

# Masiphephe Network

**THE IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



## SYNOPSIS

Cyberbullying is a global issue, and South Africa is not immune to it. According to a 2018 survey by Ipsos, South Africa has the highest rate of cyberbullying in the world, with 51% of South African teens reporting that they have experienced cyberbullying.<sup>1</sup> This is significantly higher than the global average of 37%.

One of the key challenges of cyberbullying is that it can be difficult to detect and prevent. Unlike traditional bullying, which often takes place in person and can be observed by teachers, parents, or peers, cyberbullying is often anonymous and takes place in online environments that are difficult to monitor. This means that victims may be unaware of the extent of the bullying and may be less likely to report it to authorities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the problem of cyberbullying, as more people spend time online. According to a study by L1GHT, a company that specialises in artificial intelligence (AI) that is designed to detect and filter toxic content to protect children, online toxicity and cyberbullying on social media sites and video conferencing apps during the Covid-19 pandemic increased by up to 70%.<sup>2</sup> The study also revealed an increase in hate speech among children and teens that correlated directly with an increase of COVID-19 infections within the populace.

To combat this issue globally, UNESCO has called for increased efforts to address online violence, including strengthening legal frameworks and providing support services for victims.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the StopBullying Organization has emphasised the need for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to addressing cyberbullying, which includes education, policy, and support services.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will look at:

1. The prevalence of cyberbullying in South Africa
2. Causes of cyberbullying in South Africa
3. Effects of cyberbullying on individuals and society in South Africa
4. Solutions to cyberbullying in South Africa

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<sup>1</sup> IPSOS. (2018) *Global Views on Cyberbullying*. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-views-cyberbullying> [Accessed: 23 March 2023].

<sup>2</sup> L1GHT. (2020). *Toxicity during coronavirus: How hate speech, bullying and abuse have grown online during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Available at: [https://l1ght.com/Toxicity\\_during\\_coronavirus\\_Report-L1ght.pdf](https://l1ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf) [Accessed April 2 2023]

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO. (2021). *Tackling cyberbullying and other forms of online violence involving children and young people: fact sheet*. Available at: [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/notice?id=p%3A%3Ausmarcdef\\_0000379486&posInSet=1&queryId=51d46667-bb48-4bcd-b24b-971a4ba8eb99](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/notice?id=p%3A%3Ausmarcdef_0000379486&posInSet=1&queryId=51d46667-bb48-4bcd-b24b-971a4ba8eb99) [Accessed (April 2 2023)].

<sup>4</sup> STOP BULLYING (2021). *Prevent cyberbullying*. Available at: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying/prevention> [Accessed (April 2 2023)].

## BACKGROUND

Cyber bullying is a growing concern worldwide, and South Africa is no exception. With the rise of social media, online platforms, and digital devices, cyber bullying has become an increasing threat to individuals' well-being and safety. In South Africa cyberbullying has been on the rise under the shadow of Covid-19. A majority (54%) of South African parents know of a child in their community who has been a victim of cyberbullying.<sup>5</sup> There are several different forms of cyberbullying, including harassment, stalking, and intimidation. Cyberbullies may use a variety of tactics to target their victims, including sending threatening or abusive messages, sharing embarrassing photos or videos, or spreading rumors and lies. In many cases, the bullying is aimed at undermining the victim's self-esteem and social standing and may continue over a long period of time. This paper aims to explore the issue of cyber bullying in South Africa, its causes, effects, and possible solutions. Key terms for this topic include:

**Cyber bullying:** "Cyber bullying is defined as intentional and repeated harm inflicted through the use of electronic devices such as mobile phones, computers, and tablets, and is intended to intimidate, embarrass, or harm the target".<sup>6</sup>

**Victim:** "A person who is the object of cyber bullying, harassment, or other forms of online abuse".<sup>7</sup>

**Perpetrator:** "A person who engages in cyber bullying, harassment, or other forms of online abuse".<sup>8</sup>

## Prevalence of Cyber Bullying in South Africa

Cyberbullying has become a growing concern in South Africa, with the prevalence of online harassment and intimidation on the rise. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), A survey conducted by the Mandela Metropolitan University study found that 37% of students reported experiencing cyberbullying.<sup>9</sup> This alarming trend is further exacerbated by the fact that many young people are unaware of how to handle online harassment, with only 37% of respondents in a survey conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) indicating that they knew how to respond to cyberbullying.<sup>10</sup> The consequences of cyberbullying can be severe, with victims experiencing emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and even suicide. It is important for

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- <sup>5</sup> NEWS24. (2020, November 21). *Cyberbullying on the rise under the shadow of Covid-19 - here's what to do*. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/cyberbullying-on-the-rise-under-the-shadow-of-covid-19-heres-what-to-do-20201121> [Accessed (April 2 2023)].
- <sup>6</sup> HINDUJA, S. & PATCHIN, J. W. (2018). 'Cyberbullying: An update and synthesis of the research', in Hertzog, R.K.T. & Mihailidis, D. (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective*. New York: Routledge, pp. 249-260.
- <sup>7</sup> TOKUNAGA, R.S. (2010) 'Following you home from school: A critical review and synthesis of research on cyberbullying victimization', in *Computers in Human Behavior*, (26) p.278. Available at: <https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/PPP357/Following%20you%20home%20from%20school%20A%20critical%20review%20and%20synthesis%20of%20research.pdf> (Accessed: March 30, 2023).
- <sup>8</sup> IBID, p.278.
- <sup>9</sup> POPOVAC, M. (2012) *Cyberbullying in South Africa: Impact and responses*. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259117407\\_Cyber\\_bullying\\_in\\_South\\_Africa\\_Impact\\_and\\_Responses](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259117407_Cyber_bullying_in_South_Africa_Impact_and_Responses) (Accessed: March 30, 2023).
- <sup>10</sup> IBID. (2012)

South African communities to raise awareness about cyberbullying and provide resources to help young people cope with this growing problem.

### Causes of Cyber Bullying

There are several factors that contribute to the prevalence of cyberbullying in South Africa. One key factor is the widespread use of social media platforms, which provide an easy and anonymous way for bullies to target their victims.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, a lack of awareness and education around cyberbullying prevention and intervention means that many young people are not equipped to handle online harassment.<sup>12</sup> According to a study by the University of Johannesburg, factors such as peer pressure, jealousy, revenge, and boredom were cited as the most common reasons for cyberbullying among students.<sup>13</sup> The same study found that victims of cyberbullying were often targeted due to their physical appearance, social status, or sexual orientation. These findings are consistent with other studies that have identified similar risk factors for cyberbullying, including low self-esteem, social isolation, and mental health issues.<sup>14</sup> Addressing the root causes of cyberbullying in South Africa will require a multifaceted approach that includes education, awareness-raising, and support for victims.

### Effects of Cyber Bullying

The effects of cyberbullying on individuals and society in South Africa can be devastating. Victims of cyberbullying may experience a range of emotional and psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>15</sup> They may also suffer from decreased self-esteem, increased feelings of social isolation, and a reluctance to participate in school or social activities. (South African Depression and Anxiety Group). According to a report by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, exposure to violence and bullying can also have a negative impact on young people's academic performance, making them more likely to miss school and perform poorly in class.<sup>16</sup> In some cases, cyberbullying has even led to suicide, making it a matter of urgent concern for individuals and communities across South Africa. The impact of cyberbullying is not limited to the individual victim, however. Cyberbullying can also have a ripple effect on families, friends, and the broader community, creating a culture of fear and mistrust. Addressing the impact of cyberbullying will require a coordinated effort from educators, parents, and policymakers, as well as mental health professionals and social workers.

### Legal and Policy Framework

Statistics over the years indicate that cyberbullying continues to be a prevalent issue in South Africa. In one study, South African girls are found to be slightly more susceptible to cyber bullying both at home (43.4%) and in the school environment (33.1%) compared to boys (42.4% at home and 29.3% at school).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the study found that social

<sup>11</sup> XIN-CHENG, S. & PADMANABHANUNNI, A. (2016) *Vicarious trauma: 'The psychological impact of working with survivors of trauma for South African psychologists'*, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 26:2, 127-133. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/14330237.2016.1163894

<sup>12</sup> HINDUJA & PATCHIN. (2018)

<sup>13</sup> XIN-CHENG & PADMANABHANUNNI. (2016)

<sup>14</sup> HINDUJA & PATCHIN. (2018)

<sup>15</sup> XIN-CHENG SUI. (2016)

<sup>16</sup> POPOVAC. (2012)

<sup>17</sup> IBID. (2012)

media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, were the most common sites for cyberbullying.

To address this issue, the South African government has implemented several policies aimed at preventing and addressing cyberbullying. In 2020, the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies launched the National Cybersecurity Policy Framework, which includes measures to prevent cyberbullying and to protect victims.<sup>18</sup> The framework also outlines steps for investigating and prosecuting cyberbullying cases. Additionally, the Film and Publications Board has been tasked with monitoring and regulating online content to prevent cyberbullying and other forms of harmful online behaviour.<sup>19</sup>

South Africa has taken steps to address the issue of cyberbullying through legal and policy frameworks. In 2018, the country passed the Cybercrimes and Cybersecurity Bill, which criminalises cyberbullying and provides for penalties for perpetrators. This legislation includes provisions related to cyberbullying and aims to provide greater protection for victims of online harassment. The bill also establishes a National Cybersecurity Hub, which serves as a central point of contact for reporting cybercrimes, including cyberbullying.

Additionally, the South African government has developed a National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. The plan includes provisions for combating cyberbullying and promoting safe online behavior. The government has also launched a Cybersecurity Hub to provide resources and support to victims of cyberbullying. The Department of Basic Education has also implemented policies to address cyberbullying in schools. The department has developed a Safe Schools Framework, which includes guidelines for preventing and responding to cyberbullying in schools. The framework encourages schools to promote digital citizenship and responsible online behaviour among students.

However, despite these legal and policy frameworks, cyberbullying remains a significant problem in South Africa. Many cases go unreported, and victims often do not receive the support they need. There is a need for continued efforts to address the issue of cyberbullying and to promote a safe and inclusive digital environment in South Africa.

While these policies are a step in the right direction, there is still much work to be done to effectively combat cyberbullying in South Africa. It will take a multi-pronged approach, including education, legal measures, and support services, to effectively address this growing problem.

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<sup>18</sup> STATE SECURITY AGENCY. (2015). *National Cybersecurity Policy Framework for South Africa*. South African Government Gazette No. 39475 of 4 December 2015. Available at: [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/201512/39475gon609.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201512/39475gon609.pdf) [Accessed April 2 2023]

<sup>19</sup> DE WEE, N. (2022) *Safer Internet Day: Protecting children from harmful content online*. Available at: <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/lifestyle/kids-parenting/safer-internet-day-film-and-publication-board-online-statistics/> [Accessed April 2 2023]

Cyberbullying has become a significant issue in South Africa, with a rising number of cases reported each year. To combat this problem, several solutions have been proposed. One solution is to raise awareness of the issue through education campaigns in schools and communities. This can help prevent cyberbullying by educating young people about appropriate online behavior and the consequences of cyberbullying. Another solution is to strengthen the legal framework around cyberbullying, with harsher penalties for offenders. In addition, several organisations, such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), have established hotlines and counselling services to support victims of cyberbullying. According to a study conducted by Ipsos in 2020, 51% of South African teens have experienced cyberbullying, making it imperative to implement effective solutions to combat the issue.

In conclusion, cyberbullying is a pervasive problem in South Africa that has serious implications for the mental health and well-being of young people. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this issue, as more young people are spending time online and engaging in social media platforms. It is essential that parents, teachers, and policymakers work together to address this problem and raise awareness about the dangers of cyberbullying. Several organisations, such as Childline South Africa and the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, are working to combat cyberbullying and provide resources and support to victims. By taking a proactive approach to this issue, we can help create a safer and more supportive online environment for young people in South Africa.

## Recommendations

1. Educate young people and adults about cyberbullying, its impact, and how to prevent and report it.
2. Increase awareness of the signs and effects of cyberbullying among parents, teachers, and school officials.
3. Develop and implement policies and regulations that address cyberbullying, including the regulation of social media platforms.
4. Enhance mental health support and counselling services for those affected by cyberbullying.
5. Work with social media companies to improve their reporting systems and ensure they respond quickly and effectively to reports of cyberbullying.
6. Encourage bystander intervention and create safe spaces for victims to report incidents of cyberbullying.
7. Conduct further research on cyberbullying in South Africa to better understand the scope of the problem and its impact on young people.

## Further References

1. Ipsos. (2020) "*Ipsos Global Advisor: Cyberbullying 2020*". Ipsos.
2. South African Depression and Anxiety Group. (n.d.). Cyberbullying. Retrieved from <https://www.sadag.org/how-to-cope-with-cyberbullying>.
3. Zola, N. (2021). Cyberbullying in South Africa: A Growing Concern. Digital Forensic Research Lab. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/cyberbullying-in-south-africa-a-growing-concern/>

## DISCLAIMER

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**BREAK THE SILENCE, CALL 0800 428 428 (GBV COMMAND CENTRE) TO REPORT AND GET GBV SUPPORT.**

## Masiphephe Network Implementing Partners

ORGANISATION	IMPLEMENTATION SITE/ LOCATION	CONTACT #
CCI	Pretoria, Gauteng	012 366 9300
GHJRU	University of Cape Town	021 406 6023
Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT)	City of Johannesburg Region E, Gauteng	011 786 6608
Sonke Gender Justice (Sonke)	City of Johannesburg Region D, Gauteng	011 339 3589
Ethembeni Crisis Care Centre (ECCC)	eThekwini West, KwaZulu Natal	031 704 6860
Gugu Dlamini Foundation	eThekwini INK Area, KwaZulu Natal	031 292 2852
Project Support Association Southern Africa (PSASA)	Emalahleni Local Municipality and City of Mbombela	013 752 5624

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