only one participant, the father, showed moderate digital literacy through occasional social media use, though with a limited understanding of the risks involved. None of the four caregivers demonstrated high digital literacy. Regarding employment, the findings reflect the broader socioeconomic profile of Mbare as a high density, low-income community. One participant was engaged in informal trading, one was a security guard, one was unemployed, and one was a domestic worker. The prevalence of informal, low-income, and precarious employment among caregivers has direct implications for child protection, as long and irregular working hours significantly reduce the time available for supervision of children's online activity. These economic realities must be carefully considered when designing social work interventions aimed at strengthening caregiver digital awareness in communities like Mbare

4.1.5Demographic information on key informants

This section presents the demographic details of eleven key informants selected for the study. Participants were purposively drawn from institutions in Mbare with direct relevance to child protection, community welfare, and digital engagement. The selection ensured diversity across sector, gender, and institutional digital capacity.

Table 3

No.	Sector	Institution	gender	Job title	Digital capacity
1	Social work	Ministry of public service, labor and social welfare	Female	Child protection officer	moderate

2	Social work	Ministry of public service, labour and social welfare	male	Senior social worker	moderate
3	Social work	Childline Zimbabwe	female	Program officer	High
4	Social work	Department of social service	female	Field social worker	low
5	Education	Mbare Primary School	female	School councilor	moderate
6	Education	Mbare high	Male	Class teacher	high
7	Community health	Mbare poly clinic	female	Primary care nurse	low
8	Community health	Mbare community clinic	female	Community health worker	moderate
9	Low enforcement	Mbare police station	male	Officer child protection unit	moderate
10	Community leader	Mbare residents association	male		low
11	Community leader	Mbare ward 16	male	Ward councilor	low

Source; Primary data

4.1.6 Summary of key informant's demographic funding's

The table above captures the demographic characteristics of the eleven key informants who participated in this study. Each informant was drawn from a distinct sector, namely Social Work, Education, Community Health, Law Enforcement, and Community Leadership, reflecting the multi-sectoral nature of child protection efforts in Mbare. The institutions represented range from government departments and health facilities to schools and community structures, all of which operate within or in direct service of the Mbare community.

Gender was recorded to ensure a balanced representation in the study, with six female and five male participants. The job titles listed confirm that all informants hold roles with a direct bearing on child welfare, community safety, or social service delivery, making them credible and relevant sources of information for this research. Institutional digital capacity, rated as High, Moderate, or Low, indicates the extent to which each informant's institution engages with digital platforms in its day-to-day operations. This variable is particularly significant in the context of this study, as it speaks to each institution's awareness of and responsiveness to social media-driven child abuse within the Mbare community.

4.2 Forms of social media driven Child Abuse Experienced by Children in Mbare.

This section reviewed the forms of social media driven child abuse in Mbare as stated by the participants

4.2.1 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying emerged as a prevalent form of child abuse among children in Mbare, reflecting the intersection between digital technology and child welfare in urban low-income communities. Despite limited access to personal devices, children reported exposure through shared mobile phones and social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok. Cyberbullying manifested through threatening messages, nonconsensual sharing of photographs, public humiliation via social media, and deliberate exclusion from online peer groups. Participants described being mocked for their physical appearance, family poverty, and academic performance, causing significant emotional and psychological distress. Several children received anonymous insults they could not trace, amplifying their sense of helplessness. The findings indicate that cyberbullying frequently extends face to face bullying from schools and neighborhoods into victims' homes via digital platforms.

Female Child Participant 9, female aged 13 years' states that;

> *"Pane munhu wandisingazivi ainditumira mameseji pa WhatsApp achinditi ndinonzi hure. Akatumira mufananidzpo wangu kugroup redu rechikoro, vese vakaseka. Handina kuudza mai vangu nekuti ndaitya kuti vaizoita hasha. Kudzoka kuchikoro kwakaoma nekuti vese vaindiseka".*

“A stranger was texting me on WhatsApp calling me a slut. He sent a picture of me to our school group, everyone laughed. I didn’t tell my mother because I was afraid she will get angry. Going back to school was very hard for me”.

Male child Participant 2 aged 14 state’s that;

"Vakomana vanogara kumba kwedu vakatora video ndichirohwa vakaisa pa TikTok nepa whatsapp group rekumaraini kwedu, izvezvi ndava kungosekwa kumba nekutyoro zvese nevamwe izvo zvinondirwadza moyo kusvika pakusada kuenda ku tyoro

The boys stayed at our house took a video of me being beaten and posted it on tiktok and our local WhatsApp group, now I’m being laughed both at school and home and its hurts my heart to an extend that I didn’t want to return back to school.

Male child Protection member 2 (social worker) state’s that**;**

"Cyberbullying is one of the most underreported forms of child abuse in communities like Mbare. Parents do not understand digital platforms, children fear victimization if they report, and there is no clear institutional mechanism in Zimbabwe targeting online child abuse. Schools refer cases back to families; families refer them back to schools. Poverty drives children to use communal devices in unsupervised spaces like tuck shops and internet cafés, which increases their exposure. We are advocating for a child-specific digital safety policy, but progress is very slow."

From a social work perspective, the verbatim accounts illuminate a pattern of digital harm that intersects with preexisting social vulnerabilities in Mbare. Cyberbullying is not an isolated technological phenomenon but a manifestation of structural inequalities including poverty, limited parental digital literacy, and inadequate child protection mechanisms. The distress expressed by the female participant particularly her decision to conceal the abuse out of fear reflects silencing dynamics commonly observed in child abuse cases, where shame deters disclosure. The male participant's school avoidance signals deterioration of psychosocial

functioning that may compound into longer term developmental harm. The child protection member testimony confirms that institutional responses to cyberbullying in Zimbabwe remain fragmented, pointing to a systemic failure to adapt child protection frameworks to the realities of the digital age. Social workers must therefore advocate for child sensitive, community embedded digital safety interventions accessible to marginalized urban communities such as Mbare.

The findings resonate with scholarly literature positioning cyberbullying as a serious child protection concern. Hinduja and Patchin (2014) define cyberbullying as willful and repeated harm inflicted through electronic devices, a definition that aptly captures experiences in this study. The anonymous nature of online harassment observed in Mbare aligns with Smith et al. (2008), who identify anonymity as a key distinguishing feature of cyberbullying that removes social inhibitions and amplifies victims' psychological distress. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a compelling lens for contextualizing these findings. The data reveals dysfunction at multiple ecological levels, families lack digital competence, schools and social services operate in silos, and Zimbabwe's national child protection legislation has not adequately addressed digital harms. This multi-level breakdown echoes Espelage and Swearer's (2004) social-ecological model, which argues that bullying is shaped by and embedded within the interconnected social environments surrounding young people.

Feminist social work theory illuminates the gendered dimensions of cyberbullying in this context. The targeting of the female participant with sexualized insults reflects online patterns identified by Jane (2014), who argues that cyberbullying against girls frequently employs sexual shaming as a tool of silencing. This is consistent with patriarchal norms in Zimbabwean society that render girls particularly vulnerable to reputational harm, compelling social workers to address cyberbullying as an expression of gender-based violence. The Rights-Based Approach, grounded in the UNCRC (1989), provides the normative framework for this issue. Article 19 obliges state parties to protect children from all forms of mental violence, while Article 17 recognizes children's right to safe media access. The absence of a child specific digital safety policy in Zimbabwe, confirmed by the child protection member, represents a significant legislative gap. Livingstone and Haddon (2009) similarly argue that children's online safety is a human rights issue demanding proactive state intervention, digital literacy education, and multi stakeholder collaboration a call that this study firmly echoes.

4.2.2 Exposure to Pornographic and Explicit Sexual Content

The findings of this study revealed that exposure to pornographic and explicit sexual content constituted a significant pathway through which children in Mbare became both victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Participants consistently indicated that children in the community had unsupervised and unrestricted access to smartphones, tablets, and other digital devices belonging to older siblings, relatives, or neighbors. Through these devices, children reported watching sexually explicit videos and images, often at very young ages, with some participants indicating first exposure as early as seven years of age. The pervasive availability of mobile data and access to social media platforms further facilitated this exposure, as children would share explicit content amongst themselves through WhatsApp groups and Bluetooth transfers without the knowledge of caregivers or parents. Participants noted that curiosity, peer pressure, and the desire to imitate what they had seen in pornographic material were key motivators for children subsequently engaging in sexual acts with their peers. Child protection members, including social welfare officers and community leaders, corroborated these findings, highlighting that the absence of parental supervision, compounded by economic pressures, left children particularly vulnerable to such exposures. The data therefore underscores that pornographic and explicit content serves not merely as a contributing factor, but as a direct initiating mechanism in the cycle of child driven child abuse within this urban community

Female child Participant 5 aged 13 state's that:

"Ini ndinoona maVideo aya pafoni yababa vangu. Vanenge vaenda kubasa,kana kut vadzoka? Toona zvinhu izvi, tobva tatoziva kuti munhu anoita sei. Tokuudza wamwe vana, tozoita tose izvozvo, hatizivi kuti zvakaipa."

"I used to watch those videos on my father's phone. They would have gone to work, We watch these things, and then you know what people do. We tell other children, and then we all do the same, we did not know it was wrong.'

Male child Participant 2, aged 14 state's that**;**

"Kuma class taiita zvekutumirana mavideos paWhatsApp. Mumwe akauya nemavideos ekuita zvepabonde, tose takangotarisa. Pashure paizvozvo, takabva tatanga kuda kutedzera izvozvo neshamwari dzangu tichiti zvonakidza

"At school we used to send each other videos on WhatsApp. Someone brought pornographic videos, and we all watched them together. After that, we started practicing those thinking its good

Female child Protection member 4state's that;

"What we are seeing on the ground is deeply alarming. A significant number of child sexual abuse cases we handle in Mbare involve children who have been exposed to pornographic content through website and social media platform. The children who come to us as perpetrators are often themselves victims of this exposure. They replicate what they have seen, not fully understanding the harm they cause. Parents are often absent due to work or are simply unaware of what their children are accessing online. The community environment in Mbare, characterized by overcrowding and limited parental supervision, creates a perfect storm for this kind of exposure and subsequent abuse

From a social work perspective, the findings under this theme illuminate the profound vulnerability of children in Mbare to pornographic content as both a trigger and a reinforce of sexual abuse behavior. The verbatim responses of child participants reveal a disturbing absence of informed consent, age appropriate sexual knowledge, and adult protective supervision, all of which are foundational safeguarding principles in child protection practice. The environment described by participants is one characterized by structural neglect, whereby poverty driven parental absence and the commodification of digital technology converge to expose children to harmful content without adequate protective mediation. Social workers understand such environments through the lens of cumulative risk, where in multiple ecological vulnerabilities interact to heighten a child's susceptibility to harm. The failure of caregivers to regulate children's digital access is not merely a parenting deficit but is deeply embedded in the socio economic realities of urban poverty in communities like Mbare.

The findings concerning children's exposure to pornographic and explicit content in Mbare resonate strongly with a growing body of international and African scholarly literature that has examined the relationship between pornography consumption and child sexual offending

behavior. Flood (2009) established in his seminal work that early exposure to sexually explicit material distorts children's understanding of healthy sexual relationships, normalizes sexual aggression, and fosters sexually coercive attitudes, particularly in contexts where comprehensive sexuality education is absent. In the Zimbabwean context, Nhundu and Shumba (2001) noted that the lack of structured child protection frameworks and the normalization of silence around sexuality render children particularly susceptible to misinterpreting sexual content. More recently, researchers such as Malamuth and Huppin (2005) have argued that the impact of pornography on young viewers is amplified when children lack the critical cognitive frameworks to contextualize what they observe, a condition that is developmentally appropriate for children under the age of 15. The current findings align with these positions, as child participants in this study demonstrated a clear inability to distinguish between the fictional performance of sexuality in pornographic material and the ethical and legal boundaries governing sexual behavior in real life.

Theoretically, the findings are best understood through the lens of Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn and reproduce behaviors observed in their social environment, particularly when such behaviors are modelled by figures perceived as authoritative or desirable. In this study, children did not learn abusive behaviors through direct adult instruction but through the passive yet powerful medium of pornographic video content. The imitative sexual acts described by child participants, including reenacting scenes observed in explicit videos with younger or more vulnerable peers, are consistent with Bandura's concept of observational learning and behavioral modelling. When children in Mbare watched pornographic content on shared devices, they internalized sexual scripts that subsequently guided their behavioral responses.

4.2.3 Online Grooming and Sexual Exploitation

A second prominent theme that emerged from the data was the role of online grooming and sexual exploitation as a critical pathway through which children in Mbare were initiated into abusive and exploitative sexual behaviors. Participants revealed that social media platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, had become primary spaces through which older individuals, including older adolescents and adults, established contact with younger children under the guise of friendship, romance, or material assistance. Children described a

gradual process in which perpetrators built trust over time by sending gifts, mobile data, and money before eventually requesting sexually explicit photographs or videos, or arranging in-person meetings of a sexual nature. This process, consistent with the internationally recognized definition of grooming, was largely invisible to parents and caregivers, who remained unaware of the online relationships their children were cultivating. Several child participants disclosed that they had initially shared their intimate images willingly, having been manipulated into believing they were in a loving and exclusive relationship with the person contacting them online. The data further revealed a disturbing secondary dimension of exploitation, wherein some children who had been groomed online subsequently began grooming younger or more vulnerable peers themselves, replicating the same manipulative strategies they had experienced. This cycle of exploitation was reinforced by material incentives, as some children reported receiving money or goods in exchange for recruiting other children into online sexual networks. Child protection members from law enforcement highlighted that cases involving online grooming in Mbare were grossly underreported due to the stigma attached to sexual exploitation, children's fear of punishment for having engaged with strangers online, and caregivers' general lack of digital literacy, which prevented them from identifying warning signs of grooming at an early stage.

Child Participant 8 Female, aged 15 state;s that**;**

"Akatanga kundiumira mari pa EcoCash, ndikafunga kuti anondida chaizvo. Akati ndimutumure mafoto angu ndakashama , ndikamutumira mafoto angu. Pashure paizvozvo, akatanga kundityikidzira kuti achaposta mafoto aya kana ndikasauya kumba kwake nevamwe vasikana vaanoda. Ndakatya chaizvo, ndikabva ndaenda navo.

"*He started sending me money on EcoCash, and I thought he truly loved me. He said send me your pictures, and I sent him my naked photos. After that, he started threatening me that he would post those pictures if I did not bring other girls he wanted. I was very scared, and I found myself trapped in that situation, just agreeing to whatever he wanted*

Male Child Participant 10, aged 15, state's that;

"Pane mumwe murume aitaura neni pa Facebook, akati anoda kundibatsira nechikoro. Akaisa mari muaccount yangu kamwe chete. Pashure pacho, akati ndofanha kuzomuona inini ne shamwari yangu kana kuti ndaizofanha kumudzorera mari yake. Izvezvi ndoshunguridzika kuti ndoiwana kupi maro yacho kuti ndisaende, handina munhu wandakamboudza

"There was a man who was talking to me on Facebook, saying he wanted to help me with school. He deposited money into my account one time. After that, he said I should go and see him with my friend or I should return the money he gave me. Now I'm stressed because I don't know where to find the money so that I could not go and see him. I didn't tell anyone about this."

Female child protection member 3 state's that*:*

"Online grooming is one of the most rapidly escalating forms of child sexual exploitation we are encountering in urban communities like Mbare. What makes it particularly insidious is its invisibility. By the time a case reaches us, the abuse has typically been ongoing for months, and the child has already been conditioned to protect the perpetrator out of fear, shame, or a misplaced sense of loyalty. We have also observed a very concerning trend where children who have been groomed become secondary groomers themselves, luring their peers into these online

From a social work perspective, the findings on online grooming and sexual exploitation reveal a deeply entrenched and multidimensional safeguarding crisis in Mbare that extends well beyond the individual interactions between perpetrators and child victims. The verbatim accounts of child participants expose the calculated and systematic nature of grooming, in which perpetrators deliberately exploit the developmental vulnerabilities of adolescents, including their need for affirmation, material resources, and romantic connection, to gain compliance and maintain control. Social work theory recognizes this as a form of coercive control operationalized through the medium of digital technology, where the power imbalance between adult perpetrators and child victims is obscured by the language of care, love, and generosity. The role of material poverty as an enabling condition cannot be overstated, children

in Mbare who accepted gifts, data, and money from online perpetrators did so within a context of profound economic deprivation in which such material assistance represented a genuine and immediate need.

The theme of online grooming and sexual exploitation in Mbare is consistent with a rapidly expanding body of global and African scholarship that has documented the convergence of digital technology, poverty, and inadequate child protection systems as key drivers of online child sexual exploitation. Whittle et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review of online grooming literature and identified a clear pattern of staged trust building, desensitization, and coercive control that mirrors precisely the experiences described by child participants in the present study. Their findings established that groomers typically invest significant time and resources, including gifts, emotional support, and financial assistance, before initiating explicit sexual demands, a strategy designed to cultivate dependency and obligation in the child victim.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory again proves indispensable in contextualizing the systemic conditions underpinning this theme. At the microsystem level, children in Mbare operate within households characterized by poverty, caregiver absence, and digital unsupervisedness. At the mesosystem level, the disconnection between home, school, and community institutions means that no single environment provides children with coherent and consistent guidance on online safety or healthy relationships. At the ecosystem level, the underfunding and under-resourcing of the Zimbabwe Republic Police's Victim Friendly Unit, as acknowledged by the child protection member, limits the state's capacity to detect, investigate, and prosecute online grooming cases effectively. At the microsystem level, Zimbabwe's legislative framework, including the Trafficking in Persons Act (Chapter 9:25) and the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021), while providing a legal basis for prosecuting online exploitation, remains insufficiently implemented and community-inaccessible, leaving children without meaningful legal protection in practice. Bronfenbrenner's model therefore calls for multi-systemic interventions that simultaneously strengthen individual children's protective capacities, improve caregiver-school communication regarding digital risks, resource law enforcement adequately, and ensure that child protection legislation is operationalized at community level.

4.3 Implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare.

This section reviewed the implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare as stated by the participants.

4.3.1 Psychosocial and Emotional Effects

Social media related child abuse was found to produce severe and wide ranging psychosocial and emotional effects among children in Mbare. Participants consistently reported experiences of persistent sadness, fear, shame, and emotional numbness following incidents of online abuse, with several children describing symptoms consistent with anxiety and depression that disrupted their daily functioning. The data revealed that children who were cyberbullied, exposed to explicit content, or publicly humiliated online experienced a profound erosion of self-worth, with many internalizing negative labels assigned to them by online perpetrators. Emotional dysregulation including sudden outbursts of anger, prolonged crying, and emotional withdrawal was noted by caregivers as a visible and distressing change in their children's behavior following abuse. Participants further described heightened fear and hypervigilance in social settings, as children became unable to distinguish safe relationships from potentially harmful ones. Several children disclosed experiences of hopelessness and, in more serious cases, thoughts of self-harm, signaling the depth of psychological injury inflicted by online abuse. The findings indicate that the psychosocial effects of social media abuse are compounded in Mbare by the absence of accessible mental health services, cultural stigma around emotional distress, and limited caregiver capacity to provide emotionally supportive responses. Child protection members observed that untreated emotional trauma from online abuse frequently manifests in behavioral changes that are misread by adults as defiance, further isolating children from the support they need.

> Child Participant Female, aged 13 state's that:
>
> *"Pandakaona zvaitaurwa nevamwe vana pamusoro pangu pa WhatsApp, ndakarwadziwa kwazvo mukati. Ndakamira kudya uye kurara zvakanaka kwemavhiki maviri. Ndaifunga kuti handina basa uye kuti vose vanondivenga. Ndakachema usiku hwese ndisingaita ruzha rekuti mai vangu vazwe. Ndakatanga*

kutya kutaura nevamwe vana nekuti ndaifunga kuti vese vari kundiseka. Handina kumboda kudzoka kuchikoro futi."

"When I saw what the other children had done to me on WhatsApp, I was deeply hurt inside. I stopped eating and sleeping properly for two weeks. I thought I had no value and that everyone hated me. I cried every night without making noise so my mother would not hear. I started fearing to speak with other children because I thought they were all laughing at me. I never wanted to go back to school again."

Female Caregiver Participant 1 aged 36 state's that;

"Ndakaona mwana wangu achichinja maitiro pamberi pangu.Akatanga kurega kudya, akaramba kutaura neni, aichema pasina chikonzero chinoonekwa. Ndakamubvunza kuti chii chikunetsa asi akaramba kutaura. Ndakafunga kuti paive nemweya wakaipa nekuti handina kunzwisisa kuti zvinoitika pa internet zvingarwadze munhu kudaro. Ndinorwadziwa mwoyo nekuti mwana wangu akarwadziwa uye ndisingakwanise kumubatsira nokuti handina mari uye handizivi zvekuita."

"I watched my child change right before my eyes. She stopped eating, refused to talk to me, and cried for no visible reason. I asked what was wrong but they refused to say. I thought it was an evil spirit because I did not understand that being abused on the internet could hurt a child that deeply. I am heartbroken because my child is suffering and I cannot help because I have no money and I do not know what to do."

Female child protection member 1 (Social Worker) states that;

"The emotional damage from online abuse is real and severe. We encounter children who present with classic trauma symptoms nightmares, withdrawal, self-blame, difficulty concentrating. The problem is that in this community, emotional suffering is not easily recognized as something that needs professional attention. Caregivers often attribute behavioral changes to spiritual causes or discipline problems, which delays help seeking significantly. By the time a child reaches our

office, the psychological harm has deepened considerably. We urgently need community level psychosocial first aid and early identification systems."

Female child protection member 5 teacher state's that;

"I have seen children come to school visibly distressed unable to focus, tearful, easily startled. When I probe gently, online abuse experiences emerge consistently. These children are carrying enormous emotional weight with no outlet. The school system is not equipped to respond I am one counsellor for over eight hundred learners. We need structured psychosocial support embedded in the school timetable and trained teachers who can identify children in emotional distress before it reaches crisis point."

From a social work perspective, the psychosocial and emotional effects documented in this theme represent a serious and often invisible dimension of child abuse that demands urgent professional attention. The female child participant's account marked by loss of appetite, sleeplessness, self-deprecation, and social withdrawal is consistent with a trauma response to relational violation, in which the child's sense of safety and self-worth has been fundamentally disrupted. Critically, her concealment of distress from her mother illustrates how shame and anticipated disbelief compound the original harm, creating an internal suffering that remains invisible to the very caregivers positioned to help. The mother caregiver's attribution of her child's changed behavior to spiritual causes reflects the broader cultural context in which emotional and psychological distress is frequently misrecognized, delaying access to appropriate support. This is not a failure of parental care but a consequence of limited psychosocial literacy a gap that social work education programmers in communities like Mbare must urgently address. The school counsellor's testimony of an eight-hundred to one learner-to-counsellor ratio exposes the structural inadequacy of the current support system and underscores the impossibility of meaningful early intervention under these conditions. Social workers must respond not only by providing direct psychosocial support to affected children but by advocating loudly for the resourcing of school-based and community-based mental health infrastructure as a non-negotiable component of child protection in the digital age.

The psychosocial and emotional consequences of social media child abuse are extensively documented in contemporary research. Kowalski, Limber and Agatston (2012) found that

victims of cyberbullying report significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation than both non victims and victims of traditional bullying, attributing this elevated harm to the omnipresence and inescapability of online abuse. These findings directly mirror the emotional presentations described by participants in this study, particularly the child participant's persistent sadness, social withdrawal, and disrupted sleep.

Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development provides a developmental framework for contextualizing the emotional harm observed in this study. For adolescents navigating the stage of identity versus role confusion, online humiliation and peer rejection strike at the core developmental task of building a coherent and positive self-concept. When social media becomes a platform for the public destruction of a child's reputation and identity, it can arrest or distort this developmental process, producing lasting difficulties with self-esteem, intimacy, and social participation. The self-deprecating cognitions expressed by the child participant believing she was worthless and universally disliked are consistent with this developmental disruption.

The trauma-informed care framework (SAMHSA, 2014) and Herman's (1992) recovery model together provide the practice framework for social work intervention with emotionally affected children. Safety, trust, and empowerment must be established before any narrative processing of the trauma can occur, and social workers must be trained to create these conditions within the community and school contexts in which they practice. The UNCRC (1989) Article 39 reinforces the state's obligation to promote psychological recovery and social reintegration for child victims an obligation that is currently unmet in Mbare and that demands systemic rather than individual level response.

4.3.2 Poor Academic Performance

Poor academic performance emerged as a significant and consistent implication of social media related child abuse among children in Mbare. The data revealed a clear pattern in which the emotional and psychological distress caused by online abuse directly undermined children's capacity to engage meaningfully with learning, resulting in deteriorating grades, increased absenteeism, loss of concentration, and disengagement from school altogether. Participants described children who had previously been enthusiastic and capable learners becoming academically disengaged following experiences of cyberbullying, online humiliation, or

exposure to disturbing digital content. The cognitive load of processing unresolved trauma including intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, and emotional dysregulation was identified as a primary mechanism through which online abuse disrupts academic functioning, as children are unable to allocate the mental resources required for sustained learning when their psychological safety has been compromised. Teachers and key informants noted that declining academic performance was frequently the first observable indicator of online abuse, yet schools lacked both the awareness and the structural capacity to investigate its root causes. Several participants described how school avoidance, driven by fear of peer ridicule following online incidents, compounded into chronic absenteeism that created insurmountable academic backlogs. Caregivers expressed frustration and confusion at their children's academic decline, often responding with punishment rather than inquiry, which further deepened children's sense of shame and isolation. The findings underscore that academic underperformance in the context of online abuse is a symptom of deeper psychosocial harm rather than a deficit of ability or motivation, demanding a compassionate and trauma-informed educational response.

Male child Participant 2 aged 14 state's that;

"Pandakatukwa pa facebook, ndakatanga kusada kuenda kuchikoro nekuti ndaitya vana vandinoziva. Ndakaenda kuchikoro kamwe chete pavhiki inotevera Pfungwa dzangu dzaingofunga matukirwo andakaitwa,ndaisanzwa zvandaidzidziswa. Mudzidzisi aindipa homework yangu ndaibva ndarega kuiita zvachose nekuti ndaifunga kuti hapana zvazvaibatsira kwandiri. Nekuda kweizvozvo ndakatadza bvunzo dzangu dzemidterm uye baba vangu vakandirova nekuti vakafunga kuti ndiri lazy. Hapana aibvunza kuti chii chakonzera."

"After I was abused on facebook, I stopped wanting to go to school because I feared the children I knew. I only went to school once the following week. My mind was only on what had been done to me I could not hear what was being taught. The teacher gave me homework and I then stopped doing it . because I thought nothing mattered to me anymore. As a result, I failed my midterm examination and my father beat me because he thought I was being lazy. Nobody asked what was causing it."

Male child protection member 6 state's that;

"I have watched children go from top performers to near failure within a single term. When I investigate, online abuse is frequently at the center of the story. The child cannot concentrate, does not submit work, starts missing school. We treat it as a discipline problem and that is where we go wrong. Schools need to be equipped to recognize trauma driven academic decline and respond with support rather than punishment. Teacher training on the relationship between online abuse and learning must become standard. We are losing academically capable children because we are not asking the right questions."

Female child protection member 1(Social worker) state's that;

"Academic underperformance linked to psychosocial trauma is one of the most underdiagnosed phenomena in Zimbabwean schools. Children present as unmotivated or defiant when they are actually deeply distressed. Cognitive functioning memory, attention, problem-solving is directly compromised by trauma exposure. We need school-based psychological support structures and teacher training in trauma-sensitive pedagogy. Without these, schools inadvertently become sites of secondary harm for children already wounded by online abuse."

From a social work perspective, the academic decline documented in this theme is not a standalone educational problem but a direct manifestation of unaddressed psychosocial trauma, and must be understood and responded to as such. The male child participant's trajectory from school avoidance through absenteeism to examination failure illustrates the cascading nature of harm that unfolds when online abuse trauma is met with punishment rather than support. His father's belated recognition that physical discipline was an inadequate and potentially harmful response reflects a broader need for caregiver education about the relationship between online abuse, emotional distress, and behavioral change. The teacher's testimony confirms that schools are currently positioned as sites of secondary harm rather than recovery, applying disciplinary responses to what are fundamentally trauma symptoms a misalignment that social workers must actively work to correct through professional advocacy, educator training, and the development of trauma-sensitive school policies. The education psychologist's framing of academic underperformance as a manifestation of compromised cognitive functioning under trauma reinforces the need for social workers to collaborate closely with educators in

developing whole-school approaches that integrate psychosocial support with academic intervention. Critically, social workers must advocate for the systemic reframing of academic failure in the context of online abuse from a problem of the child's character or capacity to a problem of the system's failure to protect and support. This reframing is not only theoretically sound but ethically essential, as it shifts accountability from the victimized child to the institutions and structures responsible for their welfare.

The relationship between trauma exposure and academic underperformance is well-established in the literature. Porche and colleagues (2011) demonstrated through longitudinal research that children who experience chronic stress and trauma show measurable deficits in working memory, executive function, and reading comprehension the core cognitive competencies required for academic success. These neurological impacts of trauma directly explain the concentration difficulties, inability to complete homework, and examination failure reported by participants in this study, grounding what might appear as motivational deficits in their neurobiological reality.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning illuminates the social dimension of academic disengagement observed in Mbare. Vygotsky argued that learning is fundamentally a social process, mediated through interaction with peers, teachers, and the broader cultural environment. When online abuse destroys a child's safe engagement with the peer learning community as evidenced by the school avoidance and social withdrawal of participants it simultaneously dismantles the social scaffolding upon which academic development depends. Recovery of academic functioning therefore requires not only individual support but the rebuilding of safe, trusting learning relationships within the school community.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model situates academic underperformance within its full systemic context. At the microsystem level, trauma disrupts the child's cognitive and emotional capacity. At the mesosystem level, the disconnect between home and school responses compounds harm. At the ecosystem level, inadequate school counselling resources and teacher training leave frontline educators ill-equipped to respond. At the microsystem level, educational policy in Zimbabwe has not integrated trauma-sensitive frameworks into school management systems. Effective social work intervention must therefore operate across all these

levels simultaneously, building connections between family support, school response, and policy advocacy.

4.4 Social work related interventions to address abuse of children through social media

This section reviewed social work related interventions to address abuse of children through social media as stated by the participants.

4.4.1 Community Awareness and Digital Literacy Program

Community awareness and digital literacy programs were identified by participants as a primary and urgently needed social work intervention to address social media related child abuse in Mbare. The data consistently revealed that a significant barrier to child protection in the digital space is the widespread lack of awareness among children, caregivers, and community members about the nature, forms, and consequences of online abuse, as well as the digital skills required to navigate social media platforms safely. Participants described communities in which children access digital content without any foundational understanding of online risks, privacy settings, or appropriate boundaries, largely because adults themselves lack the competency to provide guidance. Child protection members emphasized that community awareness programs must go beyond one-off information sessions and instead be embedded as ongoing, participatory initiatives that are culturally relevant, linguistically accessible, and delivered through trusted community structures such as churches, schools, community centers, and neighborhood committees. The data further highlighted the critical role of peer education models, in which trained young people serve as digital safety ambassadors within their communities, reaching peers through relatable language and shared experience. Caregivers expressed a strong desire to be equipped with practical digital literacy skills that would enable them to monitor children's online activity, recognize warning signs of abuse, and engage in open conversations about digital safety. Social workers and community development practitioners were identified as well-positioned professionals to design, coordinate, and evaluate such programs in partnership with local government, civil society organizations, and technology providers. The findings underscore that community awareness and digital literacy are not peripheral add-ons to child protection work but foundational components of a comprehensive, prevention-focused response to social media child abuse in resource-limited urban communities like Mbare

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Female Child protection member 4(social worker) state's that;

"We have been running community meetings for years on issues like drug abuse and early marriage, but digital safety has never been on the agenda because people do not see the internet as a danger they see it as progress. That mindset needs to change. We need structured awareness campaigns that explain to parents, in plain Shona, what cyberbullying looks like, how grooming happens, and what a child should do if they are abused online. Social workers are the right people to lead this because they already have the trust of the community. But they need training, resources, and institutional backing to make it sustainable. One workshop is not enough this needs to be a continuous community education process."

Male child protection member 2 state's that;

"Digital literacy is a child protection issue, full stop. In our work across urban communities in Zimbabwe, we have found that peer led digital safety programs are the most effective because children respond to their own. When a trained peer ambassador explains online risks using examples from TikTok and WhatsApp, children listen in a way they never would if an adult stood in front of a classroom and lectured them. We also need to bring caregivers into the process not to police children online, but to create homes where digital safety conversations are normal and children feel safe disclosing abuse. Social workers must be the bridge between community awareness and formal child protection systems."

Female Caregiver Participant 4 aged 67 state;s that;

"I do not know how WhatsApp works. My grandchild sends me things but I do not understand them. I wanted there to be someone who could come to our home or our church to teach us elders about these things. If I knew, I would be able to protect my grandchild. Children today live on phones but we elders cannot protect them because we cannot see what they are seeing. I would like to learn what to do when I suspect a child is being abused on the internet

Female child Participant, aged 14 state's that;

"Hapana akambotiudza kuti ndingadzivirira sei pa internet. Kuchikoro tinodzidza computer lessons asi hatidzidziswa nezve safety. Kana shamwari yangu akandiratidza chinhu chakaipa, handizivi kuti ndinofanira kuita sei kuripota here, kana kuti ndobloka sei handize,. Dai paine programme yechikoro kana yemumusha inotidzidzisa izvozvo, zvaindibatsira. Ndingada kudzidziswa kuti ndigone kudzivirira ini pachanga uye kukurudzira vamwe vana."

"Nobody ever told me how to protect myself on the internet. At school we have computer lessons but we are not taught about safety. If a friend shows me something harmful, I do not know what I am supposed to do whether to report it, how to block, or how to delete it. If there were a school or community program that taught us this, it would uplift us. I would like to be taught so that I can protect myself and encourage other children.")

From a social work perspective, the call for community awareness and digital literacy programs reflects a prevention oriented approach that is central to contemporary child protection practice. The grandmother caregiver's account starkly illustrates the intergenerational digital divide that leaves older guardians structurally unable to fulfil their protective role in digital spaces, despite their genuine commitment to their grandchildren's safety. This is not a failure of caregiving intent but of access to knowledge a gap that is fully addressable through well designed, community embedded literacy interventions. The child participant's expressed desire to be equipped with practical digital safety skills signals both her agency and her awareness of her own vulnerability, underscoring the importance of child centered program design that treats young people as active participants rather than passive recipients of adult-directed protection. The child protection member convergent emphasis on sustainability, cultural relevance, and peer led delivery reflects evidence informed best practice in community education, challenging social workers to move beyond episodic awareness events toward programmatic, relationship-based approaches. Critically, the data suggests that digital literacy in Mbare must be understood as a social justice issue, children from wealthier, more educated families have access to digitally literate parents and quality internet safety education at school, while children in Mbare

navigate the same digital risks with none of these protective resources. Social workers must therefore advocate not only for program delivery but for equitable access to digital safety education as a fundamental component of children's rights in the digital age.

The imperative for community awareness and digital literacy as a child protection intervention is well supported in the academic literature. Livingstone and Haddon (2009) established through the EU Kids Online framework that children's online safety is most effectively promoted through a combination of digital literacy education, parental mediation, and structural regulatory measures. Their research demonstrates that children who receive digital safety education and have digitally engaged caregivers are significantly better equipped to recognize, resist, and report online harm findings that are directly applicable to the Mbare context, where both elements are currently absent.

Freire's (1970) theory of conscientisation, developed in his seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, provides a transformative theoretical foundation for community digital literacy programs in Mbare. Freire argued that genuine education is not the transfer of information from expert to recipient but a dialogical process through which people develop critical consciousness of the forces shaping their lives and become empowered to act upon them. Applied to digital safety, a Freirean approach would engage community members as co-investigators of their digital environment, building collective understanding of online risks and shared ownership of protective strategies an approach far more likely to produce sustained behavior change than top-down information campaigns.

The UNCRC (1989) Articles 17 and 19, read together, establish both children's right to access safe information and the state's obligation to protect children from harm a dual mandate that places community digital literacy firmly within the domain of children's rights rather than optional programming. Complementing this, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) Article 11 obligates state parties to take measures to ensure children receive education that promotes their dignity and prepares them to participate fully in their society. In the digital age, preparation for full societal participation must include digital literacy, compelling Zimbabwean authorities and social work practitioners to mainstream digital safety education across all child and family services in Mbare and beyond.

4.4.2 Strengthening Legal and Policy Frameworks

Strengthening legal and policy frameworks emerged as a critical social work intervention identified by participants to effectively address social media related child abuse in Mbare. The data revealed a pervasive sense among child protection members, caregivers, and children that perpetrators of online abuse operate with near-total impunity, largely because existing legal instruments in Zimbabwe are inadequate, insufficiently enforced, or unknown to the communities they are meant to protect. Participants highlighted that while Zimbabwe has general child protection legislation under the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) and provisions under the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, these frameworks do not comprehensively or specifically address digital forms of child abuse such as cyberbullying, online grooming, or nonconsensual sharing of intimate images. Key informants noted that the absence of child-specific digital safety legislation creates significant gaps in accountability, leaving social workers, police, and prosecutors without clear legal tools to pursue justice for victims of online child abuse. The data further indicated that even where relevant laws exist, awareness of these provisions among frontline practitioners, community members, and children themselves is negligible, rendering them practically ineffective as protective mechanisms. Participants advocated for the development and enactment of comprehensive, child-sensitive digital legislation that explicitly criminalizes online forms of child abuse, establishes clear reporting pathways, mandates platform accountability, and provides for the rehabilitation of offenders. Social workers were identified as essential advocates in the policy development process, given their direct knowledge of community-level harm and their professional mandate to pursue social justice. The findings collectively underscore that legal and policy reform is not merely a government function but an arena of active social work advocacy that is indispensable to the protection of children in the digital age.

> Female child protection member 1 (Social worker) state's that;
>
> *"The legal framework in Zimbabwe is simply not designed for the digital age of child protection. When a parent comes to us saying their child has been cyberbullied or groomed online, we struggle to find the right charge. The Criminal Law Act has provisions on harassment and sexual offences, but they were drafted before smartphones existed. There is no specific legislation on cyberbullying, no law that*

explicitly criminalizes online grooming of children, and no clear provision requiring social media platforms to cooperate with investigations. We need a comprehensive Cyber Child Protection Act that closes these gaps, sets mandatory reporting obligations for platforms, and establishes a specialized unit within the police and judiciary trained to handle digital child abuse cases.

Male Child protection member 9(Law enforcement) state's that**;**

"We are aware that the current policy environment has not kept pace with the digital realities facing children. There are ongoing consultations around updating the Children's Act and developing a national child online protection strategy, but progress is slow due to resource constraints and competing policy priorities. What is needed is political will, multi-stakeholder coordination, and sustained advocacy from civil society and the social work profession. Social workers are uniquely positioned to bring the community voice into these policy conversations they see daily what legal impunity means for children in communities like Mbare. Their testimony and case evidence should be driving the reform agenda."

Male child Participant 4 aged 15 state's that;

"Handizivi kuti kuna mutemo unorwira vana pa internet muZimbabwe. Dai ndaiziva kuti pane mutemo unondiprotector uye kuti ndingaenda kupi kuno reporter nyaya yangu, ndaizoramba ndichienda. Asi zvisinei, hatina kuudxa vanhu kunze kwa vanhu vekumba nekuti taisada kuti zvizikanwe nevavakidzani. Vanhu vanoda kudzidziswa nezvematemo uyu kuti vana vazive kuti vane kodzero."

"I do not know if there is a law that protects children on the internet in Zimbabwe. If I knew there was a law protecting me and where I could go to report my case, I would have kept trying. But regardless, we never told anyone outside the family because we did not want our issue to reach everyone. People need to be educated about these laws so that children know they have rights."

From a social work perspective, the findings on legal and policy frameworks reveal a profound justice deficit that fundamentally undermines child protection efforts in Mbare. The legal aid lawyer's account exposes the structural inadequacy of Zimbabwe's current legislative architecture in addressing digital child abuse, confirming that gaps in the law translate directly into impunity for perpetrators and abandonment of victims. Zimbabwe legislative deficiency operates at the individual and family level, producing not only practical helplessness but profound disillusionment with child protection institutions. This institutional failure has a chilling effect on disclosure and help-seeking, as the child participant's testimony reveals: without knowledge of legal protections, children internalize their abuse as unbetterable and invisible to the state. The policy advisor's acknowledgement of ongoing reform processes, while encouraging, underscores the urgency of sustained civil society and social work advocacy to accelerate legislative action. Social workers in Mbare and across Zimbabwe must understand policy advocacy not as an abstract professional aspiration but as a practical child protection obligation one that requires them to document case evidence, engage policymakers, build coalitions with legal and civil society actors, and amplify the voices of affected children and families in legislative and policy arenas. The data makes clear that legal reform without community awareness of new provisions will remain ineffective, reinforcing the interconnection between this theme and the digital literacy interventions discussed in the preceding section.

The call for strengthened legal and policy frameworks to address online child abuse is well-anchored in international scholarship and human rights discourse. Sonia Livingstone and colleagues (2012), in their analysis of child online protection governance, argue that effective protection requires a three-layered regulatory response encompassing legislation that criminalizes abuse, industry self-regulation that builds safety into platform design, and empowerment education that equips children and caregivers to navigate risks. The findings of this study reveal that all three layers are critically underdeveloped in Zimbabwe, with the legislative layer being particularly deficient in its failure to address digital-specific forms of child harm.

The theoretical framework of legal empowerment, advanced by Golub (2003), is instructive here. Golub argues that law is only protective when communities are aware of their legal rights and have accessible mechanisms through which to exercise them. In Mbare, even the limited

legal provisions that exist offer no practical protection because community members — including the child participant in this study — are unaware of them and have no accessible pathway to invoke them. This renders legal reform a necessary but insufficient intervention unless accompanied by community legal literacy and accessible reporting systems, a point that reinforces the interdependence of all three themes in this objective.

International comparative experience offers important lessons for Zimbabwe's reform agenda. The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act (2023) and the European Union's Digital Services Act (2022) represent landmark legislative frameworks that place mandatory child safety obligations on digital platforms, require proactive removal of child sexual abuse material, and establish clear accountability mechanisms for non-compliance. While these frameworks emerge from high-income contexts with greater regulatory capacity, they establish a normative standard that developing country governments, including Zimbabwe, can adapt to their legal and institutional contexts, as argued by Bulger and Davison (2018) in their comparative analysis of digital child safety governance.

Social work's engagement with legal reform is grounded in the profession's foundational commitment to social justice, as articulated in the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014), which explicitly charges social workers with challenging unjust policies and working toward structural change. Dominelli (2012) further argues that anti-oppressive social work practice requires practitioners to engage critically with the legal and policy systems that either protect or expose vulnerable people, using their practitioner knowledge as evidence to drive reform. In the context of this study, social workers in Mbare possess irreplaceable first-hand evidence of the legal protection gaps experienced by children and families — evidence that must be systematically documented and channeled into policy advocacy processes at local, national, and regional levels.

The UNCRC (1989) General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, adopted in 2021, provides the most current and comprehensive international normative framework for this discussion. It calls on state parties to enact or adapt legislation to explicitly protect children from digital violence, establish child-sensitive reporting and justice mechanisms, and ensure that digital safety is mainstreamed across all child-related policy domains. Zimbabwe's obligations under the UNCRC, combined with its commitments

under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), create a binding normative basis for the legal reforms advocated by participants in this study, and social workers must leverage these international instruments in their domestic advocacy efforts.

4.4.3Strengthening Counselling and Support Services

Strengthening counselling and support services was identified by participants as an indispensable social work intervention to address the psychosocial consequences of social media related child abuse in Mbare. Participants reviewed that while policy and frameworks are being strengthened there is need for counseling and support services to cater for the victims of social media driven child abuse. The data revealed that children who experience online abuse suffer significant and often prolonged psychological harm including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation that remains largely unaddressed due to the near-total absence of accessible, child-friendly mental health and psychosocial support services in the community. Participants described a service landscape characterized by critical shortages of trained counsellors, the absence of school-based psychological support, prohibitive costs of private therapy, and deep cultural stigma around mental health help-seeking that collectively prevent affected children from accessing the care they need. Child protection members emphasized that counselling services in Mbare must be specifically trained in trauma-informed and child-sensitive approaches, equipping practitioners to recognize the signs of online abuse trauma, create safe disclosure environments, and provide evidence-based therapeutic interventions. The data further highlighted the importance of holistic support that extends beyond individual therapy to encompass family counselling, caregiver psychoeducation, peer support groups, and linkages to legal aid and material assistance recognizing that trauma recovery is not a clinical event but a social and relational process. Several participants advocated for school-based counselling as the most accessible and stigma-reducing entry point for support, given that schools represent the primary institutional contact point for children in Mbare. Social workers were consistently positioned as critical connectors within this support ecosystem identifying children in need, providing direct counselling, coordinating multi-disciplinary responses, and advocating for the resourcing of mental health services within child protection budgets. The findings collectively affirm that without robust, accessible, and specialized counselling and support services, all other interventions addressing online child abuse risk leaving children with unhealed wounds that compound into lifelong disadvantage.

Female child protection member 4 (social worker) states that;

"The psychological impact of social media abuse on children is serious and underestimated in this country. We see children presenting with clinical depression, PTSD symptoms, and in some cases active suicidal ideation, all directly linked to online abuse experiences. The tragedy is that most of these children do not reach us until the condition is already severe, because there are no community-level early intervention services. A child in Mbare who is struggling after being cyberbullied has nowhere to go. Their school has no counsellor, their family does not understand mental health, and the community clinic is not equipped for this. We need a cascade model trained social workers and community counsellors providing first-line psychosocial support at community level, with clear referral pathways to specialist services for complex cases."

Female caregiver participant 1, aged 38 state that**;**

"My child needed someone to talk to someone who does not know our family, without judgement, who would just listen. I love them but they think I will become angry if they tell me everything. I looked for a counsellor but they charge too much. There is one who helps for free but they always have a long waiting list and they are far away. If there were a social worker who came to school once a week or to our neighborhood, it would make it easier for children to access help. My child is suffering mentally and I see every day but I have no tool to help them."

Male child participant 6, aged 16 state that;

"I wanted to talk to someone but nobody knew me. My parents are stressed because of money and work. At school, the teacher is also worried about their own head. I heard that there are people whose job is to listen to children but I never knew that such a person existed at our school. If there were a school counsellor who knew my name and gave me space to talk about anything not going well on the phone or on the internet, I would definitely speak. I do not want my parents to know everything I just want a safe space that would be mine alone."

From a social work perspective, the findings on counselling and support services expose a critical gap between the psychosocial needs of children affected by online abuse and the services available to meet those needs in Mbare. The clinical social worker description of children arriving at specialist services only when their conditions are already severe reflects a systemic failure of early intervention a failure that is both preventable and costly in terms of long-term developmental outcomes. The mother caregiver's account is a powerful testimony to the service access barriers that operate at the intersection of cost, geography, and social stigma, demonstrating that even motivated, caring parents are structurally blocked from obtaining help for their children. The female child participant's articulation of her need for a confidential, non-judgmental space to process her online experiences is a clinically significant disclosure: it reveals that help-seeking motivation exists among affected children but is frustrated by the absence of accessible, child-friendly entry points. Social workers must recognize that the creation of safe, confidential, and culturally appropriate counselling spaces including school based and community-based models is a structural child protection imperative, not a luxury service. The social work lecturer's call for trauma-informed training as a standard competency rather than a specialization challenges the profession in Zimbabwe to urgently review its educational and supervisory frameworks to equip practitioners for the digital realities of contemporary child abuse. Ultimately, the data affirms that healing from social media abuse requires an ecosystem of care individual therapy, family support, peer solidarity, and community understanding that social workers are uniquely positioned to coordinate, advocate for, and help sustain

The critical importance of psychosocial support for children who have experienced online abuse is extensively documented in the literature. Kowalski, Limber and Agatston (2012) established that victims of cyberbullying experience significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation compared to victims of traditional bullying, attributing this elevated harm to the inescapability, permanence, and audience scale of online abuse. These findings align closely with the clinical presentations described by the psychologist key informant in this study and underscore the urgency of developing accessible mental health responses specifically calibrated to the psychological profile of online abuse trauma.

Trauma-informed care (TIC), as conceptualized by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), provides the foundational practice framework for

counselling interventions with children who have experienced social media abuse. TIC is grounded in six core principles: safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity. Applied to the Mbare context, these principles demand counselling environments in which children feel physically and emotionally safe, are treated as experts on their own experience, are supported by peers who share their reality, and receive services that are responsive to their cultural and linguistic context. The child participant's expressed need for a private, non-judgmental space reflects the safety and empowerment principles of TIC, affirming the framework's direct relevance to this community.

Herman's (1992) three-stage model of trauma recovery establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection offers a structured therapeutic roadmap for social workers and counsellors working with online abuse survivors in Mbare. In the first stage, practitioners must priorities stabilization and safety, ensuring that children are no longer exposed to ongoing abuse and have at least one trusted relationship. In the second stage, supported narrative processing allows children to make meaning of their experience. In the third stage, reconnection with peers, community, and self-worth is facilitated a stage that is particularly critical for children whose social isolation has eroded their sense of belonging and competence. The school-based counselling model advocated by participants in this study is well-suited to supporting all three stages of this recovery process within a familiar, accessible, and destigmatized setting.

The social work profession's ethical mandate to promote human dignity and wellbeing (IFSW, 2014) compels practitioners to advocate vigorously for the resourcing of counselling and psychosocial support services within national and local child protection budgets. Zimbabwe's National Mental Health Policy (2019) acknowledges the importance of community-based mental health care but allocates insufficient resources to child and adolescent mental health specifically. Social workers must leverage their professional authority, community relationships, and case evidence to advocate for dedicated funding for school-based counselling, community psychosocial workers, and digital-specific trauma support services. The UNCRC (1989) Article 39 explicitly obliges state parties to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims of abuse and neglect an obligation that is currently unmet for children in Mbare and that demands urgent, concerted, and sustained action from the social work profession, government, and civil society alike.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and analyzed findings on social media and child abuse in Mbare using qualitative data gathered through interviews and observations. The study established that cyberbullying, online grooming, exposure to explicit content and doxing are common forms of abuse affecting children in Mbare. The findings further revealed that social media-related abuse has serious psychological, behavioral, social and educational consequences on children. The chapter also established that poverty, weak parental supervision and limited digital literacy contribute to children's vulnerability to online abuse. Furthermore, the study identified possible social work interventions such as digital literacy programs, counselling services, school-based child protection initiatives and stronger enforcement of child protection laws.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a synthesis of the key findings generated from the study titled Child Abuse Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study of Mbare. It provides a summary of the research findings organized according to the study's objectives, followed by a conclusion drawn from a social work perspective. The chapter further outlines the implications of the study for social work practice and concludes with a set of evidence-based recommendations directed at practitioners, policymakers, schools, and communities. The findings of this research contribute to a growing body of knowledge on digital forms of child abuse in sub-Saharan African urban contexts and underscore the urgency of integrating digital child protection into mainstream social work practice in Zimbabwe.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The following section summarizes the key findings of the study objective by objective, drawing on the data presented and analyzed in Chapter Four.

5.1.1 Objective One: Nature and Forms of Social Media Related Child Abuse in Mbare

The first objective explored the nature and forms of social media related child abuse experienced by children in Mbare. Findings revealed that children are exposed to a wide range of online abuses through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. Cyberbullying emerged as the most prevalent form, involving the deliberate and repeated sending of threatening and degrading messages. Participants also disclosed experiences of online grooming, whereby adults used social media to build manipulative relationships with children for purposes of sexual exploitation. Image-based abuse the non-consensual sharing of intimate images was reported predominantly among adolescent girls. The study further found that children were exposed to harmful and age-inappropriate content through peer-sharing networks. The widespread availability of smartphones, limited parental digital literacy, and the absence of internet safety education in schools were identified as key structural enablers of online abuse in the community.

5.1.2 Objective Two: Implications of Social Media Related Child Abuse

The second objective examined the implications of social media related child abuse on the wellbeing of children in Mbare. Under Theme One Psychological and Emotional Effects children reported persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, worthlessness, and hopelessness, with several disclosing suicidal ideation as an extreme consequence of sustained online victimization. Caregivers observed marked behavioral changes including social withdrawal, loss of appetite, and disrupted sleep, while key informants flagged a critical shortage of specialized psychological services as a barrier to recovery. Under Theme Two Poor Academic Performance the study found that online abuse directly undermined educational engagement and achievement. Victims reported an inability to concentrate in class due to intrusive thoughts about harassment, and several resorted to school avoidance. Declining grades, absenteeism, and disengagement were documented by both caregivers and school counsellors, with the long-term impact on life opportunities in an already economically marginalized community identified as a particularly grave concern

5.1.3 Objective Three: Existing Mechanisms for Addressing Social Media Related Child Abuse

The third objective assessed existing mechanisms for preventing and responding to social media related child abuse in Mbare. Findings revealed significant gaps across institutional, community, and legislative levels. Although Zimbabwe has enacted the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) and the Child Care and Protection Act (Chapter 5:06), these instruments are poorly disseminated and rarely operationalized at community level. Schools lack formal cyberbullying policies, trained counsellors, and digital safety curricula. Community child protection structures have limited awareness of digital forms of abuse, and caregivers face cultural taboos and limited digital literacy that impede help-seeking. Social welfare offices were found to be under-resourced, with high social worker caseloads and no specialized training in digital child protection, leaving the response architecture fundamentally ill-equipped to address the scale of the problem.

5.2 Conclusions

This study confirms that social media has emerged as a significant and growing vector of child abuse in Mbare, and that children are situated within complex ecological systems marked by

poverty, weak institutional safeguarding, and cultural norms of silence that amplify their vulnerability to online harm. From a social work perspective, the findings underscore the inadequacy of individualistic and reactive approaches to child protection in the digital age. The psychological suffering, disrupted education, and absence of effective protective mechanisms documented in this study are outcomes of structural inequality and systemic neglect that the social work profession is ethically obligated to challenge. Child protection in the twenty first century must extend into the digital environments where children spend increasing proportions of their lives. The evidence from Mbare calls on social work in Zimbabwe and across the region to adopt practice that is digitally literate, trauma-informed, community-anchored, and structurally accountable.

This study concludes that the profound intergenerational digital divide observed in Mbare represents not merely a knowledge gap but a structural barrier to effective child protection in the digital age. The research found that caregivers including parents, grandparents, and extended family members frequently possess minimal or no digital literacy, rendering them unable to monitor, guide, or protect children's online activities. This divide is exacerbated by economic pressures that demand long working hours and multiple jobs, leaving caregivers with limited time and energy to engage with children's digital lives even when awareness exists. The consequence is a protection vacuum in which children navigate complex digital environments without meaningful adult mediation, supervision, or support. This study concludes that any intervention seeking to reduce social media-driven child abuse must prioritize closing this intergenerational digital divide through accessible, culturally appropriate, and economically feasible caregiver education programs. Without such efforts, children will continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for their own digital safety burden that developmentally they are not equipped to carry.

The study concludes that while Zimbabwe has made legislative progress through the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) and related instruments, law alone cannot protect children from social media-driven abuse. The research documented a stark disconnect between the existence of legal provisions and their practical accessibility, understandability, and enforceability at the community level. Children, caregivers, and even some frontline professionals in Mbare demonstrated limited awareness of existing legal protections, while specialized law enforcement capacity, digital forensics expertise, and child-friendly justice pathways remain critically underdeveloped. Furthermore, the transnational nature of much online child abuse

perpetrated by individuals across borders, on platforms headquartered in other jurisdictions places significant limits on what national legislation alone can achieve. This study concludes that effective digital child protection requires a multi-pronged approach in which legal reform is accompanied by intensive community legal literacy, investment in specialized institutional capacity, regional and international cooperation, and sustained advocacy to hold technology companies accountable for platform safety. Legal frameworks must be living instruments that communities can access, understand, and invoke, rather than abstract documents that exist only in statute books.

This study concludes that children's peer relationships in digital spaces function as double-edged swords simultaneously constituting pathways through which abuse spreads and potential resources for protection and resilience. The research found that peer pressure, peer sharing of explicit content, and peer-facilitated grooming were significant mechanisms through which children in Mbare were exposed to harm. Children who encountered abusive content or interactions frequently shared these experiences with peers, sometimes normalizing harmful behavior or drawing additional children into cycles of victimization and perpetration. However, the study also found that children consistently identified peers as the individuals they would most likely turn to for support and understanding, often preferring peer disclosure over adult disclosure due to fears of punishment, shame, or disbelief. This duality suggests that peer-led and peer-supported interventions hold significant untapped potential for digital child protection. The study concludes that social work practice must move beyond viewing peer influence solely as a risk factor and instead engage strategically with peer networks as protective resources, through peer education programs, youth ambassador initiatives, and the cultivation of positive peer norms around digital safety, consent, and mutual support.

5.3 Implications for Social Work Practice

At the individual and family level, social workers must fundamentally expand their practice competencies to encompass digital child protection assessment and intervention. Traditional child protection assessment frameworks in Zimbabwe have been designed primarily around physical and environmental indicators of risk visible injuries, home conditions, caregiver presence, and school attendance. This study demonstrates that social workers must now develop capacity to assess digital risk factors with equivalent rigor, including children's platform usage patterns, privacy settings, contact networks, exposure to harmful content, and

experiences of online victimization. This requires social workers to become digitally literate themselves, not merely as personal users of technology but as professional practitioners who can navigate platforms, understand their affordances and risks, and communicate effectively with children about their digital lives.

The study findings imply that social workers must integrate trauma-informed care principles specifically calibrated to online abuse trauma. Children who have experienced cyberbullying, grooming, or sextortion present with unique psychological profiles their trauma is often characterized by inescapability (the abuse follows them home via their devices), permanence (digital content can be endlessly replicated), audience scale (humiliation may be witnessed by hundreds or thousands), and anonymity of perpetrators (preventing closure or accountability). Social workers must be trained to recognize these distinctive trauma features and to adapt their therapeutic responses accordingly, avoiding approaches that inadvertently re-traumatize children through forced disclosure, victim-blaming, or minimization of online experiences as "virtual" rather than real harm.

Furthermore, the research implies that family-based interventions must address the intergenerational digital divide as a core component of child protection planning. Social workers conducting family assessments in Mbare and similar communities should evaluate not only whether caregivers are physically present but whether they possess the digital knowledge and skills to provide meaningful online supervision. Where such capacity is absent, interventions should prioritize caregiver digital literacy alongside traditional parenting support, recognizing that effective digital parenting requires specific competencies that cannot be assumed from general caregiving ability.

At the community and institutional level, the study implies that social workers must assume expanded roles as designers, coordinators, and evaluators of community-based digital child protection programs. The findings demonstrate that child protection committees in Mbare, while possessing valuable community legitimacy and local knowledge, currently lack awareness of digital abuse forms and have not adapted their mandates to encompass online risks. Social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap by providing training, technical assistance, and ongoing supervision to these grassroots structures, enabling them to identify digital abuse indicators, respond appropriately to disclosures, and make effective referrals to formal services.

The research implies that schools represent critical but underutilized sites for digital child protection intervention. With children spending significant portions of their day in school environments, and with teachers often being the first adults to observe behavioral changes associated with online abuse, social workers must collaborate intensively with educational institutions to develop whole-school approaches to digital safety. This includes integrating digital citizenship and online safety into curricula, training teachers as first responders to digital abuse disclosures, establishing confidential reporting mechanisms within schools, and ensuring that school counsellors where they exist are equipped to provide trauma-sensitive support for online abuse victims. The study's finding of counsellor-to-student ratios exceeding 1:800 underscores the structural inadequacy of current provision and implies that social workers must advocate forcefully for dedicated funding and staffing of school-based mental health and child protection services.

The findings also imply that social workers must develop innovative models of community engagement that account for the specific cultural, linguistic, and economic realities of high-density urban communities like Mbare. Awareness campaigns developed for Western or even other African contexts may not resonate with local populations. Social workers must engage in participatory program design, involving children, caregivers, community leaders, and local institutions in the development of interventions that are culturally grounded, linguistically accessible (including use of Shona and Ndebele), and economically feasible for resource-constrained families.

At the policy and structural level, the study implies that the social work profession in Zimbabwe must assume a more prominent and assertive role in digital child protection policy advocacy. The research documented significant gaps between existing legislative frameworks and their practical implementation, as well as the absence of child-specific digital safety legislation. Social workers, by virtue of their direct knowledge of community-level harm and their ethical commitment to social justice, possess irreplaceable evidence and moral authority to contribute to policy reform processes. This implies that professional social work associations, academic social work programs, and individual practitioners must build capacity for policy analysis, legislative advocacy, and engagement with parliamentary processes, ministerial consultations, and international human rights mechanisms.

The findings imply that social work education in Zimbabwe requires urgent curriculum reform to prepare practitioners for digital-age child protection. Current social work training programs in the country were developed primarily to address traditional forms of child maltreatment and may not adequately cover digital risk assessment, online abuse investigation, digital evidence preservation, platform accountability advocacy, or technology-facilitated trauma intervention. Social work educators must review and update curricula to ensure that graduating practitioners possess the competencies required for contemporary practice, while continuing professional development programs must provide current practitioners with opportunities to acquire digital child protection skills.

Furthermore, the study implies that social workers must engage more strategically with technology companies and platform regulators. While individual social workers in Mbare have limited direct leverage over global technology corporations, the profession collectively can contribute to advocacy coalitions demanding safer platform design, improved content moderation in African languages, transparent reporting mechanisms, and corporate accountability for harms occurring on platforms. Social workers can document and publicize platform-related harms experienced by children in their communities, contributing evidence to regulatory proceedings, parliamentary inquiries, and international advocacy campaigns.

Finally, the research implies that social work practice must embrace interdisciplinary collaboration to an unprecedented degree. Digital child protection intersects with law, technology, education, public health, and criminal justice in complex ways that no single profession can address alone. Social workers must develop collaborative competencies and institutional relationships that enable effective multi-disciplinary responses, while maintaining their distinctive professional identity centered on human dignity, social justice, and the primacy of child wellbeing.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to key stakeholders:

5.4.1 Recommendations for the Ministry of Public Service, Labor and Social Welfare

Develop a National Digital Child Protection Policy with clear reporting mechanisms and response protocols for social media-related child abuse. This recommendation calls for the development of a comprehensive, standalone national policy that specifically addresses the protection of children in digital environments. Currently, Zimbabwe's child protection architecture addresses digital risks in fragmented and indirect ways—through general provisions in the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) and the Children Act, but without a coherent framework that places children's digital safety at its center. A National Digital Child Protection Policy would establish clear definitions of digital abuse forms, mandate specific roles and responsibilities for government departments, specify reporting pathways accessible to children and caregivers, outline response protocols for different types and severity of online abuse, and establish quality standards for service provision. The policy should be developed through inclusive consultation with children, caregivers, educators, social workers, technology companies, and civil society organizations to ensure it reflects ground-level realities rather than abstract bureaucratic preferences. Importantly, the policy must include provisions for regular review and updating, given the rapidly evolving nature of digital technologies and associated risks.

Provide mandatory training for social workers in digital child protection, cyberbullying assessment, and trauma-informed online victimization intervention. Recommendation recognizes that social workers currently receive minimal or no training in digital child protection during their professional education, leaving them ill-equipped to assess, intervene, and advocate effectively in cases of online abuse. Mandatory training should be developed at multiple levels: pre-service training integrated into social work degree programs; induction training for newly qualified social workers; and continuing professional development for practicing practitioners. Training content should encompass: understanding major social media platforms and their risk profiles; recognizing signs and indicators of online abuse; conducting digital risk assessments as part of standard child protection evaluations; preserving digital evidence appropriately; providing trauma-informed support specifically calibrated to online abuse experiences; understanding relevant legal frameworks and reporting obligations; and advocating for platform accountability and policy reform. Training should be delivered through a combination of in-person workshops, online modules, peer learning networks, and supervised

practice placements, with competency-based assessment to ensure knowledge translates into practice capability.

5.4.2 Recommendations for the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

Require all schools to adopt a formal Cyberbullying and Online Safety Policy with prevention strategies, reporting pathways, and victim support mechanisms. This recommendation addresses the current absence of standardized school-level responses to digital child abuse in Zimbabwe. While some individual schools may address online safety in ad hoc ways, there is no systemic requirement for schools to develop, implement, and monitor policies specifically addressing cyberbullying and online safety. A formal policy framework would require every school to: designate a staff member with specific responsibility for online safety coordination; establish clear definitions of unacceptable online behavior involving school community members; implement prevention strategies including curriculum integration, peer support programs, and awareness campaigns; create confidential and child-friendly reporting mechanisms that allow students to disclose online abuse without fear of retaliation or victim-blaming; specify response protocols for reported incidents including investigation, support for victims, intervention with perpetrators, and communication with families; and provide support mechanisms for affected students including counselling referral, academic accommodation, and protection from further victimization. The Ministry should provide model policies, implementation guidance, and monitoring frameworks while allowing schools flexibility to adapt to local contexts.

Integrate digital citizenship and internet safety as compulsory curriculum content from primary school level. This recommendation responds to the study finding that children in Mbare receive no structured education in online safety despite being active users of digital platforms from early ages. Digital citizenship and internet safety should be integrated as compulsory, examinable components of the national curriculum from the earliest primary grades, with content progressively developed to match children's cognitive development and evolving digital engagement. Primary level content should focus on foundational concepts: understanding that not all online contacts are trustworthy; recognizing uncomfortable or scary online interactions; knowing how to seek help from trusted adults; and basic privacy principles such as not sharing personal information. Secondary level content should address more complex issues: critical evaluation of online content; understanding digital footprints and

reputation; recognizing grooming tactics and manipulation strategies; responding to cyberbullying as victim, witness, or perpetrator; understanding legal rights and reporting mechanisms; and developing ethical online behavior. Curriculum delivery should be interactive, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant, with teacher training and resource materials provided to support effective implementation.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society

Design community-based digital literacy programs for caregivers in high-density suburbs to strengthen their capacity to protect children online. This recommendation targets the intergenerational digital divide identified as a critical vulnerability factor in this study. Community-based programs should be designed specifically for caregivers in high-density, low-income urban communities like Mbare, taking into account their limited time, economic pressures, varying literacy levels, and diverse family structures. Programs should be delivered through accessible community venues—churches, community halls, health clinics, marketplaces, and existing parent-teacher association meetings rather than requiring caregivers to travel to distant training centers. Content should be practical and skills-based rather than theoretical: demonstrating how to use privacy settings on WhatsApp and Facebook; explaining how to recognize signs that a child may be experiencing online abuse; practicing conversations about digital safety with children; and knowing where to seek help when concerns arise. Programs should be delivered in local languages, use visual and participatory methods rather than text-heavy materials, and be scheduled at times compatible with caregivers' work patterns. Peer educator models, in which trained community members deliver ongoing support to fellow caregivers, may enhance sustainability and cultural appropriateness.

Establish accessible, community-based psychosocial support services for children who have experienced social media-related abuse. This recommendation addresses the near-total absence of accessible mental health services for children affected by online abuse in communities like Mbare. "Accessible" encompasses multiple dimensions: geographic accessibility (services located within or near the community rather than requiring travel to distant central facilities); economic accessibility (free or heavily subsidized services that do not impose financial barriers on impoverished families); cultural accessibility (services delivered in local languages by staff who understand community norms and can build trust); and psychological accessibility (child-friendly environments, confidential processes, and non-stigmatizing approaches that encourage

help-seeking). Community-based services might include: drop-in centers where children can speak with trained counsellors without appointment; mobile counselling services that visit schools and community locations; telephone and text-based helplines staffed by trained professionals; peer support groups facilitated by social workers; and family counselling that addresses the relational impacts of online abuse. NGOs should collaborate with government social welfare departments to ensure these services complement rather than duplicate statutory provision, and should advocate for government funding to sustain successful models.

5.4.3 Recommendations for Caregivers and Community Members

Caregivers should maintain open communication with children about online experiences and seek digital literacy training to better safeguard their children. This recommendation recognizes that caregivers are the frontline protectors of children but often lack the knowledge and skills to fulfill this role in digital spaces. "Open communication" means creating family environments in which children feel safe discussing their online activities, concerns, and negative experiences without fear of punishment, judgment, or device confiscation. Caregivers should initiate regular, non-confrontational conversations about what children are doing online, who they are interacting with, and what they have encountered that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Rather than relying solely on restrictive approaches (banning platforms, confiscating devices), caregivers should adopt supportive mediation strategies that combine appropriate boundaries with dialogue, guidance, and shared exploration of digital spaces. Seeking digital literacy training through community programs, school-based workshops, or peer learning should be understood not as an optional extra but as a core parental responsibility in the digital age. Caregivers should also model responsible digital behavior themselves, recognizing that children learn norms through observation as well as instruction.

Community leaders should actively dismantle cultural norms of silence around online abuse, fostering a shared responsibility for children's digital safety. This recommendation acknowledges that community norms significantly influence whether online abuse is recognized, discussed, reported, or suppressed. In Mbare and similar communities, cultural norms that discourage discussion of sexual matters, prioritize family reputation over individual disclosure, and stigmatize victims of abuse create powerful barriers to help-seeking that compound the harm of online victimization. Community leaders—including traditional leaders, religious leaders, ward councilors, resident association chairs, and respected elders

possess significant moral authority to challenge these harmful norms and reframe digital child protection as a collective community responsibility rather than a private family matter. Leaders should: speak publicly about online child abuse as a community problem requiring community response; challenge victim-blaming narratives that hold children responsible for their own victimization; support families who report abuse rather than ostracizing them; collaborate with child protection committees, social workers, and schools to develop community-level prevention and response strategies; and model zero-tolerance attitudes toward all forms of child abuse, including those facilitated through digital means.

5.4.4 Recommendations for Future Researchers

Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track the long-term developmental outcomes of children who have experienced social media-related abuse in Zimbabwe. This recommendation addresses a significant limitation of the current study and the broader research landscape: the absence of longitudinal evidence tracking how online abuse affects children's development over time. Cross-sectional studies such as this one can document current experiences and immediate impacts but cannot establish causal relationships, track developmental trajectories, or identify protective factors that promote resilience versus risk factors that compound harm. Longitudinal research should follow cohorts of children who have experienced different forms of online abuse (cyberbullying, grooming, exposure to explicit content, sextortion) over periods of five to ten years, assessing impacts on mental health, educational attainment, social relationships, employment outcomes, and intergenerational patterns of parenting and protection. Such studies would provide invaluable evidence for policy development, service planning, and clinical practice, while also contributing to international comparative understanding of online abuse impacts in low-resource contexts.

Further research should investigate culturally responsive digital intervention models suitable for adaptation in sub-Saharan African community contexts. This recommendation responds to the study finding that most existing digital child protection interventions have been developed in Western, high-income contexts and may not be directly transferable to African communities characterized by different family structures, economic realities, cultural norms, platform preferences, and institutional capacities. Future research should prioritize participatory action research approaches that engage communities as co-researchers in developing, piloting, and evaluating interventions. Specific research priorities include: identifying indigenous protective

mechanisms and community resources that can be strengthened and integrated into digital safety programs; testing peer-led intervention models that leverage the influence of young people on each other; evaluating the effectiveness of different delivery modalities (school-based, community-based, digital, face-to-face) in resource-constrained settings; understanding how gender, age, disability, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape online vulnerability and protection needs; and developing culturally grounded measurement tools for assessing digital risk, protective factors, and intervention outcomes. Research should also examine the potential of technology itself such as AI-based content filtering, safety-by-design platform features, and mobile-based reporting applications to support child protection in African contexts, while remaining critically alert to risks of digital exclusion, surveillance, and rights infringement.

BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK



NAME OF STUDENT: TINASHE M. MWASOYA

REGISTRATION NUMBER: B223953B

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: MR NYAMAKA

PROJECT TITLE: SOCIAL MEDIA DRIVEN CHILD ABUSE: A CASE STUDY OF MBARE, HARARE

RESEARCH DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree

Date: _____

APPENDIX 1: REQUEST FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Request for Ethical Clearance

BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

Faculty Of Social Sciences And Humanities

Department Of Social Work

Date: _____

RE: REQUEST FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I, Tinashe M. Mwasoya, a final year Social Work student at Bindura University Of Science Education. I am conducting a research study titled "Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study of Mbare, Harare" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree.

The purpose of the study is to explore how social media is connected to child abuse in Mbare, Harare. The study is guided by three objectives: to examine the forms of social media driven child abuse, to analyses the implications of social media related child abuse, and to propose social work related interventions that can strengthen child protection responses.

The study will use qualitative research methods. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes. The intended participants include children, caregivers, teachers, social workers, members of child protection structures, community leaders, and representatives from child related organizations operating in Mbare.

The study will observe voluntary participation, informed consent, child assent, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point. No participant will be forced to answer a question that causes discomfort. Data will be used strictly for academic purposes.

I therefore request ethical clearance to conduct this study.

Yours faithfully,

Tinashe M. Mwasoya

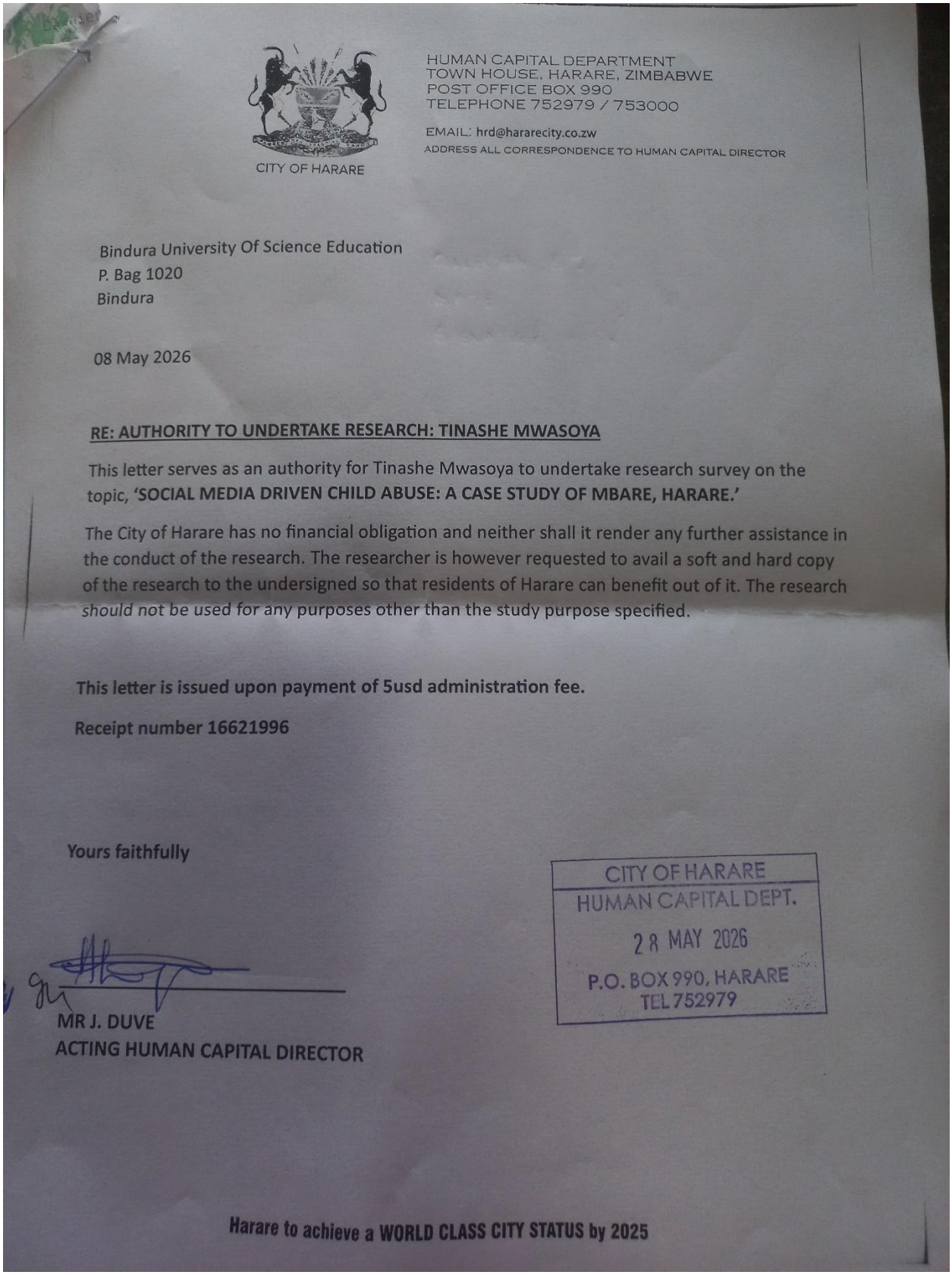
Social Work Student

Bindura University Of Science Education

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 2: PERMISSION LETTER FROM GATEKEEPERS



CITY OF HARARE

HUMAN CAPITAL DEPARTMENT
TOWN HOUSE, HARARE, ZIMBABWE
POST OFFICE BOX 990
TELEPHONE 752979 / 753000

EMAIL: hrd@hararecity.co.zw
ADDRESS ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO HUMAN CAPITAL DIRECTOR

Bindura University Of Science Education
P. Bag 1020
Bindura

08 May 2026

RE: AUTHORITY TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH: TINASHE MWASOYA

This letter serves as an authority for Tinashe Mwasoya to undertake research survey on the topic, **'SOCIAL MEDIA DRIVEN CHILD ABUSE: A CASE STUDY OF MBARE, HARARE.'**

The City of Harare has no financial obligation and neither shall it render any further assistance in the conduct of the research. The researcher is however requested to avail a soft and hard copy of the research to the undersigned so that residents of Harare can benefit out of it. The research should not be used for any purposes other than the study purpose specified.

This letter is issued upon payment of 5usd administration fee.

Receipt number 16621996

Yours faithfully

CITY OF HARARE
HUMAN CAPITAL DEPT.
28 MAY 2026
P.O. BOX 990, HARARE
TEL 752979

MR J. DUVE
ACTING HUMAN CAPITAL DIRECTOR

Harare to achieve a WORLD CLASS CITY STATUS by 2025

APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS

Informed Consent Form

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

My name is Tinashe M. Mwasoya. I am a final year Social Work student at Bindura University Of Science Education. I am conducting this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Social Sciences Degree.

You are being invited to take part because your views may assist the study to understand social media driven child abuse in Mbare. The discussion will focus on child protection concerns, effects on children, community responses, and possible social work interventions.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. No payment will be made for participation. The information you provide will be treated as confidential and will be used for academic purposes only.

Your name will not be used in the final research report. A participant code will be used to protect your identity. Information will be stored securely and accessed only for purposes connected to the research.

By signing below, you show that the study has been explained to you and that you agree to participate voluntarily.

Name of participant: _____

Participant code: _____

Signature or mark of participant: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 4: PARENT OR GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION

Parent or Guardian Consent Form

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

My name is Tinashe M. Mwasoya. I am a final year Social Work student at Bindura University Of Science Education. I request permission for your child to participate in a research study on social media driven child abuse in Mbare, Harare.

The study seeks to understand children's online safety experiences, the effects of harmful online interactions, and the support systems that can help children. The child interview will use open-ended and non-leading questions. The child will not be forced to discuss personal experiences. The child may speak generally, skip any question, or stop the interview at any stage.

The study will protect confidentiality and anonymity. The child's name will not appear in the research report. A code will be used instead of a name. Information will be used only for academic purposes. If the researcher becomes aware of a serious child protection concern, the matter will be handled through appropriate child protection procedures.

By signing below, you show that the study has been explained to you and that you give permission for the child to participate voluntarily.

Name of parent or guardian: _____

Relationship to child: _____

Signature or mark of parent or guardian: _____

Date: _____

Name of child: _____

Child participant code: _____

APPENDIX 5: CHILD ASSENT FORM

Child Assent Form

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

My name is Tinashe M. Mwasoya. I am doing a study about children's online safety in Mbare. I would like to hear your views about how children use social media, what makes online spaces unsafe, how online problems affect children, and what support children need.

Taking part is your choice. You can skip any question. You can stop the interview at any time. You do not need to give names of people or describe anything that makes you uncomfortable. Your name will not be written in the research report. A code will be used instead of your name. If the researcher becomes worried that a child may be unsafe, the researcher will follow approved child protection steps.

By signing below, you show that the study has been explained to you and that you agree to take part.

Name of child or participant code: _____

Signature or mark of child: _____

Date: _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

APPENDIX 6: SEMI-STRUCTURED INDEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CHILDREN

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

Section A: Participant Information

Participant code: _____

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Level of schooling: _____

Area within Mbare: _____

Date of interview: _____

Venue: _____

Name of interviewer: _____

Section B: Interview Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. I am interested in children's views about social media and online safety. There is no right or wrong answer. You may speak about what children in the community experience, what you notice in the community, or your own views where you feel comfortable. You do not need to give names. You may skip a question or stop the interview at any time.

Section C: Interview Questions

Research Question 1: What forms of social media driven child abuse are prevalent in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. How would you describe the way children in Mbare use social media in daily life?
2. What online situations make children feel unsafe, embarrassed, pressured, or threatened?
3. What kinds of harmful behavior toward children appear on social media in this community?
4. How do children usually notice that an online interaction has become unsafe?
5. What patterns occur before an online interaction becomes a child protection concern?
6. What roles do peers, adults, and unknown contacts play in unsafe online interactions involving children?

Research Question 2: What are the implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. How does harmful online interaction affect the way children feel about themselves?

2. How does it affect children at school, at home, and among friends?
3. What changes in behavior may show that a child is struggling after a negative online experience?
4. How do children usually respond when they feel unsafe online?
5. What makes it difficult for children to seek help after an unsafe online experience?
6. How do community attitudes affect the way children report online safety concerns?

Research Question 3: What social work-related intervention can be instituted to address abuse of children through social media in Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. What kind of help do children need when social media use becomes unsafe?
2. How should caregivers support children who experience online safety concerns?
3. How should teachers and schools support children who face online safety concerns?
4. How should social workers make reporting safe and trusted for children?
5. What community actions could help prevent harm to children through social media?
6. What changes would make children more comfortable seeking help from adults?

Section D: Neutral Follow-up Prompts

1. Please explain that further.
2. What happened next?
3. What made that situation difficult?
4. How did people respond?
5. What kind of support would help in that situation?
6. What else should be understood about this issue?

Section E: Closing

Thank you for sharing your views. Your contribution will help the study understand how children can be better protected when using social media. The information will remain confidential and will be used for academic purposes only.

APPENDIX 7: SEMI STRUCTURED INDEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CHILD PROTECTION COMMITEE

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

Section A: Participant Information

Participant code: _____

Professional role: _____

Institution or ganization: _____

Years of experience in child welfare or related work: _____

Area of operation: _____

Date of interview: _____

Venue: _____

Name of interviewer: _____

Section B: Interview Introduction

Thank you for participating in this key informant interview. The purpose of this discussion is to obtain professional and community-based insight into social media driven child abuse in Mbare. The interview will focus on observed patterns, implications for children, institutional responses, and possible social work interventions. The questions are open-ended and you may decline to answer any question.

Section C: Interview Questions

Research Question 1: What forms of social media driven child abuse are prevalent in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. From your professional or community-based experience, how would you describe social media related child protection concerns in Mbare?
2. What forms of harmful online interaction involving children appear in your work or observations?
3. How do these concerns usually come to the attention of families, schools, community actors, or service providers?
4. What pathways connect children's online interaction with wider child protection concerns?
5. What conditions in Mbare increase children's exposure to unsafe online interaction?
6. How do family, peer, school, and community factors shape the forms of harm reported by children?

Research Question 2: What are the implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. What effects on children appear in relation to harmful online interaction?
2. How does social media related harm affect children's schooling and participation in learning activities?
3. How does it affect relationships between children, caregivers, peers, and community members?
4. What emotional or behavioral changes commonly raise concern among adults working with children?
5. What challenges appear when children, caregivers, or institutions try to report online safety concerns?
6. How do stigma, fear, and community responses influence support for affected children?

Research Question 3: What social work related intervention can be instituted to address abuse of children through social media in Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. What interventions currently support children facing social media related child protection concerns in Mbare?
2. How effective are current reporting, referral, counselling, and follow-up systems?
3. What gaps should social workers address in prevention and case response?
4. How should schools, families, social workers, community leaders, and child protection structures coordinate their responses?
5. What child-friendly reporting pathway would be suitable for Mbare?
6. What recommendations would strengthen social work practice in relation to children's online safety?

Section D: Neutral Follow-up Prompts

1. Please expand on that point.
2. What makes that issue significant in Mbare?
3. How does the current response work in practice?
4. What barriers limit the response?
5. What improvement would make the strongest difference?
6. What additional information should the study record?

Section E: Closing

Thank you for taking part in this interview. Your professional insight will assist the study to develop context-specific findings and recommendations for child protection practice.

APPENDIX 8: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY CHILD PROTECTION COMMITEE

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

Section A: Group Information

Group code: _____

Participant category: _____

Number of participants: _____

Date of discussion: _____

Venue: _____

Facilitator: _____

Note taker: _____

Section B: Introduction to Participants

Good day. My name is Tinashe M. Mwasoya, a final year Social Work student at Bindura University Of Science Education. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion.

The purpose of this discussion is to gather community views on social media driven child abuse in Mbare. The discussion will focus on forms of online harm, implications for children, and possible social work-related interventions. Participation is voluntary. Participants may choose not to answer any question. Participants are requested to respect one another's privacy and avoid sharing information discussed in this group outside the research setting.

The discussion should focus on community patterns and child protection responses. Participants should avoid naming children, families, alleged perpetrators, schools, or private accounts.

Section C: Ground Rules

1. Speak one person at a time.
2. Respect different views.
3. Avoid naming children or families.
4. Keep the discussion confidential.
5. Use respectful language when discussing sensitive issues.
6. Focus on child protection and support.

Section D: Discussion Questions

Research Question 1: What forms of social media driven child abuse are prevalent in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. How would the group describe children's use of social media in Mbare?
2. What online risks concern caregivers and child protection actors in this community?
3. What patterns show when online interaction becomes unsafe for children?
4. How do families and community structures usually become aware of online harm affecting children?
5. What community conditions influence children's exposure to unsafe online interaction?
6. What differences appear between harm involving peers and harm involving adults?

Research Question 2: What are the implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. How does social media related harm affect children at home?
2. How does it affect children at school and in peer relationships?
3. What changes in children may alert adults to possible online safety concerns?
4. How do stigma and fear affect reporting by children and caregivers?
5. What challenges do caregivers face when guiding children's social media use?
6. How do current community responses affect children's willingness to seek help?

Research Question 3: What social work related intervention can be instituted to address abuse of children through social media in Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. What support is currently available for children facing online safety concerns?
2. What improvements are needed in homes, schools, community structures, and social work services?
3. How should reporting and referral be organized in a way children and caregivers can trust?
4. What community awareness approach would be suitable for Mbare?
5. How should social workers coordinate prevention, case management, and follow-up?
6. What recommendations should be made to strengthen child protection responses?

Section E: Closing Remarks

Thank you for participating in this discussion. Your views are valued and will help the study understand how child protection responses can be improved in relation to social media driven child abuse in Mbare. All information shared will be treated confidentially and used strictly for academic purposes only.

APPANDEX 9; SEMI STRUCTURED INDEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDS FOR PARENTS / CAREGIVERS

Section A: Participant Information

Participant code: _____

Sex: _____

Age: _____

Relationship to child: _____

Number of children in household: _____

Area within Mbare: _____

Date of interview: _____

Venue: _____

Name of interviewer: _____

Section B: Interview Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. My name is Tinashe M. Mwasoya, a final year Social Work student at Bindura University of Science Education. The purpose of this interview is to understand the experiences and views of caregivers and parents regarding the use of social media by children in Mbare and the child protection concerns that arise from it. There are no right or wrong answers. You may speak from your own experience as a caregiver, or share what you have observed in your household or community. You do not need to provide names or details that could identify a child or another person. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time without penalty.

Section C: Interview Questions

Research Question 1: What forms of social media driven child abuse are prevalent in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. How would you describe the way children in your household or community use social media?

2. What kinds of online situations have you observed or heard about that put children at risk of harm?

3. What types of harmful behavior involving social media have affected children known to you or in your community?

4. How do caregivers usually become aware that a child has experienced something harmful through social media?

5. What conditions in the home or community make children more vulnerable to online harm?

6. How do peer influence, adult contacts, and unknown online users contribute to unsafe online interactions for children?

Research Question 2: What are the implications of social media related child abuse in Mbare, Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. How has harmful online interaction affected the emotional wellbeing and behaviour of children in your care or in this community?

2. What changes have you noticed in a child's school attendance, performance, or attitude toward learning following an unsafe online experience?

3. How has social media related harm affected relationships between children and their caregivers, siblings, or peers?

4. What signs or changes in a child's behavior have caused concern for you or other caregivers?

5. What difficulties have caregivers faced when trying to report or respond to a child's harmful online experience?

6. How do community attitudes, stigma, or fear affect a caregiver's ability to seek help for a child affected by online harm?

Research Question 3: What social work-related intervention can be instituted to address abuse of children through social media in Zimbabwe?

Guiding and probing questions

1. What kind of support do caregivers need to help them protect children from online harm?

2. How can social workers, schools, and community organizations better assist caregivers in responding to social media related child abuse?

3. What changes would make it easier for caregivers to report concerns and access help for affected children?

4. What community awareness or education programs would be most suitable and useful for caregivers in Mbare?

5. How should social workers coordinate with caregivers in the prevention, reporting, and follow-up of social media related child abuse?

6. What recommendations would you make to strengthen child protection responses to social media driven harm in Mbare?

Section D: Neutral Follow-up Prompts

1. Please explain that further.
2. What happened next?
3. What made that situation difficult?
4. How did people respond?
5. What kind of support would help in that situation?
6. What else should be understood about this issue?

Section E: Closing

Thank you for sharing your views and experiences. Your contribution is valued and will help the study understand how caregivers and families can be better supported in protecting children from social media driven abuse. All information shared during this interview will remain confidential and will be used for academic purposes only.

APPENDIX 10: RESEARCHER FIELD NOTES SHEET

Research topic: Social Media Driven Child Abuse: A Case Study Of Mbare, Harare

Section A: Session Details

Date: _____

Venue: _____

Participant code or group code: _____

Type of session: _____

Start time: _____

End time: _____

Researcher: _____

Section B: Contextual Notes

Record non-identifying contextual observations only. Avoid names, addresses, phone numbers, school names, online account names, or any detail that may reveal a participant's identity.

Setting and privacy of the interview space:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Participant comfort and communication style:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Key non-verbal observations relevant to interpretation:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Interruptions or environmental issues affecting data quality:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Researcher reflections on neutrality and questioning:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Follow-up actions required through approved supervision or referral channels:

_____

_____

Section C: Interview Quality Checklist

Table 4

Item	**Researcher confirmation**
Consent or assent process completed before data collection.	_____
Questions were asked in an open-ended and non-leading manner.	_____
Participant was reminded of the right to skip questions.	_____
No identifying details were recorded in the notes.	_____
Any child protection concern was handled through approved procedures.	_____

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