GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CYBER-BULLYING AMONG FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY OF VENDA STUDENTS

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Abstract

Most people anticipate bullying as a childhood issue that children will finally outgrow but bullies are growing up and penetrating university campuses. The growing of technology has allowed bullying to be taken to adulthood through cyber-bullying. Technology has become a big part of young people's lives and it plays an increasingly important role in their day-to-day activities. However, it has also become a platform for young people to bully each other. Cyber-bullying has become a serious problem for university students and can cause long term effects to victims. It involves sending hurtful, threatening or embarrassing messages to another person. Cyber-bullying causes problems such as depression, anxiety, suicide, poor school attendance and performance for the victims of such an act. Both males and females take part in cyber-bullying. Avenues for students cyber-bullying include emails, blogs, text messages, and social network sites such as Facebook, My Space, Whatsapp, Instagram and twitter. The main aim of this study was to find out gender differences in cyber-bullying. The study was taken at the University of Venda. The qualitative research approach was used and semi-structured interviews were used as the data collecting tool. Snow ball sampling, a subtype of non-probability sampling, was used to select the respondents for the study. Data was analysed through thematic analysis. Ethical considerations that were followed include confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation and informed consent. The study found out that cyber-bullying is prevalent at the University of Venda and it affects both female and male students. Female students seem to be major cyber-victims and male students were the main cyber-bullies. It was concluded that the university needed to draft rules that help detect and also contain the spread of cyber-bulling. Moreover there was need for running awareness campaigns that will help students know the dangers involved in cyber-bullying.

Key words: Cyber-Bullying, Cyber-Victims, Cyber-Bullies, Probe, Technology, Harass, Students, Cyber-Victims

INTRODUCTION
The fast technological advancement has allowed students increased access to computers and advanced cell phones (Li, 2012). Many university students use electronic communication such as emailing as well as instant and text messaging. Young people use technology for their studies and for communication. There are internet sites such as blogs, social networks and other platforms through which photos are shared (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2011). Students use such platforms to post their photos. Electronic devices provide many opportunities for young people to meet new people, maintain friendships and to ensure that there is easy and efficient flow of communication. University students also find the internet to be a useful platform from which to acquire information for academic activities. In spite of

all these positive effects, university students, both males and females, also misuse these facilities to bully others. Bullying creates multitudes of problems, especially for the victims.

Several reports show that throughout the world, cyber-bullying is becoming more frequent each year. For example, Baumen (2013) reports that in the United States of America, 3,2 million are victims of cyber-bullying annually, 72% reported being victimised at least once in their lives. Dilimac (2012) reports in his study that approximately 22% of the students in the United States have taken part in cyber-bullying at least once in their lives. The study also shows that about 53% of the students had experienced cyber-bullying in the past. There is also research-based evidence which shows that females are more likely to be cyber victims than males (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). These scholars also indicate that more than 32% of males compared to more than 36% of females have been victims of cyber-bullying. This suggests that females are experiencing more cyber-bullying than males. There is also research-based evidence showing that females are more likely to be cyber victims than males (Hinduja and Patchin, 2012). This may be attributed to the fact that women's uptake on social networks is significantly higher than that of men. Women are more likely to post personal information than men.

Turan *et al.* (2011) observe that females are more victimized online than males. Girls are usually sufferers of degrading, threatening or sexually explicit images (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014).However. Perry (2015) maintains that females take part in online actions such as sending harassing texts or online messages, purposely excluding a person from a group chat and impersonating an individual to embarrass or offend them. This shows that women are not only victims of cyber-bullying. They are also perpetrators of cyber-bullying. Is just that their bullying is subtle and less violent compared to that of men. Cyber-bullying as carried out by females mostly involves blame, threats, gossip and blackmail (Duhue, Bolman and Vollink, 2008). Hinduja and Patchin (2010) contends that females mostly take part in cyber-bullying either as a victim or as a bully. Colby (2013) also supports this view by highlighting that internet bullies are more likely to be females. This is possibly because young women feel less inhibited and more assertive online. Females prefer indirect forms of harassment that are effective but discrete in nature (Topcu and Barker, 2012). They socialise online more frequently than males. This in turn causes females to get involved in situations where social interactions can lead to disagreements and acts of cyber-bullying. Though bullying is thought of as boys' sport, women have developed interest in this sport (Colby, 2013). Females prefer cyber-bullying than face to face bullying. According to Mucum, Huggins, Freiburger and Rickets (2012), women are most likely to post gossip on the internet to hurt others no matter how true or false the rumour is. Naturally, women like talking about other people. With this mind-set, they would rather do it hidden behind screens. Females prefer participating in behaviours that do not involve physical contact (Mucum, *et al.* 2012). They participate in bullying that involves emotional and psychological abuse like gossiping and spreading rumours. Females are also most likely to experience cyber-bullying than males (Ramanathan, 2013). Females are affected more by fear and humiliation caused by cyber-bullying than men (Turan *et al.*, 2011). According to Baumen and Newman (2012), females report cyber-bullying as a way of standing up for themselves.

Males, unlike females, are more likely to threaten physical violence than online violence (Perry, 2015). Males, unlike females, are more extreme in their cyber-bullying threats than females. Examples of these threats include challenging an individual to a fist fight, threats to cause bodily harm, theft and destruction of property (Perry, 2015). The involvement of males in video games which are normally violent increases the likelihood of individuals being

perpetrators of cyber-bullying and also victims to such acts (Lam, Cheng and Liu, 2013). According to the study conducted by Mishna *et al*., (2009), most boys reported bullying others more than girls and girls reported being victimized. However, Cassidy *et al*, (2013) found that males do not report cyber-bullying for the fear of being labelled a rat and this may cause cyber-bullying to continue. Male students are more likely to be cyber-bullies (Dilimac, 2012). It is difficult to identify males as victims because they have too much pride to admit being bullied.

Objective of the study: The purpose of the study was to investigate gender differences in cyber-bullying among first year university of Venda students.

Research question: The research question is: what are the gender differences in cyber-bullying among University of Venda students?

METHOD

This study used qualitative research approach as it focuses on natural settings where interaction occurs rather than in static terms. It places great emphasis on understanding the phenomena being studies (Maree, 2016). Qualitative research approach influenced the techniques that are used for sampling, data collection and data analysis. Its purpose was to determine the gender differences of cyber-bullying on first year students at the University of Venda.

Research design: A research design is a plan that outlines how a scientific research will be carried out (Bless, Higson & Sithole, 2016). Laws, Harper, Jones and Marcus (2013) define research design as a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between research questions and the execution or implementation of the research. Therefore, the research design for this study is exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is done in order to satisfy the researcher's desire for better understanding (Babbie, 2017)

Study population and location of the study: According to Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout (2014), population refers to setting boundaries on study units taking into account the characteristics that the researcher is interested in studying. Population is the total number of objects or people who the researcher wants to conduct a study on (Wiid & Diggines, 2013). The population in this study consisted of first year students from the University of Venda. A study location refers to the place or venue where the researcher conducts the study (Cilliers *et al.,* 2014). This study was conducted at the University of Venda (UNIVEN), which is found in South Africa. It is located in Thohoyandou, Thulamela Municipality, Vhembe District, Limpopo Province.

Sampling procedure: Sampling is the process whereby a small population or subgroup of a population of interest is selected for a scientific study (Laws *et al*, 2013). A small portion is acquired in order to get results quickly. It saves time and money rather than including the whole population. Non-probability snowball sampling was used in the study. To get the respondents, the researcher identified one first year student who has been a victim of cyber-bullying from a website named toilet which was created solely to post hurtful messages to others. Once one victim of cyber-bullying was found, she/he was asked to refer the researcher to another victim of cyber-bullying. The second victim of cyber-bullying was also requested to help the researcher to identify another victim of cyber-bullying. This process was repeated until there was data saturation. Data saturation was reached after 14 respondents have been

interviewed. Of the 14 respondents and interviewed, 10 respondents were female and 4 were male.

Data collection: According to Bless, Higson and Sithole (2016*)* data collection method is a tool through which measurement is actualized. Data collection refers to an instrument through which data is gathered. This gathering of data is done through social interaction, with participants in field studies, participant observation and other sources of information (Maree, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were used in the study. Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews which involve many open-ended questions and a few closed questions (Bless *et al,* 2016). The researcher developed an interview guide with open-ended questions which was used during interviews. The interviewer and the interviewees were equal partners. The interviewees were allowed to take different paths and express different thoughts and feelings. The interviewer also probed questions to get more information. A tape recorder was also used to record the interview in order to ensure that the researcher will capture all the information. A tape recorder also helped the researcher and the research assistant rewind and listen to the interview repeatedly to get clarity on the interview. It also helped when transcribing data to include relevant quotes in the research report.

Data analysis: Data analysis is the process of scrutinizing, cleansing, and modelling data in order to discover new information and make conclusions (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell, 2005). Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Thematic analysis is used as a means to get insight and knowledge from the data gathered (Franzel, Cilliers, Davis and Bezuidenhout, 2014). After data collection, it was cleaned and coded according to themes that emerged.

Ethical considerations: Ethics are concerns, dilemmas and conflicts that may arise during the proper conduct of a research. They define what is or is not legitimate to do or the moral procedures (De Vos, Strydom, Fauche & Delport, 2011). The++se set of principles help prevent research abuse and assists investigators to understand their responsibilities before they undergo a research expedition (Bless et.al, 2016). It is crucial to follow ethics when carrying out a research in order to avoid harm to the participants as well as to ensure that the respondents take part in the study with full awareness of the purpose, risks and benefits associated with it. Ethical considerations come into play when the respondents are recruited, during the intervention and in the release of the results obtained. In this study, confidentiality, voluntary participation, no harm to participants, the anonymity of participants and informed consent were considered. An ethical clearance letter was also sought from University of Venda which gave the researcher permission to carry out a research at the University of Venda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographical information

Below is a discussion and analysis of the gender, nationality, place of residence and age of the respondents.

Table 1: gender of the respondents

Respondent	Gender
A	Male
B	Female
C	Female
D	Male
E	Female
F	Male
G	Female
H	Female
I	Female
J	Female
K	Male
L	Female
M	Female
N	Female

The gender of the interviewed students who have experienced cyber-bullying are presented above (i.e. Table 1). Fourteen first year students were interviewed and they were labelled A-N to protect their identity. Their gender is presented in the above table. Ten respondents were female and four were male. This shows that female students are prone to be victims than male students. It also indicates that there was misrepresentation of males in the study. Cyber-bullying happens to both male and female students. Both male and females can participate in cyber-bullying either as a bully or a victim.

Below is the presentation of the gender differences in cyber-bullying:

Female cyber-bullying

Table 1 above shows that female students fall victims to cyber-bullying more than male students. Seventy one per cent of the victims of cyber-bullying were females. This confirms the view by Kowalski *et al.* (2014) that females are more prone to be victims of cyber-bullying than males. This could be because of a reason outlined by Topcu & Barker (2012) that women experience more cyber-bullying because they spend more time online than men. The fact that females fall victims more than men shows that oppression of women goes beyond physical. Women are oppressed even on the internet. Men show their masculinity even on the internet, they see themselves as superior and females as inferior hence they can harass them anywhere.

All victims who were cyber-bullied for their appearances were females. Below is what respondents C and I said:

> *They mocked me about my weight on social media. (Respondent C)*

> *Pictures about me were posted on social media. They would take photos of me whenever I eat, post them on the internet and make funny comments. (Respondent I)*

The above statements shows that being overweight can make one a victim of cyber-bullying. Two of the respondents who were cyber-bullied for their weight are both female of which there are overweight men but they are not targeted for that. This shows that society has a certain picture of how women should look. Women are expected to have slender bodies other than men. Female students are targeted because of how they look other than male students.

Respondent L was cyber-bullied for the reason that she is dark in complexion. Below is what she said:

> *People sent humiliating messages anonymously to me about me being dark. Others were laughing at me suggesting that I should try bleaching or bathing with a washing detergent.*

The above statement show that complexion can also make one a victim of cyber-bullying. Mostly women are shunned for being dark unlike men. This might be the explanation to why there is a high rise of women using chemicals to lighten their skin. All the respondents who were cyber-bullied because of their appearances were women. This is upsetting because women are targeted for their appearances unlike men. Society has their own thinking of how women should look. People are failing to celebrate women for who they are.

Female students also fall victim to cyber-bullying because of the way they dress unlike men who are not attacked because of the way they dress. Below is what respondent B and respondent K said:

> *They were saying I wear very small clothes which disclose a lot of flesh. Messages were sent to me that I do so to attract men of which I do it because that's what I like. (Respondent B)*

> *I come from a poor background and my parents can't afford to buy me clothes every now and then. I wear not so fashionable clothes and this has been posted on the internet. They make fun of my clothes online. (Respondent K)*

Men can wear whatever they want and no one attacks them. This shows that society has norms that they expect women to follow in which men since they are regarded as the superiors are not expected to follow any norms like how to dress. Females are judged for the way they dress and males are not even judged.

Another respondent (respondent G) had her nude pictures circulated on social media. Sending naked pictures of a person online is normally done to humiliate and get even with the victim:

> *I was misled by a boyfriend who is now an ex to send nude pictures to him. I had my doubts but I did it anyway. When we broke up he sent them on every social media site just to get even with me for dumping him.*

Females also experience having their naked bodies displayed and circulated online. This may be the case because females like taking nude pictures of themselves which is not a safe thing to do since they may get into the wrong hands and circulated everywhere. The above respondent gave her pictures to her boyfriend knowing that they are not safe with him but she gave him anyway. At times students do actions that might lead to them being victimised. Victims are aware of the dangers of sharing naked pictures with other people but they do it regardless of the consequences.

One woman (respondent H) has experienced some stalking on social media. According to Webster's New World Law dictionary, (2010) stalking is a form of cyber-bullying whereby a person gives unwanted attention or obsession either through the internet or face to face. Cyber-stalking is related to harassment and monitoring the victim online. Below is what respondent H experienced.

> *I started by receiving love messages from an unknown account on Facebook. I blocked the person but he kept on creating new accounts and sending me the same*

> *kind of messages. The stalking got worse when the person started sending me flowers to my room with messages addressing me as his girlfriend.   This   really   got   me scared.*

The above response shows how dangerous cyber-bullies especially cyber-stalkers can be. They can move from being behind the screen to the real world. The person sent unwanted love messages online. Females are more vulnerable than males online when it comes to stalking. Some men only go on the internet just to victimise women. This shows that female students might not be safe at UNIVEN, there are perpetrators out there waiting to victimise women.

Contracting a disease especially a sexually transmitted disease leads to one being cyber-bullied. Below is what respondent J said:

> *They were laughing at me because I had contracted syphilis from my boyfriend. I confided in my friend but she told everyone about it. People started calling me names on social media. Others said I was a prostitute, I'm rotten and I'm going to die.*

The above response shows that having a disease could make one a victim of cyber-bullying especially if it gets known by other people. This could make people hide having contracted a disease and they might not even seek medical help because they will be afraid that it might come out and people will laugh at them. The woman in this case is the only one that is being cyber-bullied but the statement from the respondent shows that both the respondent and the boyfriend had syphilis but the bullies' targeted the woman. This shows that people regard women as weak and easy targets to cyber-bully than men. The response above also indicates how cyber-bullies put ideas into victim's mind. They suggest to the victim that they are going to die. This might make the victim decide to kill themselves. Bullies do not sympathise with their targets. They say harsh words they do not care what impact it will have on the victims.

When respondents were asked why they thought they were bullied, respondents B and L said that they were harassed simply because they were women:

> *A man can wear a short and a vest and walk around but nothing will be said about it. But because I am woman wearing a short makes me a bad person and I'm called names because of that. (Respondent B)*

> *I know a lot of boys in my class who are even darker than me but no one says anything to them. Bullies see me as an easy target because I'm a lady. (Respondent L)*

The above statements show that women feel vulnerable simply because they are women. They feel that they are targeted by cyber bullies because they are female. This is worrying because cyber-bullying removes self-worth in female victims. This also shows that the issue of patriarchy whereby males are regarded as supreme and women are regarded as inferior is even taken out of the physical world. In a partriachial society, the class of men are oppressors of the class of women and this is also taken to the online community. Men oppress women because of their desire for power and it drives them to bully them so that they gain as much power and control over women.

Of the five victims who managed to know who cyber-bullied them, only two of the bullies were females. This shows that females also take part in cyber-bullying as bullies but the majority of the bullies are male. This observation confirms Perry's (2015) view that women do take part in cyber-bullying as bullies. It is also in contrast with Colby's (2013) view that

internet bullies are most likely to be females. When women cyber-bully, they participate more in gossip. Below is what respondent J said:

> *I confided in my friend and she went around telling people about something that I told her in confidence.*

Respondent J above confided in her friend who is also a female and she went around spreading the rumours on the internet. This confirms the observation by Duhue *et al, (*2008) that women cyber-bullying mostly involve blame, threats and gossip.

Male cyber-bullying

Males fall victims to cyber-bullying less than their female colleagues. As shown in table 1 above, only four of the fourteen interviewed victims were males. This shows that there was misrepresentation of males in the sample. This could be because it is difficult to identify males as victims because they have pride in accepting being victims (Dilimac, 2012). Another reason for having few male respondents could be that male students do not report cyber-bullying for fear of being labelled a rat (Cassidy *et al*, 2013). Of the male respondents, fifty per cent were cyber-bullied for being gay. Underneath is what respondent A and D said:

> *They laugh at me for being gay and they send nasty messages to me. They even call me all sorts of names like 'sisy boy' meaning you are a boy/girl. (Respondent A)*

> *People would post photo-shopped pictures of me wearing a dress or a skirt wearing lip stick. I know I am gay but it doesn't mean I am a woman. The sad part about this is that the pictures ended up in my parents' hands who didn't know I was gay. This did not only break me but my parents too. I was going to tell them at my own time when I was ready but thanks to the bullies they did it for me. (Respondent D)*

Both respondent A and D are men. This indicates that males are cyber-bullied online mostly because of their sexual preferences. Gay people might be the most oppressed people in the society and on the internet. This supports the assertion by (Glensen, 2011) that the LGBTi community are the minority group most likely to be targeted by bullies. The above statement by respondent A indicates that gay people are called names. It shows that people have not fully accepted the gay community and gay bashing is still happening. Respondent D's response shows that being cyber-bullied for sexual preferences did not only hurt the victims but their parents as well. In an African society, it is very difficult to accept same sex relationships especially elderly people but the above has shown that even young have not yet accepted gay people and universities have become unsafe places for them. This is supports findings by Blumenfeld and Frazer (2010) in their study, that universities and colleges have unwelcoming environments for gay people. Respondent D's parents could have suffered a lot of shock since they were caught off guard. Most parents who discover that their children are gay feel that they have lost their child and it is really hard for them to accept their children's sexuality. Coming out to parents that one is gay is the most difficult thing for LGBTi people to do, they would need to be prepared to tell their parents. Having the bullies letting his parents know about his sexual orientation could have been the worst thing that respondent D went through. When cyber-bullies manage to humiliate people, they have feelings of achievement. LGBTi students are called crazy. People think that there is something wrong with their mind and that normal people do not practise same sex relationships. People who bully others because of their sexual orientation are going against the law in the South African constitution, section 9 (3) which prohibit discrimination on race, gender and sexual orientation. It is an offense in which one could face jail time.

Of the five respondents who knew their bullies, three of the bullies were male. This assertion is attested to by the statement uttered by respondent G below:

My ex-boyfriend is the one who sent the nude pictures around

The above observation indicates that men are mainly bullies. They feel they have power over women and other men, normally the minority group like gay people. This confirms the view by Dilimac, (2012) that males are most likely to be cyber-bullies than females. Even those we know and trust can be perpetrators like the above where a woman was cyber-bullied by her ex-boyfriend that she trusted. The observation that male students are likely to be cyber-bullies confirms the biological theory of gender (Mc Leod, 2014). It says that males are likely to be cyber-bullies than females because of their biological making. It maintains that men and women's operation in society is governed by their biological make-up. Men are naturally aggressive than women, that is why men are likely to act as cyber-bullies than women.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that cyber-bullying is taking place at UNIVEN. It appears females are more cyber-bullied than male students. The study has to some extent provided further support to the school of thought that says females are more victimised online than males and acknowledged that it is possible that in some situations, males might be the cyber-bullies. Given the fact that cyber-bullying has serious psychological, social, health effects and can negatively affect academic performance, there is need for UNIVEN to take appropriate corrective measures that would prevent its spread and also limit its effects among students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since cyber-bullying has proven to have negative impact on the victim, the judicial courts and educational systems should consider formulating laws and policies regarding cyber-bullying. Peer educators should do awareness campaigns that aim to encourage those who experience cyber-bullying to report to relevant authorities so that the perpetrators are brought to book and face justice. Apart from this, the campaigns should educate students on the dangers and disadvantages of excessive use of social networking sites. By so doing the students would not expose themselves for too long on social networks. Appropriate disciplinary action can be taken to reduce cyber-bullying on campus. Parents should create environments that do not nature future cyber-bullies. Parents should create relationships with their children so that the feel free to report cyber-bullying if ever they happen to be victims. Parents should also monitor their children's online activities during their time at home. Victims should report cyber-bulling to authorities or any elders they feel comfortable to talk to in order to get appropriate help. Students should stop promoting cyber-bullying by circulating cyber-bullying content. This helps to stop the information from going viral and affecting the victims more. This study focuses on cyber-bullying victims, future researchers are recommended to focus on cyber-bullies so as to understand their mind set, reasons why they bully and intervention plans for the bullies.

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