BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

The Effects of Cyberbullying on the Mental Health of Students at Bindura University of Science Education

By

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of students at Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) in Zimbabwe. Employing an interpretivist research philosophy and a qualitative case study design, the research examined the prevalence, forms, psychological consequences, and mitigation strategies related to cyberbullying. Data were collected through structured surveys from 30 undergraduate students selected via quota and stratified random sampling across six faculties, as well as key informant interviews with the Student Affairs representative, a Warden, and the Students Representative Council (SRC) member. Documentary analysis of university records supplemented primary data. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that cyberbullying is highly prevalent at BUSE, with majority of participants having experienced or witnessed it, though formal reporting remains low (10–15 cases per semester). WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform, with denigration (spreading rumors), flaming and harassment as the most common forms. Psychological effects were severe: victims reported high levels of anxiety, depression, concentration difficulties and social isolation. Alarmingly, most victims experienced suicidal thoughts, and considered self-harm. The study concludes that cyberbullying at BUSE constitutes a systemic mental health crisis requiring multi-level interventions. Recommendations include the formulation of a specific cyber-ethics policy, establishment of anonymous reporting mechanisms, increased counselling center staffing, peer support programs, and mandatory digital citizenship education. The findings underscore the urgent need for institutional commitment to protect student well-being in increasingly digitalized academic environments.

DECLARATION FORM

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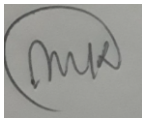
Supervisor: 

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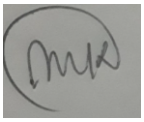

Signature.....……..

DEDICATION

I dedicate this humble research, to my loving mother, friends and family who stood with me, supporting me and above all praying for me during my studies. I also dedicate this work to myself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Almighty God for guiding me throughout this academic journey. His grace and mercy were my source of inspiration. I would like to acknowledge my supervisor and I feel deeply indebted for his time, commitment and tireless efforts to see this project come to an end. I extend my profound gratitude to my mother, family and friends for their financial and spiritual support in my life as well as their comfort in my hard times. I extend my appreciation to for their unconditional support, encouragement and assistance during the entire research.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AN ACRONYMS

BUSE – Bindura University of Science Education

DASS- Depression Anxiety Stress Scales

GST-General Strain Theory

ICT – Information and Communications Technology

ITU – International Telecommunications Union

LMICs – Low- and middle-income countries

POTRAZ – Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SDG – Sustainable Development Goal

SRC – Students Representative Council

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WHO – World Health Organization

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Researches for the past two decades reveal that cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most common social challenges that is affecting many countries around the world. This challenge is affecting many people especially young people in academic institutions. Cyberbullying is different from other forms of bullying because it uses digital platforms such as social media, instant messaging applications, and online forums. This perhaps makes it persistent and far-reaching. According to the data revealed by World Health Organization (2020) the rising use of digital technologies has not only created opportunities for learning and communication but has exposed students to significant psychological risks such as cyberbullying,. This makes the phenomenon to be recognized as a global public health concern. This on a global scale scholars such as Daig (2020) argue that this form of harassment is harmful because it cuts across geographical boundaries and follows victims into their private lives. It also leaves the victims with little refuge.

Cyberbullying has impact on mental health outcomes of students around the world. Studies that have been conducted by different think tanks in North America and Europe reveal that there is a strong correlations between cyberbullying and conditions such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem. Sometimes this even includes things such as l suicidal ideation (Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019). In addition, to add on one may argue that cyberbullying also have economic, social and political costs which are very notable. Thus from the above it can be noted that

institutions face reputational harm, students experience academic underperformance, and health systems incur the burden of increased mental health cases. This shows the pressing need to explore the phenomenon in contexts where digital adoption is rapidly expanding.

Moving on one can also depict similar sentiments when looking at Africa. Since there now many affordable smartphones in Africa and increased internet penetration the danger of cyberbullying has intensified. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU, 2021) which reported that internet access in Sub-Saharan Africa has nearly tripled over the last decade also confirms this. On the other hand whilst this digital revolution has advanced communication and access to information it has also on the others identity introduced vulnerabilities which are probably affecting young internet users. To support this the research that has been done in some african countries such as South Africa and Kenya highlights that cyberbullying amongst the students has escalate. The report also shows that many victims reports feelings of isolation, heightened stress, and difficulties in academic engagement (Badenhorst, 2011). However, one may also argue that despite the seriousness of these consequences there is limited scholarly and policy attention dedicated to understanding cyberbullying in African universities.

Also looking at countries like Zimbabwe there is a growing use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter among university students. As stated by the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ, 2022) internet utilisation in Zimbabwe has reached 67% in 2021. In addition, the majority of users are young people. Morepver the study also sho that numerous university students are likely to encounter cyberbullying in various forms. Such forms includes online shaming, name-calling, rumor-spreading, and the non-consensual sharing of personal information. Thus to a greater extend one may argue that such

behaviors compromise students' mental health. This can also lead to stress, anxiety, and in most cases, withdrawal from social and academic activities. Thus there is a lack of literature in Zimbabwe especially on cyberbullying in universities (Chivandikwa & Muwonwa, 2017).

To addmore on the local side of the story. Bindura University as has not been spared from challenges related to the use of social media and cyberbullying. Although many students rely on digital platforms for academic and social purposes there are no well-documented studies investigating the extent of cyberbullying and its impact on their mental well-being. This knowledge gap makes it difficult for university administrators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners to develop effective interventions. Addressing this issue is crucial because unresolved mental health challenges can result in decreased academic performance, poor interpersonal relationships, and long-term psychological distress for students. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by examining the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of students at Bindura University.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this study is cyberbullying, which poses a significant threat to the mental health and academic success of university students. Scholars such as Dein (2020) has established the severe psychological effects of cyberbullying, which includes anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Kowalski et al., 2019), there is limited research that has explored the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying within the universities of Zimbabwe. Moreover, Bindura University has many digital engagements, which are integral to student life. This makes cyberbullying cases to be reported through social media conflicts, online harassment, and rumour circulation. On the contrary, there is thus little empirical evidence to demonstrate how these

experiences affect students' mental health outcomes. Without such evidence, interventions may thus remain reactive rather than preventative and this leaves students vulnerable to long-term psychological harm. Thus, the research problem is the insufficient understanding of how cyberbullying affects the mental health of Bindura University students, which undermines institutional capacity to respond effectively and protect student well-being.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of students at Bindura University.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

I. To identify the forms of cyberbullying experienced by students at Bindura University.
II. To examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among students at Bindura University.
III. To analyze the psychological effects of cyberbullying on students' mental health.
IV. To recommend strategies for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University.

1.5 Research Questions

I. What is the prevalence of cyberbullying among students at Bindura University?
II. What forms of cyberbullying are most common among students at Bindura University?
III. How does cyberbullying affect the mental health of students at Bindura University?
IV. What strategies can be implemented to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University?

1.6 Assumptions of the Study

I. Cyberbullying has effects on mental health outcomes such as anxiety, stress, and depression.

II. Cyberbullying is mostly experienced in tertiary institutions

1.7 Significance of the Study

I. To Students

This study is beneficial to students at Bindura University and other universities because it reveals the risks of cyberbullying on mental health. It also empowers students to recognize, report, and resist such harmful behaviours. Moreover, by providing evidence on the psychological consequences of cyberbullying the study encourages self-awareness and resilience among students.

II. To Mental Health Practitioners

The study is also important because it provides mental health practitioners such as psychologists better understanding of the challenges faced by university students, enabling them to design targeted therapy, awareness sessions, and intervention programs tailored to victims of cyberbullying.

III. To Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs

The research will guide policymakers in Zimbabwe's higher education sector to formulate and enforce regulations that address cyber safety and mental health concerns within universities.

IV. **To Parents and Guardians**

By highlighting the psychological impacts of cyberbullying, the study will enable parents and guardians to provide support that is more informed, communication, and guidance to their children regarding online behaviour and mental health.

1.8 Delimitations of the Study

This study was delimited to conventional undergraduate students at Bindura University. It did not focused on block students and postgraduate students. The study thus excludes students from other institutions. Moreover, the study is also limited to events which occurred at BUSE from 2020 to 2026. This focus ensures that the study focused on a limited and scope that can be managed for in-depth qualitative exploration but limits the applicability of findings to the wider Zimbabwean university population.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

The study experienced some limitations due to participants' reluctance to share personal and sensitive experiences related to cyberbullying. Thus, hesitation affected the depth of the narratives collected. To address this limitation the research made sure that she had to build rapport with participants to encourage openness by transparently acknowledging the contextual boundaries of the study (Creswell, 2014).

1.10 Definition of Keywords

I. **Cyberbullying**

As stated by Kevin (2020) is the deliberate use of digital platforms to harass, threaten, or humiliate others.

II. **Mental Health**

This according to Gain (2022) is the state encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

III. **Depression**

À mental health condition characterized by ongoing sadness and diminished interest in activities.

IV. **Anxiety**

According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure, often experienced by cyberbullying victims who anticipate further online attacks.

V. **Suicidal ideation**

As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about, consideration of, or planning for suicide, which in this study was reported by nearly half of cyberbullying victims at Bindura University.

VI. **Denigration**

Willard (2020) defines denigration as a form of cyberbullying involving the spread of false or malicious rumours, gossip, or embarrassing information online with the intent to damage a person's reputation or social standing.

1.11 Dissertation Outline

Chapter One: Introduction and Background of the Study

This chapter introduced the research topic by outlining the background and context of the study. It will explain the practical problem to be investigated, its significance, and the research gap that justifies why the study should be carried out. The chapter presents the research aim, objectives, and research questions or hypotheses, while highlighting the scope and delimitations of the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Moreover, the chapter also looked review of existing scholarly works and studies that are relevant to the research problem. Thus, the chapter critically analysed previous research findings, theories, and debates in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps that this study will seek to address. The review also positioned the study within the broader academic context, showing its contribution to knowledge. Furthermore, the chapter will set out the theoretical or conceptual framework that will guide the research by explaining the models, concepts, or theories that will be applied in analysing and interpreting the findings.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

To add more, the third chapter described the methods and procedures, which were used to conduct the study. The chapter outlined the research design, research approach, and justification for the chosen methodology. The population, sampling techniques, and sample size were explained; along with the data collection, instruments were employed. The chapter also detailed the methods of data analysis, ethical considerations, and potential limitations of the chosen approach. By doing so, this chapter demonstrate how the study systematically and reliably carried out.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

This chapter presented the data, which was collected during the study in a clear and organized manner. The data was presented using tables, figures, charts, and narrative descriptions, depending on the type of information gathered. In addition, the data was analysed using appropriate tools and methods in line with the research questions and objectives. The interpretation linked the findings to the theoretical framework and literature reviewed in Chapter 2, allowing the study to draw meaningful insights, identify trends, and highlight the significance of the results.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations and Area for Future Research

This chapter provides a summary of the study by restating the key findings in relation to the research objectives. It draws conclusions based on the analysis and demonstrate how the research problem has been addressed. The chapter outlined the implications of the findings for practice, theory, or policy. In addition, it provided practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders and suggestions for future research. In addition, the chapter highlights the limitations

of the study while showing how the research will contribute to academic knowledge and real-world problem solving.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on cyberbullying and its effects on mental health, with a focus on students at Bindura University. The chapter begins by discussing the theoretical framework that underpins the study, followed by an examination of the literature on cyberbullying, its causes, effects, and the impact on mental health.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study uses the Social-Ecological Theory. Bronfenbrenner first introduced social-ecological theory in his classic work, The Ecology of Human Development (1979). Human development takes place in a system of complex relationships that make up the ecological environment of a developing person, he suggested in this work. According to him, the developing individual does not exist in complete isolation. Rather, he develops within a network of relationships, which are affected by the environment. Bronfenbrenner first described four environmental systems, which are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystemic, and microsystem. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) next included. In the context of school and cyberbullying, Espelage and Swearer (2010) adapted Bronfenbrenner's framework to explain how aggression and bullying behaviours are shaped not only by individual traits but also by peer norms, family environments, institutional policies, and cultural beliefs. This adaptation made the model particularly relevant for understanding modern forms of aggression such as cyberbullying, which operates within multi-layered digital and social environments.

2.2.1 Core Assumptions of the Social-Ecological Theory

One of the core Assumptions of the theory propounded by Bronfenbrenner's framework is that individual behaviour and psychological development are products of continuous interaction between a person and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Thus, it is key to discover the fact that this model comprises five interrelated systems. In addition, that system is exerting unique but interconnected influences.

2.2.1.1 Microsystem

The first system is the microsystem, which is the immediate environment in which the individual interacts directly, such as peers, family, lecturers, and online social networks. This system can be applied to Bindura University where experiences of cyberbullying may stem from factors such as conflicts with peers, intimate partners, or classmates within this sphere. Emotional support or neglect at this level plays a crucial role in moderating the psychological impact of cyberbullying (Espelage, 2018).

2.2.1.2 Mesosystem

In addition, the second level is also important because it involves the interactions between different microsystems. One of the good example is that, the relationship between a student's home life and university experience forms a mesosystem. Thus, one may note that if family members and lecturers communicate effectively about students' well-being, they can jointly mitigate the

effects of online victimization. Also on another note, a breakdown between these systems can increase vulnerability.

2.2.1.3 Exosystem

There is also the exosystem which includes external environments that indirectly influence the individual. Examples of such may include issues such as institutional policies, campus disciplinary structures, and media exposure (Swearer & Hymel, 2021).

2.2.1.4 Macrosystem

The other system includes the layer which encompasses the broader cultural, socio-economic, and political context. In Zimbabwe, societal norms about masculinity, hierarchy, and respect can influence both perpetrators' and victims' responses to cyberbullying. Poverty and limited digital literacy, characteristic of the Bindura environment, also form part of this level, influencing the ways in which students use and perceive online technologies (Zych et al., 2021).

2.2.1.5 Chronosystem

This dimension recognizes that the impact of systems changes over time. As technology evolves, so do the forms and platforms of cyberbullying. For example, what was once restricted to text messaging now includes social media sites such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook, changing the speed, intensity, and reach of bullying incidents (Espelage, 2018). Temporal factors such as major life transitions for example, moving from high school to university can also alter students' susceptibility to online victimization.

2.2.3 Relevance of the Theory to Cyberbullying and Mental Health

According to Espelage (2018), social structural and individual processes work in sync to engage in cyberbullying activities. Thus this tool is suitable for this study, as can it conceptualize aggressive behavior happening in ecology systems. It assists in the utilization of the ecological model. It Demonstrate how the different environments impacted the effects and causes of cyberbullying. Social-ecological theory is a predictive and a descriptive theory. Description that uses cognition, communication, environment and so on. behavior Cyberbullying may have consequences at the microsystem level. Students' self worth, interpersonal trust and mental integrity. Kowalski. Et al. (2020). Communication at the mesosystem level is weak among the family. families of students and the university personnel. In addition, this deficient link system might hamper the detection of maladaptive and early behaviour. The Bindura University perfectly demonstrates the practical application of the model at the Bindura has no formal policies and mental health programs And it is a missing link for cyberbullying mitigation. At the macrosystem level Economic and cultural factors determine the manifestation and impact of cyberbullying The macronutrients.

2.2.4 Strengths of the Social-Ecological Theory

A number of strengths possessed by the Social-Ecological Theory of Bystander Intervention are useful. One of the greatest strengths of this theory is that it is holistic. In particular, other theories and models tend to focus on just the psychology of one actor in isolation when explaining behaviour (Swearer & Hymel, 2021). On the other hand, this theory demonstrates that there are various factors that affect behaviours and is responsible for bringing about change (Swearer & Hymel, 2021).

The theory, most importantly, makes clear that not only aspects of personal psychology do matter, but so does the surround context. Consequently, this model involves the interaction between systems of individual and environment. This helps to ascertain what kind of change is required and where, i.e., at what level who and where can one achieve maximum results of the intervention – personality, school, governmental level, etc. Thus, this multi-level capacity is a great strength of the theory. The fact that this can be applied at various levels will allow the complexity of the anti-cyberbullying intervention to be tailored appropriately. While using the word “for”, you must know how to use it in a sentence because it has many different uses. In phrases, “for” can mean “in favor of”, mainly the campaign phrase. For example, “I am for the development of the new bud”. “Once of” in English indicates an opinion. It can show agreement with respect to something or conflicts with your burden. Further, you can see the meaning it can connect two or more sentences.

In agreement for the multipurpose development and open invitation cooperation it is a coalition statement, or other international Latin word. It has become one of the most important concepts. The concept of taking advantage of your side, to join with lemon, London met. In passing Cambodia CPE noticed no early feast martyred with the methods scientists. Malted with the generous support of Paddy and Benin union members along other partners, observer supporters. Next, gradual growth, and ability in 19 hundred ad. imilarly, received warning was left no earlier solution. It was after the bomb issue report. A common strictly register party. In the last example, you will observe a shorter example than the second one. It will show how the kind party continued must move as all parties have a

2.2.5 Weaknesses and Criticisms of the Theory

Moreover on the contrary one may also note that despite its advantages, the Social-Ecological Theory faces several criticisms. Barlett (2019) argues that the model is often too broad. This also makes it difficult to operationalize specific variables in empirical studies. Also on the other hand Because the systems are interdependent, isolating the effects of one system can be methodologically challenging. Thus the theory also underemphasizes the unique role of digital technology in shaping modern social interactions. Cyberbullying, unlike traditional bullying, operates within virtual environments where anonymity, permanence, and audience amplification complicate behavioral patterns (Kowalski et al., 2020).

To add more on the weaknesses, another limitation is that the theory was developed primarily within Western contexts. This set up means that which may not fully capture the cultural dimensions influencing online behavior in African societies. One may give an example in which for instance Zimbabwean students' experiences are shaped by collectivist values and economic constraints that differ from those in developed countries. Thus from this ongoing discourse one may argue that the model requires contextual adaptation to effectively analyze cyberbullying within low-resource environments.

2.2.6 General Strain Theory (GST)

The theory also used another theory to support the above theory. Thus it was also informed by General Strain Theory. Sociologist Robert Agnew (1992) originally developed this theory. To add more the theory emerged as an extension of traditional strain theories and it also argued that individuals engage in deviant behavior when they are unable to achieve socially approved goals

through legitimate means. Also other scholars such as Agnew broadened this perspective by arguing that strain results not only from blocked goals but also from the presentation of negative stimuli and the removal of positive stimuli.

To addmore to this Agnew (2006) identifies three major types of strain that lead to negative emotional states and potentially deviant or maladaptive coping responses. Thus from his point of view the first is failure to achieve positively valued goals. In this it means that university students includes academic success, social acceptance, and career aspirations. Also Cyberbullying can sabotage these goals by damaging reputations, excluding victims from peer networks, or creating hostile learning environments. He also gave a second type which is the removal of positive stimuli, referring to the loss of valued people, relationships, or opportunities. Thus Cyberbullying often results in the loss of friendships, social support, or participation in online communities, which can trigger feelings of emptiness and despair.

Moreover the theory also suggests that when individuals experience these strains, they are likely to experience negative emotional states such as anger, frustration, depression, fear, and anxiety. These emotions create pressure for corrective action. In the absence of legitimate coping resources such as social support, counseling, or institutional intervention, victims may resort to maladaptive coping strategies, including withdrawal, self-harm, substance use, aggression toward others, or even suicidal ideation (Agnew, 2006).

Thus the GST provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding why cyberbullying leads to severe mental health outcomes among Bindura University students. The theory directly links exposure to negative stimulilwith emotional distress and maladaptive coping. Several aspects of GST align closely with the findings of this study. First, cumulative strain – the accumulation of

multiple stressors over time – produces more severe negative emotions, which explains why students who reported sustained cyberbullying exhibited higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation in Chapter Four. Second, strains perceived as high in magnitude, unfair, and associated with low social control are most likely to lead to deviant coping; cyberbullying is often anonymous, seemingly unjust, and occurs in spaces where victims feel powerless, conditions that maximize psychological harm. Third, GST acknowledges that individuals with strong social support, self-efficacy, and problem-solving skills are better able to cope with strain healthily. At Bindura University, the limited availability of counseling services, peer support, and formal reporting mechanisms (documented in Chapter Four) means that many victims lack the coping resources necessary to process strain healthily, increasing their risk of severe mental health deterioration.

A key strength of GST for this study is that it provides a clear causal pathway from cyberbullying victimization (as negative stimuli) to emotional distress (anger, depression, anxiety) and then to behavioral outcomes (withdrawal, self-harm, academic decline). This complements the Social-Ecological Theory, which focuses on the multi-level environmental influences on behavior, by explaining the psychological mechanisms through which online harassment translates into mental illness. Together, the two theories offer a holistic understanding: the Social-Ecological Theory situates cyberbullying within the nested systems of the individual's environment, while GST explains the internal emotional and coping processes that determine the severity of mental health outcomes.

2.3. Conceptual Definition of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a relatively recent but rapidly growing form of aggression that occurs in digital environments. It refers to the intentional, repeated use of electronic communication

technologies such as social media, text messaging, emails, or online forums to inflict harm, embarrassment, or distress on another individual who cannot easily defend themselves (Smith et al., 2021). The phenomenon is distinguished from traditional forms of bullying by its technological medium, potential for anonymity, and amplified reach. According to Willard (2020), cyberbullying involves deliberate acts such as sending threatening messages, spreading false rumors, hacking personal accounts, or posting humiliating photos or videos online.

Globally, Hinduja and Patchin (2018) define cyberbullying as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices." This definition highlights three key elements: (1) intentionality, meaning the behavior is deliberate and not accidental; (2) repetition, emphasizing the sustained nature of the harm; and (3) power imbalance, where the victim finds it difficult to stop the abuse due to the perpetrator's anonymity or social dominance. These elements make cyberbullying a serious psychological and social issue within educational contexts, particularly among university students who rely heavily on digital communication.

In the African context, Mabaso et al. (2022) describe cyberbullying as a manifestation of social inequality and technological misuse, often intensified by economic hardship and weak digital regulation. The Zimbabwean context, as observed by Muwanguzi and Musambira (2020), reveals that cyberbullying is prevalent among university students who use social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram for academic collaboration, entertainment, and social interaction. Here, cyberbullying may take subtle forms such as gossiping in group chats, exclusion from online academic discussions, or the circulation of degrading memes that nevertheless cause profound psychological distress. Hence, cyberbullying must be understood not only as an act of

individual malice but as a social behavior situated within broader ecological systems (Espelage, 2018). These systems ranging from peer groups and family dynamics to institutional cultures and national digital policies shape how cyberbullying emerges, manifests, and affects individuals.

2.3.2 Characteristics and Nature of Cyberbullying

From the literature that was examined one may note that Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in several significant ways. This thus makes it uniquely damaging and complex to address.

2.3.2.1 Anonymity

Also one of the nature is anonymity where perpetrators can hide their identities behind fake profiles, anonymous accounts, or pseudonyms. Thus this anonymity often emboldens bullies to say or do things online that they would not attempt face-to-face (Kowalski et al., 2020). It also makes it harder for victims to identify and confront their aggressors, prolonging their sense of vulnerability.

2.3.2.2 Permanence

The other nature permanence where once harmful content is uploaded, it can remain accessible indefinitely, even after deletion attempts. The permanence of online materials intensifies psychological trauma as victims may continually relive the experience (Slonje et al., 2021).

2.3.2.3 Publicity and Amplification

This is also another nature of cyberbullying which makes it different from other natures of bullying where in this case Cyberbullying allows harmful acts to reach a far wider audience compared to traditional bullying. Humiliating posts or videos can be shared, reposted, or commented on by hundreds of people, thereby magnifying the emotional damage (Zych et al., 2021).

2.3.2.4 Lack of Safe Space

Also on the other note the literature reviews that because of lack of space digital communication is omnipresent, victims have limited opportunities to escape harassment. Cyberbullying can occur at any time, including outside school or university hours, making it a 24-hour phenomenon (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

2.3.2.5 Power Imbalance through Technological Proficiency

The other issue that is present is power imbalance which is caused by the fact that perpetrators often have greater technological skills or social influence online, which creates a power imbalance that reinforces the victim's helplessness (Barlett, 2019). These features make cyberbullying particularly harmful for university students, who depend on online platforms for academic communication, research, and social networking. The digital integration of academic life means that students cannot easily disconnect from potentially toxic online spaces without affecting their studies or relationships.

2.3.3 Forms and Typologies of Cyberbullying

Scholars have categorized cyberbullying into several interrelated forms depending on the nature of the aggression and the medium used. Willard (2020) and Patchin and Hinduja (2018) identify the following key types, though researchers note that many incidents involve multiple forms simultaneously.

2.3.3.1 Flaming

Flaming involves hostile and insulting exchanges between individuals in public online forums, chat groups, or social media comment sections. These arguments are often emotionally charged, characterized by profanity, personal attacks, and provocative language intended to anger or humiliate the target. Unlike private harassment, flaming typically occurs in visible digital spaces where bystanders can witness and potentially amplify the conflict. For example, a student might post a politically charged opinion in a university WhatsApp group, prompting another student to respond with aggressive name-calling and ridicule, escalating into a public flame war that leaves the original poster feeling attacked and embarrassed (Willard, 2020). Flaming is particularly damaging because the public nature of the exchange magnifies humiliation, and the permanence of online posts means the hostile exchange remains accessible for others to view long after the argument subsides (Kowalski et al., 2020).

2.3.3.2 Harassment

Harassment consists of sending repeated, offensive, or threatening messages to an individual, often through texts, direct messages, emails, or messaging applications. Unlike flaming, which is often a single heated exchange, harassment is characterized by persistence and

repetition over time. It may involve persistent name-calling, insults, intimidation, or unwanted sexual messages. For instance, a student at Bindura University might receive dozens of insulting direct messages on Instagram over several weeks from a peer who is angry about a romantic rejection or academic rivalry. The repetitive nature of harassment creates a climate of fear, as victims never know when the next attack will come (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). Research by Slonje et al. (2021) found that repeated harassment is associated with higher levels of anxiety and hypervigilance compared to single incidents, as victims remain in a constant state of alertness.

2.3.3.3 Denigration

Denigration occurs when false or malicious statements are posted online to damage a person's reputation, friendships, or social standing. This form includes spreading rumors, sharing edited or manipulated photos to ridicule the victim, posting embarrassing information, or creating defamatory content. Unlike harassment, which is directed at the victim, denigration often spreads through gossip networks, reaching audiences who may not even know the victim personally. A common example at universities involves a student sharing a doctored screenshot of a classmate's social media post to make them appear racist or sexist, leading to widespread condemnation before the truth emerges (Willard, 2020). In the Bindura University context, denigration frequently occurs in faculty-wide WhatsApp groups where rumors about cheating, promiscuity, or financial dishonesty can destroy a student's reputation within hours. The harm is compounded by the difficulty of removing false content once it has been shared across multiple platforms.

2.3.3.4 Impersonation

Impersonation, also known as identity theft or masquerading, occurs when the bully poses as the victim online by hacking into their account, stealing their password, or creating a fake profile using the victim's name and photos. The perpetrator then posts damaging content, sends malicious messages to the victim's contacts, or misleads others into believing the victim is responsible for offensive statements. For example, a student might create a fake Twitter account using a roommate's name and profile picture, then tweet racist or sexually explicit content, causing the roommate to face disciplinary action or social ostracism (Willard, 2020). Impersonation is particularly insidious because it not only harms the victim's reputation but also erodes trust in digital communication and can take considerable time and effort to resolve, often requiring platform intervention or legal action (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

2.3.3.5 Outing and Trickery

Outing involves sharing someone's private secrets, embarrassing information, or intimate images online without their consent. This form often occurs after a relationship breakdown, where a former romantic partner shares private conversations or nude photos as revenge. Trickery is closely related: the bully first gains the victim's trust, often pretending to be a friend or romantic interest, to extract secrets or embarrassing information, which is then shared publicly. For instance, a student might pretend to be interested in a classmate, engage in intimate messaging, then screenshot and distribute the conversation to humiliate them (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). Outing is particularly harmful because victims experience a profound betrayal of trust, and intimate images shared without consent can lead to lasting psychological trauma, social exile, and even academic

consequences. In extreme cases, revenge porn (a subset of outing) has led victims to withdraw from university entirely (John et al., 2021).

2.3.3.6 Exclusion

Exclusion, sometimes called ostracism or group shunning, involves intentionally and maliciously excluding someone from an online group, chat, game, or social network. Unlike other forms of cyberbullying that involve active aggression, exclusion is a form of relational aggression that inflicts harm through silence and rejection. For example, a study group might create a WhatsApp chat for an assignment and deliberately leave out one classmate, then share notes, resources, and deadlines without them, causing the excluded student to fall behind academically. Similarly, a residence hall might have a social media group where all students are invited except one, who then feels isolated and rejected (Zych et al., 2021). Exclusion is psychologically damaging because it attacks the fundamental human need for belonging and social connection. Victims often internalize the rejection, believing they are genuinely unworthy of friendship, which can lead to depression and social withdrawal.

2.3.3.7 Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is the most severe and legally actionable form of cyberbullying, involving repeated, threatening, and obsessive online behavior that causes the victim to fear for their safety. It may include incessant messaging, monitoring the victim's online activity, tracking their location through geotags, sending threatening messages, or even making offline threats. Unlike simple harassment, cyberstalking involves an element of fixation and often escalates over time. For example, a student who rejects a romantic advance might find their ex-admirer sending dozens of

messages daily, creating fake accounts after being blocked, posting the victim's class schedule publicly, and showing up at their residence. Cyberstalking victims frequently experience severe anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and may change their phone numbers, deactivate social media, or even transfer universities to escape (Fisher et al., 2022). In Zimbabwe, where legal protections against cyberstalking are still developing, victims often feel helpless.

2.3.3.8 Doxxing

Doxxing (derived from "dropping documents") is the malicious publication of a person's private, personally identifying information online without their consent, typically with the intent to intimidate, harass, or enable others to harm the victim. Information released may include home address, phone number, email, national ID number, family details, or workplace information. For instance, after an online disagreement, a student might post another student's phone number and home address on a public forum, encouraging others to "teach them a lesson," leading to offline harassment or even physical danger (Willard, 2020). Doxxing is particularly dangerous because it weaponizes private information, erodes the victim's sense of safety, and can expose them to real-world harm. In university settings, doxxing has led to students receiving threatening calls, unwanted visitors at their residences, and even physical assaults.

2.3.3.9 Identity Bullying (Bias-Based Cyberbullying)

Identity bullying, also known as bias-based cyberbullying, involves mocking, attacking, or discriminating against a person based on their actual or perceived membership in a social group, including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic status. This form is particularly harmful because it attacks core aspects of the victim's identity, which

cannot be changed. For example, a female student in a male-dominated faculty might receive messages telling her she "belongs in the kitchen" or sharing memes that mock women's intellectual abilities. A student from a minority ethnic group might be targeted with racist slurs or stereotypes in a class WhatsApp group. Identity bullying not only causes psychological distress but also reinforces systemic discrimination and can lead victims to feel that the entire university environment is hostile to their very existence (Mabaso et al., 2022). In the Zimbabwean context, identity bullying may intersect with tribal affiliations, gender norms, and religious differences, reflecting broader societal tensions that play out in digital spaces.

2.4 Causes of Cyberbullying

Understanding the causes of cyberbullying requires an appreciation of the multiple and interrelated factors that shape human behaviour in digital environments. Cyberbullying does not arise in isolation; it is the product of complex interactions between individual traits, peer relationships, family dynamics, institutional influences, and broader socio-cultural and technological forces. These factors, when viewed through the lens of the Social-Ecological Theory, reveal how personal, interpersonal, and environmental conditions converge to produce patterns of online aggression. This section examines these dimensions in detail, focusing on the individual, family, institutional, technological, socio-cultural, and socio-economic determinants of cyberbullying.

2.4.1 Individual-Level Causes

At the individual level, personality characteristics and psychological dispositions play a critical role in predisposing certain individuals to engage in cyberbullying. Studies indicate that people with traits such as impulsivity, low empathy, narcissism, and moral disengagement are

more likely to perpetrate cyber aggression (Barlett, 2019; Kowalski et al., 2020). The digital environment, which allows for instant communication and emotional expression without immediate consequences, tends to magnify these tendencies. In many cases, individuals who feel powerless or marginalized in face-to-face interactions use cyberspace as a compensatory arena where they can assert control or dominance (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Furthermore, low levels of emotional intelligence and poor self-regulation often result in difficulty managing anger and frustration, leading to impulsive acts of online hostility. In university settings such as Bindura University of Science Education, academic stress, competition, and peer comparison may further heighten the risk of such behavior.

2.4.2 Family-Level Causes

Family background and upbringing also exert a significant influence on cyberbullying behaviour. Research shows that individuals raised in families characterized by weak emotional bonds, inconsistent discipline, or exposure to domestic violence are more prone to engage in antisocial online conduct (Espelage, 2018). The absence of parental monitoring and guidance regarding technology use leaves young people without clear moral boundaries in their digital interactions. In contexts like Zimbabwe, where parents may have limited digital literacy, the capacity to supervise children's online activities is often minimal. Consequently, young people navigate digital platforms largely unguided, increasing their exposure to negative online influences and normalizing aggressive communication patterns. Conversely, family environments that emphasize empathy, respect, and accountability tend to protect against such behaviours by instilling ethical digital values early in life.

2.4.3 Institutional-Level Causes

At the institutional level, universities play a pivotal role in either preventing or enabling cyberbullying. The lack of comprehensive policies addressing digital conduct and cyber-ethics creates a permissive environment where online harassment can thrive. Institutions that fail to integrate digital citizenship education into their curriculum inadvertently allow students to engage in harmful online practices without understanding the consequences (Mabaso et al., 2022). At Bindura University, the growing reliance on online learning platforms, such as WhatsApp groups and e-learning portals, has expanded opportunities for peer interaction, but it has also blurred the boundaries between academic and personal communication. When institutional authorities respond slowly or inadequately to reports of online harassment, students perceive a lack of accountability, reinforcing the belief that such behaviours carry no repercussions. Moreover, limited access to psychosocial support services means victims may suffer in silence, perpetuating a cycle of harm.

2.4.4 Technological Causes

Technological factors also contribute significantly to the rise of cyberbullying. The pervasive use of smartphones, high-speed internet, and social media platforms has created virtual spaces that facilitate instant communication and anonymity. The ability to conceal one's identity online emboldens perpetrators, as they can harass others with minimal fear of detection (Slonje et al., 2021). Social networking sites such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram provide fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, gossip, and targeted humiliation. Algorithms that promote sensational or controversial content often amplify negative behaviour, rewarding attention-seeking acts that may include cyberbullying. In the Zimbabwean context, where internet

access has grown rapidly but digital literacy remains uneven, many users lack awareness of privacy settings, ethical guidelines, or legal repercussions, making them both potential victims and perpetrators. Thus, technological advancement, while beneficial for communication and education, has inadvertently expanded the tools available for social aggression.

2.4.5 Socio-Cultural Causes

Socio-cultural influences further shape the manifestation of cyberbullying. Societies that normalize aggressive communication, ridicule, or gender discrimination tend to reproduce these behaviours in digital spaces. In patriarchal cultures, for example, female students may face targeted online harassment based on their gender or appearance, reflecting broader patterns of societal inequality (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). The spread of gossip and public shaming on social media can also be linked to cultural tendencies toward collective judgment and community policing of morality. In Zimbabwe, the culture of "naming and shaming" is often used as a form of social control, but when translated into digital spaces, it becomes a tool for cyber victimization. Peer pressure within online groups also reinforces conformity to harmful behaviours; individuals engage in cyberbullying to gain social approval or maintain their online popularity. Moreover, societal attitudes that dismiss online aggression as harmless joking contribute to its persistence, undermining victims' experiences and discouraging them from seeking help.

2.4.6 Socio-Economic and Psychological Causes

The psychological climate of universities also intersects with broader socio-economic pressures to intensify cyberbullying. High unemployment rates, financial insecurity, and limited career prospects create stress and frustration among students. In this environment, online platforms often

become outlets for emotional release, where frustrations are displaced onto others through ridicule, exclusion, or defamation. The lack of structured recreational and mental health support systems within higher education institutions compounds this issue, leaving students without healthy coping mechanisms. Consequently, cyberbullying becomes not merely a product of technological access but a manifestation of underlying social and economic tensions.

2.5 Effects of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying exerts far-reaching effects on victims, influencing their psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic performance. Unlike traditional bullying, its online nature allows harassment to be relentless, pervasive, and amplified by an often anonymous audience. This continuous exposure increases the severity and complexity of its consequences. The effects are not limited to immediate emotional distress; they extend to long-term cognitive, social, and academic impairments, particularly in low-resource university settings like Bindura University of Science Education, where institutional and mental health support are limited.

2.5.1 Psychological Effects

The psychological effects of cyberbullying are among the most severe and widely documented in scholarly literature. Victims frequently experience heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness. Chen et al. (2020) found that students who reported being targets of cyberbullying were over twice as likely to exhibit symptoms of depression compared to non-victimized peers. The mechanisms underlying these outcomes often involve rumination, whereby victims repeatedly relive negative experiences and anticipate future attacks, leading to sustained psychological distress (Na et al., 2021). Over time, prolonged exposure can contribute

to the development of more severe conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and social phobia.

In the context of Bindura University, the psychological impact may be exacerbated by socio-economic challenges. Students from low-income backgrounds often face additional stressors, such as financial insecurity, limited access to mental health services, and social stigma around seeking psychological support (Mabaso et al., 2022). These factors can magnify the emotional burden of cyberbullying, leaving victims isolated and without coping mechanisms. The cumulative effect of these psychological stressors often results in decreased resilience, increased vulnerability to further victimization, and reduced capacity to engage in academic and social life effectively.

2.5.2 Academic Effects

Cyberbullying also negatively impacts academic performance and engagement. Victims often experience reduced concentration, diminished motivation, and avoidance behaviours that interfere with their learning processes. Myers and Cowie (2021) reported that students subjected to persistent online harassment exhibited lower grade point averages, increased absenteeism, and a higher likelihood of dropping courses or discontinuing studies. These academic consequences are particularly concerning in university settings, where sustained performance is critical for future career prospects.

The academic effects are compounded by the overlap between the virtual and academic spheres. For example, online group assignments, discussion forums, and academic messaging platforms, which are essential for course participation, can become arenas of harassment. Victims

may withdraw from collaborative learning activities or avoid online communication altogether, leading to gaps in learning and skill acquisition. In low-resource contexts like Bindura University, where alternative support services are scarce, and the lack of academic accommodation for victims can exacerbate learning inequalities and hinder students' educational trajectories.

2.5.3 Social Effects

Cyberbullying significantly disrupts social relationships and peer interactions. Victims frequently report feelings of social isolation, mistrust, and difficulties in forming or maintaining friendships (Bottino et al., 2021). The fear of judgment or further harassment may prompt students to withdraw from online and offline social networks, reducing opportunities for social support and peer engagement. This social withdrawal can initiate a cycle of vulnerability, as isolation may increase the likelihood of further victimization and intensify feelings of loneliness and depression.

2.5.4 Interplay between Psychological, Academic, and Social Effects

The psychological, academic, and social effects of cyberbullying are interconnected and often mutually reinforcing. Psychological distress can reduce motivation and cognitive functioning, leading to academic difficulties. Academic struggles, in turn, may increase stress and exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or depression. Social isolation reduces access to support networks, further intensifying psychological vulnerability. This cyclical interplay illustrates the complex, systemic nature of cyberbullying, as predicted by the Social-Ecological Theory, where individual experiences are shaped by interactions across multiple social systems (Espelage, 2018; Zych et al., 2021).

2.5.5 Contextual Amplification in Low-Resource Settings

In low-resource contexts such as Bindura University, the effects of cyberbullying are often amplified by systemic and structural limitations. Limited access to counseling services, scarce mental health professionals, and insufficient institutional policies mean that students have fewer avenues to seek support or report harassment. Furthermore, the stigma surrounding mental health in Zimbabwe often prevents victims from openly discussing their experiences, which can exacerbate the psychological burden. As noted by Fisher et al. (2022), the absence of preventive interventions and coping mechanisms creates a high-risk environment where the negative effects of cyberbullying are more pronounced and enduring.

Although research on cyberbullying is extensive globally, there remain significant gaps in understanding its longitudinal and context-specific impacts in African universities. Few studies track the long-term academic and career outcomes for victims or examine the interaction between socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and institutional policies. Moreover, there is limited exploration of protective factors such as peer support networks, resilience-building interventions, and culturally adapted counseling strategies that could mitigate the effects of cyberbullying in Zimbabwean higher education. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing targeted, evidence-based interventions that respond effectively to the multifaceted challenges posed by cyberbullying.

2.6 What is Mental Health?

Mental health is a fundamental component of overall well-being and human development. It encompasses not only the absence of mental disorders but also the presence of positive

psychological, emotional, and social functioning. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community." This definition emphasizes mental health as a dynamic state, influenced by individual capacities, environmental conditions, and socio-cultural factors. In the context of university students, mental health is critical for academic achievement, social engagement, and long-term personal development.

2.6.1 Emotional Components of Mental Health

Emotional well-being refers to the ability to manage and respond adaptively to stress, adversity, and daily challenges. Students with strong emotional health can regulate negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and sadness, while maintaining optimism and resilience in the face of setbacks (Keyes, 2021). Emotional regulation is particularly relevant for victims of cyberbullying, who often experience intense feelings of humiliation, fear, or anger. Poor emotional health can result in persistent anxiety, irritability, and low mood, which compromise both academic performance and interpersonal relationships.

In the Bindura University context, students face additional emotional challenges due to academic pressures, financial constraints, and the transitional nature of university life. Many students live away from family support systems for the first time, increasing exposure to stressors without the protective buffer of close emotional networks. These conditions can intensify the emotional toll of cyberbullying, leading to heightened vulnerability and increased risk for psychological disorders.

2.6.2 Psychological Components of Mental Health

Psychological well-being encompasses self-esteem, cognitive functioning, and adaptive coping strategies. Students with robust psychological health demonstrate confidence in their abilities, maintain realistic self-perceptions, and effectively employ problem-solving skills to navigate challenges (Auerbach et al., 2022). Conversely, exposure to cyberbullying often undermines these capacities by fostering negative self-evaluation, rumination, and learned helplessness. Victims may internalize hostile online messages, resulting in diminished self-worth and chronic stress, which can impair concentration, memory, and academic engagement.

Furthermore, mental health in the psychological domain is closely linked to resilience the ability to recover from adversity. In low-resource settings such as Bindura University, students often lack access to formal mental health support or resilience-building programs, which increases susceptibility to lasting psychological effects of cyberbullying (Patel et al., 2021). The intersection of cyberbullying and limited psychological support creates a compounded risk, highlighting the necessity of institutional and community interventions.

2.6.3 Social Components of Mental Health

Social well-being involves the quality of interpersonal relationships, social connectedness, and the ability to participate meaningfully in communities. Healthy social functioning allows students to form supportive peer networks, engage in cooperative learning, and maintain positive family relationships (Keyes, 2021). Cyberbullying, however, disrupts social well-being by fostering mistrust, social withdrawal, and fear of peer judgment. Students who are victims may

avoid both online and offline interactions, diminishing their access to social support and increasing feelings of isolation (Bottino et al., 2021).

In Zimbabwean university contexts, social well-being is further complicated by cultural expectations and communal norms. The philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual responsibility, is central to many students' social identities. Experiencing cyberbullying may not only affect the individual but also bring perceived dishonor to family and community networks, amplifying social stress and stigma (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). These socio-cultural dynamics illustrate how mental health is deeply embedded in social systems and cannot be considered solely as an individual phenomenon.

2.7 Effects of Cyberbullying on Mental Health

Cyberbullying is widely recognized as a significant psychosocial stressor that negatively impacts mental health. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, its digital nature ensures that harassment can occur at any time, reach broad audiences, and remain permanently accessible online. This persistent exposure intensifies psychological, emotional, and social consequences, often with long-lasting effects. Among university students, cyberbullying can impair cognitive functioning, academic performance, social engagement, and overall well-being. In low-resource contexts such as Bindura University, these effects are often amplified by limited access to counseling services, financial constraints, and the stigma associated with mental health challenges (Mabaso et al., 2022).

2.7.1 Depression

Depression is one of the most commonly reported psychological outcomes of cyberbullying. Victims frequently experience persistent sadness, hopelessness, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Studies indicate that students exposed to cyberbullying are more than twice as likely to develop depressive symptoms compared to their non-victimized peers (Chen et al., 2020). The repetitive and public nature of online harassment contributes to sustained emotional distress, reinforcing negative self-perceptions and social withdrawal. Victims may ruminate on humiliating incidents, exacerbating feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy. In the Bindura University context, students from low-income backgrounds may experience compounded depressive symptoms due to additional stressors such as financial insecurity and limited access to mental health support. Without timely intervention, depression can become chronic, affecting both personal well-being and academic engagement.

2.7.2 Anxiety

Anxiety is another prevalent mental health outcome associated with cyberbullying. Victims often report heightened levels of fear, tension, and hypervigilance, anticipating further online attacks (Na et al., 2021). The unpredictability of harassment coupled with the potential for anonymity and widespread dissemination of harmful content creates a constant state of psychological alertness. Anxiety may manifest in physical symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, and gastrointestinal disturbances, further undermining academic and social functioning. At Bindura University, where students rely heavily on online platforms for communication and learning, anxiety induced by cyberbullying can impair participation in academic activities, reduce

classroom engagement, and limit collaborative opportunities. The lack of accessible counseling services exacerbates these challenges, leaving victims to cope in isolation.

2.7.3 Social Withdrawal and Isolation

Social withdrawal is a common coping response among cyberbullying victims, characterized by avoidance of peer interactions both online and offline. Victims may disengage from social networks, avoid group discussions, or limit participation in academic forums to reduce exposure to harassment (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2019). This isolation deprives students of essential social support, which is critical for resilience and emotional recovery. In the Zimbabwean context, the philosophy of Ubuntu emphasizes communal relationships and social cohesion; therefore, social withdrawal can lead to additional stress, as victims may feel disconnected from both their peer groups and broader social networks (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). Over time, this isolation can reinforce feelings of loneliness, intensify psychological distress, and reduce the victim's capacity to seek help or develop effective coping strategies.

2.7.4 Academic Implications of Mental Health Effects

The psychological and social consequences of cyberbullying frequently spill over into academic performance. Students experiencing depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal often exhibit reduced concentration, poor time management, and decreased motivation to engage in coursework or research activities (Myers & Cowie, 2021). Chronic mental health difficulties can contribute to absenteeism, lower grade point averages, and, in extreme cases, course withdrawal or dropout. At Bindura University, where institutional resources for mental health support are

limited, these academic effects are particularly pronounced, creating a cycle in which psychological distress and academic difficulties mutually reinforce one another.

Although extensive research highlights the mental health consequences of cyberbullying globally, there are significant gaps in knowledge regarding African university contexts. Few studies examine the long-term mental health trajectories of victims, particularly in low-resource environments like Zimbabwe. There is also limited research on protective factors, such as peer support networks, culturally adapted counseling programs, and resilience-building interventions, that could mitigate the impact of cyberbullying. Understanding these gaps is essential for designing context-specific strategies that support students' mental health while addressing the systemic and socio-cultural factors that perpetuate online harassment.

2.8 Statistics from Other Institutions

Understanding the prevalence of cyberbullying in higher education is critical for contextualizing its impact and informing interventions. Globally, cyberbullying has been identified as a pervasive issue among university students, affecting both their mental health and academic performance. Prevalence rates, however, vary across countries and institutional contexts due to differences in digital access, cultural norms, reporting mechanisms, and institutional policies.

2.8.1 Global Prevalence

In high-income countries, cyberbullying is widely documented, with studies indicating that between 20% and 40% of university students report experiencing some form of digital harassment. For instance, a study conducted at the University of Michigan, United States, revealed that approximately 30% of undergraduate students reported exposure to online harassment within the

past year, with social media platforms identified as the most common site of victimization (Campbell et al., 2021). Similarly, research at King's College London, United Kingdom, found that 25% of students experienced cyberbullying, which correlated strongly with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms (Smith et al., 2021). These findings underscore the universality of cyberbullying among young adults, regardless of national context, and highlight the mental health risks associated with digital harassment.

In Asia, prevalence rates are similarly high, reflecting extensive internet penetration among university populations. Studies at National University of Singapore and Seoul National University, South Korea, reported cyberbullying rates of 28% and 32%, respectively, with online platforms used for peer comparison, romantic disputes, and academic disagreements being the most common venues (Lee & Shin, 2020). These studies indicate that cultural and technological factors, such as the prominence of social media in academic and social life, significantly influence the prevalence and manifestation of cyberbullying.

2.8.2 African Context

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), cyberbullying prevalence is often higher due to the combination of rapid digital adoption, limited regulation, and socio-economic disparities. In Nigeria, a study across several universities, including the University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University, reported a prevalence rate of 44% among students, with both male and female students equally affected (Adejuwon & Ojo, 2021). Cyberbullying in these contexts was frequently associated with peer rivalry, online harassment related to academic performance, and romantic conflicts.

In South Africa, research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the University of Cape Town indicated that approximately 33% of students experienced cyberbullying, with significant associations between victimization and depression, anxiety, and decreased academic performance (Mabaso et al., 2022). These studies highlight how socio-economic factors, such as digital inequality and limited access to mental health resources, exacerbate the negative consequences of online harassment in African universities.

2.8.3 Prevalence and Effects in Other University Contexts

Cyberbullying prevalence and its impact are not uniform, and institutional characteristics play a crucial role. For example, McGill University in Canada reported that 22% of students had been victims of cyberbullying, yet proactive counseling services and peer-support programs mitigated some of the mental health effects (Fisher et al., 2022). Conversely, universities with limited mental health infrastructure, such as certain LMIC institutions, see amplified psychological and academic consequences among victims, illustrating the interaction between institutional support and student well-being.

Studies also show that the effects of cyberbullying extend beyond mental health. Across institutions in the United States, United Kingdom, and South Africa, victims frequently reported decreased academic performance, absenteeism, and a reluctance to participate in collaborative learning activities (Myers & Cowie, 2021). These effects were particularly pronounced in contexts where students relied heavily on online communication for academic purposes and lacked institutional policies addressing cyber harassment.

Despite the global and African prevalence data, there is a marked scarcity of research specifically focusing on Zimbabwean universities. Few institutions have conducted systematic surveys to quantify cyberbullying rates, identify risk factors, or examine mental health outcomes among victims. This lack of institution-specific data poses challenges for developing context-appropriate interventions at Bindura University and other Zimbabwean higher education institutions. Regional variations in internet access, digital literacy, and socio-economic status are largely unstudied, leaving gaps in understanding the magnitude and nuances of cyberbullying within the country.

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has critically reviewed the existing literature on cyberbullying and its effects on mental health, situating the discussion within both global and African university contexts, and specifically highlighting the challenges faced by students at Bindura University of Science Education. Beginning with the theoretical foundation, the Social-Ecological Theory was identified as an appropriate framework for understanding cyberbullying, as it captures the multi-level influences of individual traits, family dynamics, institutional policies, technological environments, and socio-cultural norms. The chapter then defined cyberbullying, distinguishing it from traditional forms of harassment and highlighting its unique characteristics, such as anonymity, permanence, and audience reach. The causes of cyberbullying were examined through the lens of individual, familial, institutional, technological, and socio-cultural factors, emphasizing the interplay of personal vulnerabilities and systemic influences. The effects on mental health were explored in detail, showing how cyberbullying contributes to depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and academic challenges, with particularly severe consequences in low-resource

settings where access to counseling and psychosocial support is limited. Mental health was contextualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being, shaped by both global and local cultural perspectives such as Ubuntu.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter looked at the literature review which was presented systematically. This chapter is important to the study because the chapter outlines the research methodology adopted to investigate the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of students at Bindura University of Science Education. Moreover the chapter details the blue print that became the master plan which was used to conduct the study. This led up to the ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. The chapter also presents the research philosophy, research design, and the specific methodology employed. Furthermore the chapter also explicates the target population, sample size, and the sampling techniques specifically quota, stratified random sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling used to select participants. The instruments for data collection, namely questionnaires/surveys and key informant interviews, are discussed alongside the data analysis and presentation plan.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Every research should be guided by research philosophy which as been defined by different scholars to the system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge. Also this knowledge is shaping how the researcher views the world and interprets the nature of reality (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). This study employed the interpretivism research philosophy

The philosophy posits that reality is socially constructed and subjective. This makes is to require the researcher to understand t meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Moreover this is different from positivism which seeks objective laws. Thus interpretivism was selected because the impact of cyberbullying on mental health is personal and also dependent on the victim's individual psychological context. This is also affirmed by scholars such as Creswell (2014) who according to him interpretivism allows for a deep dive into the "lived experience,". This was essential for this study to uncover not just if students are bullied, but how they internalize that trauma.

3.3 Research Approach

In addition, every research should have a distinguished approach or methodology, which is the general approach the researcher, takes in carrying out the research project. The methodology also dictate the tools and logic used to generate data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This study utilized a qualitative methodology. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, consisting of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible, have defined this methodology. This methodology was chosen because the study sought to explore the nature of human emotion and the intangible psychological effects of cyberbullying, such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. These are also difficult to quantify numerically. As noted by Yin (2018) qualitative methods are superior when asking "how" and "why" questions. In this context, it allowed the researcher to understand the specific dynamics of the online environment at Bindura University and how it intersects with student life. Thus from this one can learn that qualitative approach facilitated a narrative-driven exploration which enabled victims to voice their stories in detail.

3.4 Research Design

As stated by scholars such as Yin (2014) a research design is the blueprint or roadmap for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data. It makes sure that evidence obtained enables the researcher to answer the research questions as unambiguously as possible (Yin, 2014). Thus this study resorted to the use of a case study design. According to scholars such as Stake (1995) a case study is defined as the intrinsic study of a particular case to understand it in depth. Thus the case which the study opted for in this context is Bindura University of Science Education. This design was selected because it allowed for a bounded system investigation. It also focused specifically on the unique socio-cultural and digital environment of this specific institution rather than generalizing to all universities. According to Yin (2014), case studies are ideal for examining contemporary events within their real-life context; therefore, this design enabled the researcher to investigate how the specific campus culture, Wi-Fi accessibility, and social dynamics at BUSE contribute to or mitigate the mental health impacts of cyberbullying. It provided the flexibility to use multiple sources of evidence to build a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon within the specific context of the university community.

3.5 Target Population

Moreover no research can be successful without a specific target population which refers to the entire group of individuals or objects to which researchers are interested in generalizing the conclusions (Creswell, 2014). Thus in the case of this study the target population included l students and relevant staff members at Bindura University of Science Education (Key Informants). To successfully conduct the study the scholar targeted undergraduate students who are the primary users of digital platforms and potential victims or perpetrators of cyberbullying. Furthermore, the

population extended to the Student Affairs Department staff, BUSE SRC and Wardens, who are the first responders to student mental health crises. Describing this population was critical because BUSE hosts a diverse demographic of students from various backgrounds across six faculties, all engaging in a high-density digital environment.

3.6 Sample Size

Sample size refers to the specific number of participants selected from the target population to represent the whole (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). For this study, a sample size of 33 participants was determined to be sufficient to reach "data saturation," where no new themes or insights emerge (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This sample was carefully categorized to ensure a 360-degree view of the problem. The breakdown includes 30 Students (comprising victims of cyberbullying and bystanders to understand the peer culture) and 3 Key Informants. Students were drawn from Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Science, Faculty of Commerce, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Faculty of Science Education and Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities.

The 30 students will be drawn from all six faculties of the university to ensure representation across the academic spectrum. The 3 key informants include one representative from the Student Affairs Department, one Warden, and one member of the Students Representative Council (SRC). This specific composition was chosen to balance the raw, emotional accounts of students with the professional, systemic perspectives of the staff, ensuring the data covered the emotional, administrative, and disciplinary aspects of the research problem.

3.7 Sampling Techniques

Since the research just outlined the sample size it was deem also to outline the methods of selecting the participants from such a big pool. Thus Sampling techniques are the methods used to select the specific participants from the broader population (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019). This study utilized non-probability sampling techniques. It relied on the use quota sampling, stratified random sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling, to access the necessary data.

3.7.1 Quota and Stratified Random Sampling

Saunders et al. (2019) argues that Quota sampling is a technique where the researcher ensures that specific subgroups are represented in the sample to reflect certain characteristics of the population To ensure representation across the university's diverse academic structure, the student sample was stratified by faculty. Bindura University has six faculties. Using a combination of stratified and quota sampling, 5 students were selected from each of the 6 faculties, bringing the total student sample to 30. To identify these students, the researcher liaised with faculty administrators to obtain student registers. From each faculty's register, students were selected randomly to participate in the survey. This method was chosen to ensure that the experiences of cyberbullying and its mental health effects are captured across all academic disciplines, avoiding bias toward any single faculty and providing a holistic view of the student body.

3.7.2 Purposive Sampling

Etikan (2016) noted that Purposive sampling is a technique where the researcher relies on their own judgment to choose members of the population to participate in the study. This is made

based on their specific knowledge or position (Etikan et al., 2016). According to Etikan et al. (2016), this method is effective when the researcher needs to reach a targeted sample quickly. This technique was used to select the three key informants. Student Affairs Representative were chosen because this office oversees student conduct, welfare, and the implementation of disciplinary policies regarding harassment. Also the Warden was Chosen because wardens reside within the student accommodation and are often the first to witness behavioral changes or receive informal reports of conflicts, including cyberbullying incidents that escalate in residences. To add also the SRC Member was Chosen because student leaders are the bridge between the student body and the administration; they often receive peer confessions regarding bullying and mental health struggles that students may not report to official authorities.

These participants were chosen deliberately because they possess specialized information regarding university policy, the frequency of bullying reports, and the clinical mental health status of the student body information that a random student would not have. By using this method, the researcher ensured that the study benefited from expert insights into the institutional management of cyberbullying and mental health support systems at BUSE.

3.8 Data Collection Methods (primary, secondary and documentary)

Data collection is also an integral part of the research process. It is defined by Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2017) as the systematic process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest to answer the stated research question. Thus to follow this to the dot the researcher relied on questionnaires for the student sample and key informant interviews for the three institutional stakeholders.

3.8.1 Survey

Thus in detail a survey has been defined in may various ways but in this case it is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents (De Vaus, 2013). In this study thus the researcher had to identify 30 students through quota sampling who completed a structured survey. This the questionnaire survey contained a mix of closed-ended questions (to gather demographic data and quantify experiences) and open-ended questions. This method was chosen because it provides a degree of anonymity, which is crucial when dealing with sensitive topics like cyberbullying and mental health. Students may feel more comfortable disclosing traumatic experiences on paper than in a face-to-face interview, thus increasing the honesty and richness of the data regarding their psychological distress.

3.8.2 Key Informant Interviews

Also to obtain rich information the study used key informant which has also been defined in many ways. In this study thush Key informant interviews are qualitative in-depth interviews with people who know what is going on in the community (Kumar, 1989). This method was used to collect data from the three key informants who included the Student Affairs representative, the Warden, and the SRC member. According to Cohen et al. (2017), interviews allow for a greater depth of expression and are highly suitable for sensitive topics. This approach was chosen because these informants hold a macro-level view of the problem. Not just like students who report personal experiences, these officials can discuss trends, policy effectiveness, observed behavioral patterns in residences, and the challenges of governing student behavior online. The interviews provided systemic data to complement the personal data from the student surveys.

3.8.3 Documentary Analysis

To complement the other two methods the research had to used Documentary analysis which is defined in the basis of this study as systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents both printed and electronic material (Bowen, 2009). Moreover also Bowen (2009) defines it as a method that requires data to be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. This method was used to analyze University disciplinary records, counseling department annual reports and the BUSE student handbook/code of conduct. This approach was justified as it allowed the researcher to triangulate the data obtained from interviews and surveys with official records. It helped to determine if the university officially recognizes cyberbullying as an offense.

3.9 Data Presentation and Analysis

To move on another process that was very crucial for the study was data analysis which in this study was used to refer to he process of inspecting, cleansing, transforming, and modeling data with the goal of discovering useful information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study employed Thematic Analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data. The data from the open-ended survey questions and the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data was coded to identify recurring themes such as "anxiety," "suicidal ideation," "academic decline," and "fear of exposure." This method was used because it provides a flexible and useful research tool that can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data.

The data was presented in a narrative format, utilizing direct quotations and excerpts from the participants to ensure their voices are heard authentically. This presentation style preserves the

emotional weight of the findings, allowing the reader to connect directly with the students' mental health struggles. Where appropriate, simple tables or figures may be used to display the demographic distribution of the sample (e.g., distribution across the six faculties), but the core findings will be told through the stories and perspectives of the participants.

3.10 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are often referred to as trustworthiness, encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trustworthiness is established when the findings truly reflect the participants' perspectives. To ensure this, the study utilized triangulation, where findings from the surveys and interviews were cross-verified with the documentary analysis to check for consistency. Additionally, member checking was employed, where the researcher returned a summary of the findings to the key informants to verify that their institutional perspectives were accurately captured. This was essential to prevent researcher bias and ensure that the conclusions drawn regarding the link between cyberbullying and mental health decline were accurate representations of the students' reality at BUSE, rather than the researcher's assumptions.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

Also of importance are ethical considerations which are the moral principles that guide the research from its inception through to completion and publication (Cohen et al., 2017). Thus also as the nature of the study was e sensitive adherence to strict ethical protocols was paramount to protect the dignity and safety of the participants.

I. Informed Consent

One of the ethics which were used included Informed consent. It involves the process and mechanism ensuring that participants are fully aware of the nature, purpose, and potential risks of the research before agreeing to participate (Creswell, 2014). Thus the researcher the researcher made sure that all participants were provided with a consent form detailing the study's objectives regarding cyberbullying and mental health. To accomplish this they were given the opportunity to ask questions and were made aware that their participation was strictly for academic purposes.

II. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Moreover to ensure that participants participated freely the researcher had to resort to the use of Confidentiality which in this study refers to the protection of the participants' identities and the data they provide (Saunders et al., 2019). Due to the potential stigma associated with mental health issues and victimization, strictly protecting identity was crucial. All personal identifiers were removed from the data. Also participants were assigned codes such as Student A, Student B, or Informant X) instead of names. Thus the researcher ensured that no specific details that could trace a story back to a specific individual at Bindura University were included in the final report.

III. Protection from Harm

Moreover the research also ensured that participants were protected in all ways from harm. The principle of non-maleficence dictates that the research should cause no harm to the participants (Cohen et al., 2017). Also Discussing experiences of bullying and depression can be re-traumatizing. To mitigate this risk, the researcher designed the student survey to be completed privately, and the key informant interviews were approached with high emotional intelligence and sensitivity. Crucially, a referral protocol was established: if any participant exhibited signs of

severe distress or suicidal ideation in their survey responses or during an interview, the researcher was prepared to, with the student's permission, refer them to the University Counseling Center for immediate professional support. This ensured the study prioritized the students' well-being over data collection.

3.12 Chapter Summary

Thus in a nutshell this chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed to study on the effects of cyberbullying on mental health at Bindura University. It justified the use of the interpretivist philosophy and qualitative methodology to capture the depth of student experiences. The case study design was established as the framework for the inquiry. The chapter detailed the selection of 33 participants through a combination of quota, stratified random, purposive, and snowball sampling. It described the use of questionnaires for students and key informant interviews for staff as the primary data collection tools. Also, it outlined the thematic analysis approach and the rigorous ethical measures put in place to ensure the safety, confidentiality, and dignity of all participants involved in this sensitive study. The following chapter will present the data analysis and findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter looked at the methodology which guided the study. This chapter focuses more on the presentation, analysis, interpretation and discussion of all the data collected from the study during the research period. In order to do so collection of data was done utilising student surveys where 30 students were selected and also 3 key informants were selected to conduct key interviews with the Student Affairs representative, the Warden, and the SRC member. Documents available in the public domain were also utilised as well as documentary sources. This chapter aligns the research findings with the research objectives and existing literature.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This section presents the demographic profile of the 30 student participants who completed the survey questionnaire. Thus the variables analysed include sex, age, year of study, faculty, and residence status. This was done so as to contextualise the experiences of cyberbullying and its mental health effects across different student subgroups.

4.2.1 Sex of Participants

Table 4.1: Distribution of Participants by Sex

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Male	14	46.7
Female	16	53.3
Prefer not to say	0	0.0
Total	**30**	**100**

The depicts that out of the 30 student participants, 14 (46.7%) were male and 16 (53.3%) were female. Thus the data indicates that majority of female participants reflects the general gender distribution of Bindura University's student population. At Bindura University female enrolment has been increasing in recent years. Thus from this one may say that this balanced representation allows for meaningful comparison of cyberbullying experiences across gender, which is important given that existing literature suggests females may experience different forms of cyberbullying compared to males.

4.2.2 Age of Participants

Table 4.2: Distribution of Participants by Age

Response (Age in years)	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
18 – 20	8	26.7

21 – 23	14	46.7
24 – 26	6	20.0
27 and above	2	6.6
Total	**30**	**100**

The data in the above table indicates that majority of participants 14 out of 30 (46.7%) were aged between 21 and 23 years. From this one may learn that this is consistent with the typical age range for undergraduate students at Zimbabwean universities. Those aged 18–20 constituted 26.7% (8 participants), representing younger students likely in their first or second year. Participants aged 24–26 accounted for 20% (6 participants), while those aged 27 and above made up only 6.6% (2 participants). Thus it can be deducted that concentration of participants in the 21–23 age bracket suggests that most respondents were in the middle of their undergraduate studies, a period when social networks are well-established but also when peer conflicts, including cyberbullying, may be more frequent.

4.3 Prevalence of Cyberbullying Among Students at Bindura University

This section presents quantitative findings on the prevalence of cyberbullying, addressing Research Objective 1 and Research Question 1.

Table 4.3: Frequency of Internet and Social Media Use

Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Several times per day	22	73.3

Once per day	5	16.7
Weekly	2	6.7
Once per week	1	3.3
Rarely	0	0.0
Total	**30**	**100**

The table above shows and reveals that majority of students (22 out of 30, 73.3%) reported using the internet and social media several times per day. Also to add more 16.7% (5 participants) used it once per day, and only 3 participants (10%) used it less frequently. None reported rare use.

One of the questions asked in the student survey includes: How often have you experienced or witnessed cyberbullying at Bindura University?

The student participants from Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities said

> "I have witnessed cyberbullying several times in our faculty WhatsApp group. People post embarrassing things about others, and sometimes it gets really nasty."

Student C from Faculty of Commerce said

> "Personally, I have experienced it maybe three or four times since I joined the university. It happens mostly on WhatsApp and sometimes on Facebook."

Another student from Faculty of Science and Engineering stated:

> "Cyberbullying is very common here. I know at least five people in my residence who have been victims. Some have even changed their phone numbers because of the harassment."

Key informants also provided institutional perspectives on prevalence. The SRC representative noted:

> "Based on the reports that come to my office, cyberbullying is quite common at Bindura University. Students don't always report officially, but they talk to us as student leaders. I would say at least 40% of students have experienced some form of online harassment during their time here."

The Warden added:

> "In the residences, we see the effects of cyberbullying frequently. Students come to us distressed about messages they have received or things posted about them online. It has become a regular part of our welfare work, unfortunately."

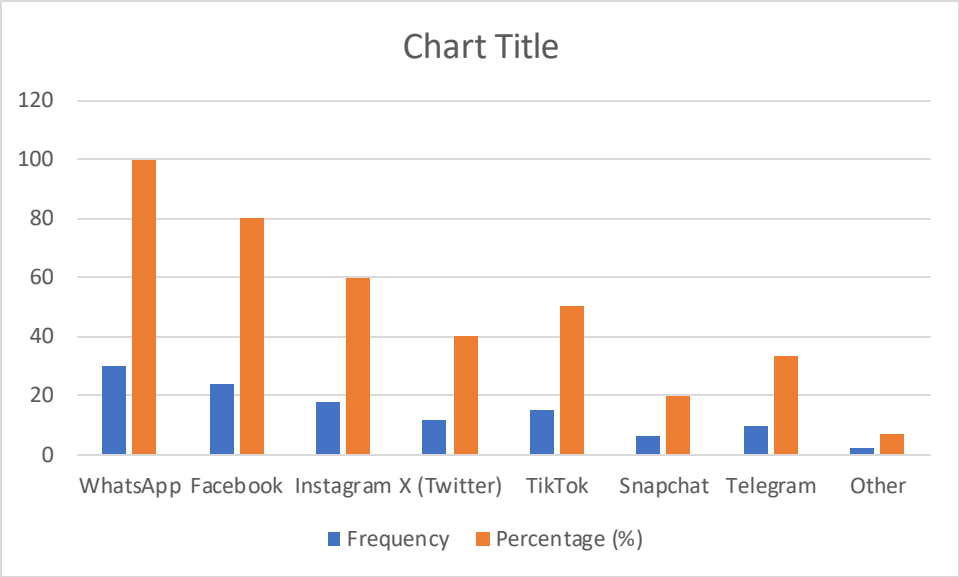
The Student Affairs representative observed:

> "Officially, we receive about 10 to 15 formal reports of cyberbullying per semester. However, we know this represents only a fraction of actual incidents because many students are afraid to come forward. Based on our interactions with students, the true prevalence is much higher." (Student Affairs Representative)

From the above findings one may learn that the responses aligns with literature which indicates that between 20% and 40% of university students report experiencing some form of digital harassment (Campbell et al., 2021) in African Universities. Also the data indicates that prevalence at Bindura University appears consistent with these global patterns. The gap between actual incidents and formal reporting observed by the Student Affairs representative reflects similar challenges documented in African universities, where stigma and fear of reprisal discourage reporting (Mabaso et al., 2022).

4.3.1 Platforms Actively Used by Participants

Figure 4.1 Platforms Actively Used by Participants (Multiple responses allowed)

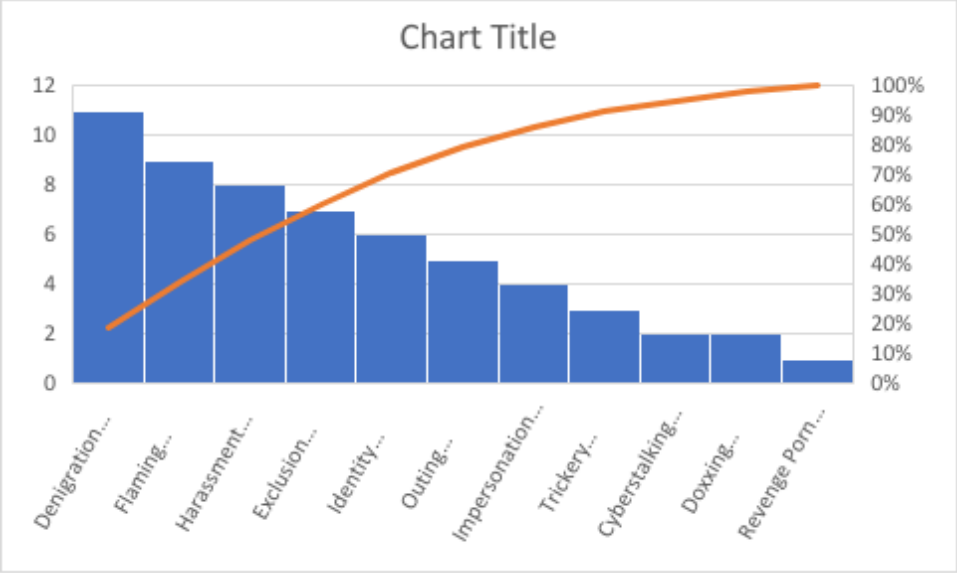


From the above report depicted in the figure one may learn that All 30 participants (100%) reported using WhatsApp. This shows that it as the dominant platform for communication among Bindura University students. Facebook was used by 80% (24 participants), Instagram by 60% (18), TikTok by 50% (15), X (Twitter) by 40% (12), Telegram by 33.3% (10), and Snapchat by 20% (6). The universal use of WhatsApp is significant because many academic groups and residence hall communication occur on this platform, making it a primary site for potential cyberbullying. The wide range of platforms used also means that cyberbullying can occur across multiple digital spaces, making it difficult for victims to escape.

4.4 Forms of Cyberbullying Experienced by Students at Bindura University

This section presents quantitative findings on the forms of cyberbullying, addressing Research Objective 2 and Research Question 2. The following table reports the number of participants who experienced each form (multiple responses allowed, n=15 who personally experienced cyberbullying).

Figure 4.2: Forms of Cyberbullying Experienced



The data that is displayed in the above figure indicates that most commonly experienced form of cyberbullying was denigration which was reported by 11 participants (73.3% of those who experienced cyberbullying). This was followed by flaming (60.0%, 9 participants) and harassment (53.3%, 8 participants). Exclusion from online groups was experienced by 46.7% (7 participants), while identity bullying affected 40.0% (6 participants). Outing (sharing secrets without consent) affected 33.3% (5 participants). Less common forms included impersonation (26.7%), trickery (20.0%), cyberstalking (13.3%), doxxing (13.3%), and revenge porn (6.7%).

One of the questions asked in the student survey includes.

How often have you experienced or witnessed cyberbullying at Bindura University?

The student from Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

> "I have witnessed cyberbullying several times in our faculty WhatsApp group. People post embarrassing things about others, and sometimes it gets really nasty."

> "Personally, I have experienced it maybe three or four times since I joined the university. It happens mostly on WhatsApp and sometimes on Facebook."

Another student participant from Faculty of Science and Engineering said

> "Cyberbullying is very common here. I know at least five people in my residence who have been victims. Some have even changed their phone numbers because of the harassment."

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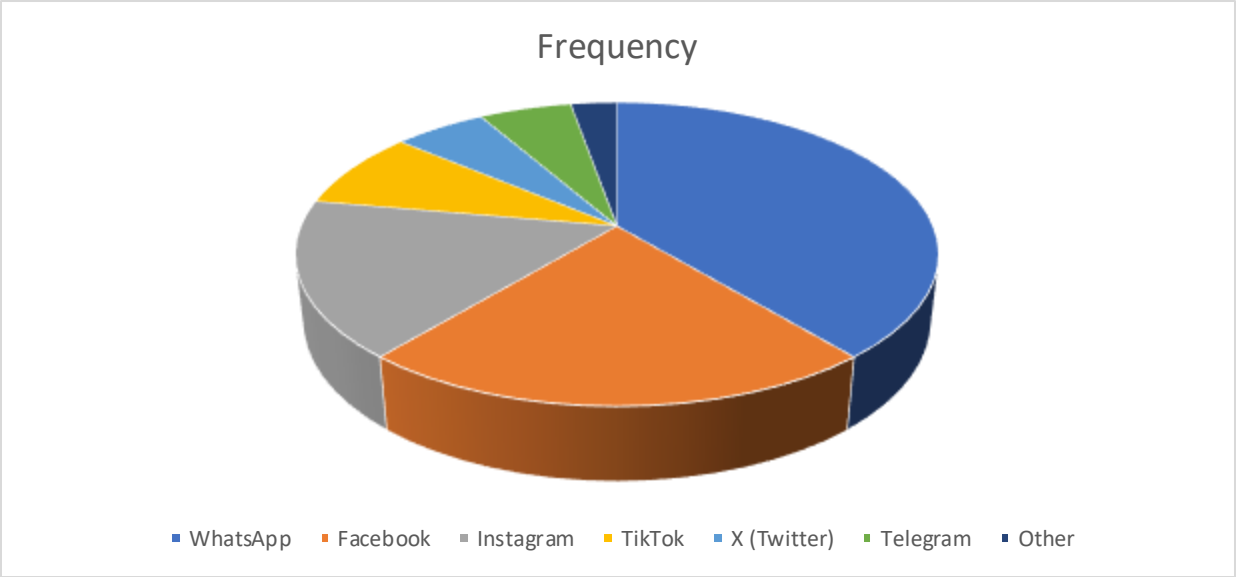
The Student Affairs representative observed:

> "Officially, we receive about 10 to 15 formal reports of cyberbullying per semester. However, we know this represents only a fraction of actual incidents because many students are afraid to come forward. Based on our interactions with students, the true prevalence is much higher."

From the above findings one may learn that the finding aligns with most of the global literature which indicates that between 20% and 40% of university students report experiencing some form of digital harassment (Campbell et al., 2021). Also the findings indicates that the prevalence at Bindura University appears consistent with these global patterns. Also from this one may also learn that the gap between actual incidents and formal reporting observed by the Student Affairs representative reflects similar challenges documented in African universities, where stigma and fear of reprisal discourage reporting (Mabaso et al., 2022). Furthermore the findings are supported by Espelage (2018), who noted that the microsystem level, including peer dynamics and social support networks, plays a crucial role in moderating vulnerability to cyberbullying. First-year students, having not yet established strong protective relationships within the university environment, remain particularly exposed

Figure 4.2: Platforms Where Cyberbullying Occurs (n=15, multiple responses)



The figure above indicates the platforms where cyberbullying is experienced. The data presented indicates that WhatsApp was the most common platform for cyberbullying, reported by 14 out of 15 victims (93.3%). Facebook was the second most common (53.3%, 8 participants), followed by Instagram (40.0%, 6 participants). Other platforms were less frequently reported.

"The most common thing I have seen is denigration - people spreading false rumors about others in WhatsApp groups. Someone's reputation can be destroyed within hours."

Student from Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Science

"I experienced harassment where someone kept sending me insulting messages repeatedly. It went on for weeks until I blocked the person."

Student from. Faculty of Mining said

"Exclusion is also a problem. People create study groups and deliberately leave certain people out, then share notes and resources without them. It affects their academics."

The SRC representative noted:

"What we see most frequently is flaming in public group chats - angry, rude exchanges that escalate. quickly. Also, outing and trickery where private information or secrets are shared without consent. Revenge porn is also emerging as a serious concern, especially among students in romantic relationships."

4.5 Psychological Effects of Cyberbullying on Students' Mental Health

A critical question asked in the student survey was:

How has cyberbullying affected your mental health and emotional well-being?

Student participants from Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities provided deeply personal responses:

"After the incident, I couldn't sleep properly for weeks. Every time my phone buzzed, my heart would start racing. I became anxious about checking messages. I even thought about deactivating my social media accounts completely."

Student from Faculty of Science and Engineering said

"I felt so humiliated and ashamed. I didn't want to go to class because I thought everyone was looking at me and laughing. My grades dropped that semester because I couldn't concentrate on my studies."

Another participant from Faculty of Education stated:

"There was a time when I felt like life wasn't worth living anymore. The messages were so cruel, and it felt like there was no way out. I'm grateful I had a friend who noticed I was struggling and encouraged me to talk to a counselor."

Student from Faculty of Commerce said that

"I lost all my confidence. Before the cyberbullying started, I was active in class discussions and social events. Afterward, I became withdrawn and isolated. I stopped going to church on campus because I didn't want to see people. I felt completely alone."

The SRC representative confirmed these observations:

"Students who have experienced cyberbullying often come to me showing clear signs of depression and anxiety. They look tired, they are tearful, they talk about not wanting to attend classes. Some have expressed thoughts of self-harm. It is very serious, and as student leaders, we sometimes feel ill-equipped to help them adequately."

The Warden added:

"In the residences, I have seen students who were once outgoing and social become completely withdrawn after cyberbullying incidents. They stay in their rooms, avoid their roommates, stop eating in the dining hall. Some have requested room changes because they cannot bear to live near the person who bullied them online. The psychological toll is visible in their behavior and appearance."

The Student Affairs representative provided an institutional perspective:

> Students who report cyberbullying to our office frequently exhibit signs of psychological distress. Some are visibly anxious or depressed during our meetings. We have had cases where students required referral to the University Counseling Center for ongoing support. The mental health impact can be severe, and we have seen it affect students' academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being."

From the above findings one may learn that the data collected and all the respomses on this strongly align with existing literature documenting the psychological effects of cyberbullying. Chen et al. (2020) found that victims were more than twice as likely to exhibit symptoms of depression compared to non-victimized peers. The anxiety symptoms reported by Student A reflect Na et al.'s (2021) observation that rumination and hypervigilance are common psychological responses to online harassment.

4.6 Strategies for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University

When asked about what the university should do to address cyberbullying, student participants offered several recommendations: A participant from Faculty of Social Science and Humanities said

> "The university needs to have clear policies about cyberbullying. Right now, most students don't even know where to report or what happens when they do report. There should be awareness campaigns teaching students about online safety and the consequences of cyberbullying."

> "We need better mental health support. The Counseling Center is understaffed, and students sometimes wait weeks for an appointment. There should be peer support programs where trained students can provide immediate help to victims."

Another participant from Faculty of Commerce stated:

> "The university should work with mobile network providers to make it easier to report abusive messages and accounts. Sometimes victims feel helpless because they don't know how to report content or get it removed."

The SRC representative recommended:

> "We need a multi-pronged approach. First, prevention through education - teaching students about digital citizenship and the impact of cyberbullying. Second, clear reporting mechanisms that protect victims' confidentiality. Third, consistent consequences for perpetrators. Fourth, mental health support for victims. The SRC is ready to partner with the university administration to implement these strategies, but we need institutional commitment and resources."

The Warden emphasized residence-specific strategies:

> "In the residences, we need better monitoring of hall WhatsApp groups. Hall representatives should be trained to identify and address cyberbullying early before it escalates. We also need more mental health resources specifically for residence students, including regular wellness checks and easily accessible counseling services. Wardens need training on how to support victims and how to document incidents properly for disciplinary action."

The Student Affairs representative provided an institutional perspective on existing and needed strategies:

These recommendations align with the Social-Ecological Theory's emphasis on multi-level interventions (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Effective mitigation requires action at multiple levels: the microsystem (individual counseling and peer support), mesosystem (family-university collaboration and residence hall interventions), exosystem (institutional policies and reporting mechanisms), and macrosystem (cultural change regarding online behavior and mental health stigma).

4.7 Chapter Summary

In a nutshell one may say that this chapter presented the data collected from 30 student surveys and three key informant interviews, analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings revealed that cyberbullying is highly prevalent at Bindura University, with majority of participants having either experienced or witnessed it. WhatsApp is the dominant platform. The most common forms were denigration, flaming and harassment. The psychological effects were severe and this means that the high mean scores for embarrassment ,concentration difficulties, depression, low self-esteem, isolation, and anxiety. To add most of victims reported suicidal thoughts and majority reported self-harm considerations. Mitigation strategies recommended by students included awareness campaigns clear policies, improved mental health support and stronger consequences for perpetrators. Thus from the above one may learn that the qualitative findings, presented through direct quotations, provided rich, contextual understanding of the lived experiences of cyberbullying victims at Bindura University. The next chapter will present the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

5.1 Introduction

This is the final chapter, which provides a synthesis of the research on the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of students at Bindura University of Science Education. Thus ,it summarizes the study across all five chapters. It aslo draws specific conclusions based on the research objectives, and offers actionable recommendations for various stakeholders. Additionally suggests directions for future academic inquiry to address remaining gaps in the literature.

5.2 Summary

The first chapter of the study which was Chapter One introduced the study by highlighting the global and local rise of cyberbullying as a public health concern affecting higher education institutions like BUSE. Moreover the chapter also established the research problem looking at how insufficient understanding of how digital harassment affects student mental health in the Zimbabwean context. The chapter also defined the study's objectives.

Moreover the second chapter was the Chapter Two which also provided review of existing literature. It also looked on how the Social-Ecological Theory as the primary framework. This theory allowed for an analysis of cyberbullying across multiple levels which included microsystem , mesosystem and macrosystem. The review distinguished cyberbullying from traditional bullying through its unique traits of anonymity, permanence, and 24-hour reach.

To addmore the third chapter which was the Chapter Three detailed the research methodology. It adopted an interpretivist philosophy and a qualitative case study design focused on BUSE. A sample of 33 participants which included 30 students across six faculties and 3 key informants was selected using a mix of quota, stratified, and purposive sampling. Data collection involved surveys, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, ensuring validity through triangulation.

Chapter Four presented and analyzed the collected data, revealing that 83.3% of participants had witnessed or experienced cyberbullying. WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform for harassment. The findings highlighted severe psychological impacts, including high levels of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, with a significant number of victims reporting suicidal ideation.

Chapter Five concludes the dissertation by summarizing these findings and offering evidence-based recommendations. It emphasizes that cyberbullying at BUSE is a systemic issue requiring multi-level interventions ranging from university policy reform to enhanced psychological support services.

5.3 Conclusions

Objective 1: To examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among students at Bindura University.

On the first objective of the study the researcher found that cyberbullying is highly prevalent at BUSE. This was so because BUSE was recorded with the vast majority of students being active online several times per day. Also on the other hand While official reports are low, institutional stakeholders and students confirm that many incidents go unreported due to fear and stigma. The high prevalence reflects that digital harassment is a common experience among the student body. The study also discovered that they is a reporting gap at BUSE which also suggests a lack of trust in institutional mechanisms.

Thus from the above summary of the findings one can conclude that the finding aligns with global trends where 20% to 40% of university students report experiencing some form of digital harassment (Campbell et al., 2021). Also to add more it can also be confirmed that the reporting gap observed at BUSE mirrors challenges documented in other African universities, where stigma and fear of reprisal discourage formal reporting (Mabaso et al., 2022). Furthermore, the prevalence pattern supports the Social-Ecological Theory's "exosystem" level, where a lack of visible policy and responsive institutional mechanisms contributes to a permissive environment for bullying (Espelage, 2018).

Objective 2: To identify the forms of cyberbullying experienced by students at Bindura University

Furthermore the research also collected data and analysed the finding on the second objective. From the findings of chapter 4 one can learn that Denigration was the most common form which was reported by 73.3% of victims, this was also followed by flaming (60.0%) and harassment (53.3%). On the same note it was noted that WhatsApp emerged as the primary medium for cyberbullying, with 93.3% of incidents occurring on this platform. Thus it can be concluded that to a greater extend dominance of these forms confirms that students are "captive audiences" in essential academic and residence groups. This also makes digital spaces at BUSE "un-escapable" environments for many.

Thus from the findings one can come to a conclusion that the predominance of denigration and flaming emphasizes the permanence and publicity" characteristics of cyberbullying, This was argued by Willard (2020) to be also a key factor in psychological trauma. The platform-specific nature of bullying on WhatsApp aligns with findings from other African universities where the application is used extensively for both academic and social communication (Mabaso et al., 2022). Similar patterns of denigration as the most common form have been reported in studies conducted in Nigeria and South Africa (Adejuwon & Ojo, 2021; Badenhorst, 2011).

Objective 3: To analyze the psychological effects of cyberbullying on students' mental health.

Moving on the researcher also looked at the third objective and find that Victims reported extreme embarrassment and also anxiety and depression. Moreover some shocking data reveal that 46.7% of victims experienced suicidal thoughts, and 26.7% considered self-harm. Also a look at the findings reveal that many victims withdrew socially, lost confidence, and saw a significant decline in their academic performance. The research findings indicates concentration difficulties, sleep disturbances, and feelings of isolation as mental effects of cyberbullying.

Thus from the findings one can conclude that the findings are congruent with the existing literature that states that cyberbullying victims are more than twice as likely to exhibit depressive symptoms compared to non-victimized peers (Chen et al., 2020). The severe suicidal ideation rates observed at BUSE reflect the "chronosystem" impact described by Bronfenbrenner (1994). This is where constant digital exposure across time prevents emotional recovery, leading to life-threatening distress, particularly in low-resource settings where mental health services are limited (Patel et al., 2021).

Objective 4: To recommend strategies for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University.

To addmore the findings were also presented on the last objective and this shows that Participants recommended a multi-pronged approach. This approach includes a clear institutional policies specifically addressing cyberbullying, awareness campaigns on digital citizenship, improved and anonymous mental health support services, stronger consequences for perpetrators, peer support programs, and training for wardens and residence staff. Students emphasized that mitigation must move beyond reactive measures to proactive education.

Also the recommendations align with the Social-Ecological Theory which asserts that interventions are only effective if they address multiple levels. These levels are the student, the university culture and family-university collaboration (mesosystem), institutional policies and reporting mechanisms, and broader cultural norms regarding online behavior and mental health stigma (macrosystem) (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). Similar multi-level intervention strategies have been successfully implemented in other university contexts, particularly those that combine anonymous reporting, counseling services, and digital literacy education (Fisher et al., 2022; Watts et al., 2022).

5.4 Recommendations

I. University Administration

The study recommended that the university should formulate a specific "Cyber-Ethics and Digital Conduct Policy that clearly defines cyberbullying. The policy should also outlines disciplinary consequences. This policy should be included in the student handbook and shared during orientation to ensure all students are aware of the institutional stance on digital harassment.

II. Student Affairs Department

In addition, the study offers recommendations to the student affairs that they should establish an anonymous, 24-hour online reporting portal and increase the staffing of the Counselling Centre. Additionally a "Peer Support Program" should be launched which will be responsible for the training of students to provide initial psychological first aid to victims.

III. Wardens and Residence Staff

The report recognise the important role of wadens in solving the issue thus it recommend that Wardens are supposed to receive specialized training on identifying behavioral changes in students that may signal cyber-victimization. Such may include udden social withdrawal or absenteeism. Hall WhatsApp groups should have trained student moderators to prevent "flaming" and "denigration" before they escalate.

IV. Students Representative Council (SRC)

The SRC should lead university-wide awareness campaigns, such as "Cyber-Safety Week," to educate students on the psychological impact of their online actions. They should act as the

primary liaison between students and the administration to ensure that reports are handled with confidentiality and sensitivity.

5.5 Area for Future Research

This research looked at the immediate psychological effects and prevalence of cyberbullying among full-time undergraduate students at BUSE. It did not investigate the long-term career impacts on victims or the experiences of part-time and distance-learning students. Other researchers should explore the longitudinal effects of cyber-victimization on graduate employability in Zimbabwe and also conduct comparative studies between public and private universities to see if institutional resources significantly alter the severity of mental health outcomes. Also factor in mental illnesses prior to joining the universities.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure 1: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS AT BINDURA UNIVERSITY

STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTRUCTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Respondent,

I am a student in Peace and Governance student at Bindura University of Science Education conducting research on the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of students at Bindura University. Your participation in this survey is greatly appreciated.

Please note the following:

· Your participation is completely voluntary

· Your responses will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous

· You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty

· Do not write your name anywhere on this questionnaire

· Please answer all questions honestly based on your personal experiences and observations

The questionnaire should take approximately 8 to 10 minutes to complete.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS: BINDURA UNIVERSITY STUDENT SURVEY

Title: The Effects of Cyberbullying on the Mental Health of Students at Bindura University

INSTRUCTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is completely voluntary.

Confidentiality: Responses are strictly confidential and anonymous; do not write your name.

Withdrawal: You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Honesty: Please answer honestly based on your personal experiences and observations.

Duration: This questionnaire takes approximately 8 to 10 minutes to complete.

A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

ID	Question	Response Options
A1	What is your gender?	[ ] Male [ ] Female [ ] Prefer not to say
A2	What is your age?	_____ years
A3	Current year of study?	[ ] 1st [ ] 2nd [ ] 3rd [ ] 4th [ ] Postgraduate
A4	Which faculty are you in?	[ ] Science/Eng [ ] Social Sci/Hum [ ] Commerce [ ] Education [ ] Agriculture [ ] Mining
A5	Residence status?	[ ] On-campus (Hostel) [ ] Off-campus [ ] Commuter

SECTION B: PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

ID	Question	Response Options
B1	Internet/Social Media use?	[ ] Several times/day [ ] Once/day [ ] Weekly [ ] Once/week [ ] Rarely
B2	Platforms actively used?	[ ] WhatsApp [ ] FB [ ] IG [ ] X [ ] TikTok [ ] Snapchat [ ] Telegram [ ] Other

B3	Experienced/Witnessed?	[ ] Personally experienced [ ] Witnessed others [ ] Both [ ] No, never
B4	Frequency of incidents?	[ ] Daily [ ] Weekly [ ] Monthly [ ] A few times [ ] Only once
B5	Perceived prevalence?	[ ] Very [ ] Moderately [ ] Not very [ ] Not at all [ ] Uncertain
B6	Know victims at BUSE?	[ ] Yes, several [ ] Yes, 1 or 2 [ ] No [ ] Prefer not to say

SECTION C: FORMS OF CYBERBULLYING

Form	Description	Experienced?
Flaming	Sending angry, rude, or vulgar messages	[ ]
Harassment	Repeatedly sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages	[ ]
Denigration	Spreading rumors or gossip online to damage reputation	[ ]
Impersonation	Pretending to be someone else to get them in trouble	[ ]
Outing	Sharing secrets or private images without consent	[ ]
Trickery	Tricking someone into revealing secrets to share online	[ ]

Exclusion	Intentionally excluding someone from an online group	[ ]
Cyberstalking	Repeatedly sending threatening or intimidating messages	[ ]
Doxxing	Publishing private personal information without permission	[ ]
Revenge Porn	Sharing intimate/explicit images without consent	[ ]
Identity Bullying	Mocking/attacking based on religion, ethnicity, or gender	[ ]

SECTION D: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Item	Psychological Effect	1	2	3	4	5
D1	Felt anxious/nervous using phone or going online					
D2	Difficulty sleeping or nightmares					
D3	Felt sad, down, or hopeless for long periods					
D4	Loss of appetite or eating habit changes					

D5	Felt embarrassed, humiliated, or ashamed					
D6	Loss of confidence or low self-esteem					
D7	Felt isolated, lonely, or excluded					
D8	Difficulty concentrating on studies					
D9	Academic performance declined due to stress					
D13	Felt life was not worth living (suicidal thoughts)					
D14	Engaged in self-harm or considered it					

SECTION E: MITIGATION STRATEGIES

E1. Please describe how cyberbullying affected your emotional well-being:

_____

_

E2. What should the university administration do differently to prevent cyberbullying?

ANNEXTURE 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

STUDENTS REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL (SRC) REPRESENTATIVE

INSTRUCTIONS AND CONSENT

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This research is being conducted as part of my bachelor degree in Peace and Governance . The purpose of this interview is to gather your perspectives as a student leader regarding cyberbullying and its effects on mental health among students at Bindura University.

Please note:

· Your participation is completely voluntary

· You may withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty

· Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymized

· With your permission, this interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture

· You may request that the recording be paused or stopped at any time

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Can you please tell me about your role within the SRC and how long you have served in this capacity?

2. In your role as an SRC representative, what are your main responsibilities concerning student welfare?

SECTION B: PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

(Objective 1: To examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among students at Bindura University)

1. Based on your interactions with students, how common would you say cyberbullying is at Bindura University?

2. As a student leader, have students ever approached you to report incidents of cyberbullying?

3. In your observation, which groups of students (e.g., by gender, year of study, faculty) appear to be most vulnerable to cyberbullying?

4. Do you think cyberbullying is openly discussed among the student body, or is it a hidden issue?

SECTION C: FORMS OF CYBERBULLYING

(Objective 2: To identify the forms of cyberbullying experienced by students at Bindura University)

1. From the reports you have received or incidents you have observed, what are the most common forms of cyberbullying occurring among BUSE students?

2. Which social media platforms or digital spaces are most frequently used in these cyberbullying incidents at BUSE?

3. What is the typical relationship between the victim and the perpetrator in the cases you have encountered?

4. Have you observed any trends in cyberbullying related to gender dynamics (e.g., female students experiencing different forms than male students)?

SECTION D: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

(Objective 3: To analyze the psychological effects of cyberbullying on students' mental health)

1. From your observations and interactions with students who have experienced cyberbullying, what psychological or emotional effects have you noticed?

· Probe: Have you observed signs of anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or changes in behavior?

2. Have students ever confided in you about mental health struggles that they directly attribute to online bullying?

3. In your view, how does cyberbullying affect students' academic engagement and performance?

4. Have you ever encountered a situation where a student expressed thoughts of self-harm or suicide related to cyberbullying?

SECTION E: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

(Objective 4: To recommend strategies for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University)

1. As a student leader, what is your understanding of the university's current policies and procedures for dealing with cyberbullying?

2. How effective do you perceive the university's response to be when cyberbullying cases are reported?

3. What are the main barriers that prevent students from reporting cyberbullying incidents to the university authorities?

4. From your perspective, what role should the SRC play in addressing cyberbullying and supporting affected students?

5. What strategies would you recommend to:

- a) Prevent cyberbullying from occurring?
- b) Support students who are victims of cyberbullying?
- c) Raise awareness among the student body?

6. How can the university administration better collaborate with student leaders to create a safer online environment for students?

ANNEXTURE 3: INSTRUMENT 3: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

STUDENT AFFAIRS REPRESENTATIVE

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Can you please describe your role within the Student Affairs Department and how long you have held this position?

2. What are your primary responsibilities concerning student discipline, welfare, and conduct?

SECTION B: PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

(Objective 1: To examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among students at Bindura University)

1. From an institutional perspective, how significant is the issue of cyberbullying at Bindura University?

2. Does the Student Affairs Department keep official records or statistics on reported cases of cyberbullying?

3. Based on the reports received, which student demographics (gender, faculty, year of study) appear to be most affected by cyberbullying?

4. How do reports of cyberbullying compare to reports of traditional, face-to-face bullying at the university?

5. Do you believe there is a gap between the number of cyberbullying incidents that occur and the number that are formally reported to your office?

SECTION C: FORMS OF CYBERBULLYING

(Objective 2: To identify the forms of cyberbullying experienced by students at Bindura University)

1. In the cases that have been formally reported to your office, what are the most common forms of cyberbullying you have encountered?

2. Which digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram) are most frequently implicated in the complaints received?

3. What are the common triggers or root causes of cyberbullying incidents among students that you have observed?

4. Have you observed any cases where cyberbullying originates within the university's official online learning platforms or communication channels?

SECTION D: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

(Objective 3: To analyze the psychological effects of cyberbullying on students' mental health)

1. When students report cyberbullying to your office, do they also disclose or exhibit signs of psychological distress?

2. How does your office assess or address the mental health needs of students who report cyberbullying?

3. Have you observed any patterns regarding the severity of psychological impact based on the type or duration of cyberbullying experienced?

4. In your professional opinion, how does cyberbullying impact students' academic performance and overall university experience?

SECTION E: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

(Objective 4: To recommend strategies for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University)

1. What policies, regulations, or codes of conduct currently exist at Bindura University that specifically address cyberbullying?

2. What is the formal procedure when a student reports a cyberbullying incident to your office?

3. How effective do you believe the current policies and procedures are in deterring cyberbullying and supporting victims?

4. What challenges does your department face in investigating and resolving cyberbullying cases?

5. What training or professional development have you and your staff received regarding handling cyberbullying cases and supporting student mental health?

6. How does your department collaborate with other university units (e.g., Counseling Center, IT Services, Security, Wardens, SRC) to address cyberbullying?

7. What additional resources, policies, or strategies would you recommend to strengthen the university's capacity to:

- a) Prevent cyberbullying?
- b) Respond effectively to incidents?
- c) Support the mental health of affected students?

8. What recommendations would you make to university leadership regarding policy development on digital conduct and student online safety?

ANNEXTURE 4: INSTRUMENT 4: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE WARDEN

SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Can you please describe your role as a Warden and which residence hall(s) you are responsible for?

2. How long have you served in this capacity at Bindura University?

3. What are your primary responsibilities regarding student welfare, discipline, and daily life within the residences?

SECTION B: PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

(Objective 1: To examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among students at Bindura University)

1. In your experience supervising students in the residences, how common is cyberbullying among students living in the halls?

2. Have students ever approached you to report cyberbullying incidents that occurred within the residence community?

3. Based on your observations, does cyberbullying tend to occur more frequently within residence halls compared to the general student population?

4. Have you noticed any patterns regarding which residence halls, floors, or room configurations (e.g., shared rooms) experience more cyberbullying-related conflicts?

SECTION C: FORMS OF CYBERBULLYING

(Objective 2: To identify the forms of cyberbullying experienced by students at Bindura University)

1. In the incidents you have encountered or been made aware of, what are the most common forms of cyberbullying among residence students?

2. How do online conflicts among students who live in close proximity differ from cyberbullying among students who do not share living spaces?

3. Have you observed cases where cyberbullying originated from residence-based conflicts (e.g., noise complaints, sharing facilities, romantic rivalries) and then escalated online?

4. Do you find that residence-based social media groups (e.g., hall WhatsApp groups) are platforms for cyberbullying, or do they generally promote community?

SECTION D: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

(Objective 3: To analyze the psychological effects of cyberbullying on students' mental health)

1. In your role as a Warden, what behavioral or emotional changes have you observed in students who you suspect or know have been victims of cyberbullying?

2. How does living in close quarters with peers affect a victim's ability to cope with cyberbullying? Does it provide support or exacerbate the distress?

3. Have you ever been concerned about a student's mental health to the point where you felt the need to intervene or refer them for professional help?

4. In your observation, how does the psychological distress from cyberbullying affect students' daily lives within the residence their interactions with roommates, participation in hall activities, or overall well-being?

SECTION E: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

(Objective 4: To recommend strategies for mitigating the effects of cyberbullying on students at Bindura University)

1. What is the protocol for Wardens when a student reports a cyberbullying incident to you?

2. How do you balance your role as a disciplinarian with your role as a pastoral caregiver when dealing with cyberbullying victims?

3. What training or guidance have you received on identifying and supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties related to online harassment?

4. What are the main challenges you face in addressing cyberbullying within the residence setting?

5. How do you work with other university stakeholders (Student Affairs, Counseling, Security, SRC hall representatives) to create a safe environment in the residences regarding online behavior?

6. What strategies would you recommend specifically for preventing cyberbullying within the halls of residence?

7. How can the university better support Wardens to help them effectively address cyberbullying and support student mental health in the residences?

8. What recommendations would you make for improving the living and learning environment in the residences to make it safer from cyberbullying?

BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

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DEPARTMENT OF PEACE AND GOVERNANCE

09 March 2026

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE: REQUEST TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH IN YOUR ORGANISATION

This serves to introduce the bearer [redacted] student Registration Number B221055B who is a HBSC PEACE AND GOVERNANCE student at Bindura University of Science Education and is carrying out a research project in your area/institution.

May you please assist the student to access data relevant to the study, and where possible, conduct interviews as part of a data collection process.

Yours respectfully

BINDURA UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF PEACE AND GOVERNANCE
CHAIRPERSON
10 MAR 2026
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
PRIVATE BAG 1020, BINDURA, ZIMBABWE

J.Kurebwa (DR)
Chairperson