

# Gauteng youth intensify cyber bullying

The Youth Research Unit (YRU) of the Bureau of Market Research (BMR) in the College of Economic and Management Sciences at Unisa has released a report indicating that there is an increase in bullying among secondary school learners in Gauteng, particularly cyber bullying.

The YRU recently conducted the study, focusing on the nature, extent and the impact of bullying (especially cyber bullying), as part of a Schools Community Engagement research project, which included 3 371 Gauteng learners in Grades 8 to 12.

According to Prof Deon Tustin (BMR executive research director) and Goodness Zulu (YRU researcher), the research study was motivated by concerns regarding the increase in incidents of bullying among young people and the need to substantiate the seriousness of this phenomenon. Consequently, the study provides contemporary research information on the nature, extent and impact of bullying (especially cyber bullying) among the youth, which has started to feature as a distressing phenomenon within society.

The YRU research study highlighted that almost three in every 10 learners (34.4%) who participated in the study were victims of bullying. Whereas four in 10 learners (38.1%) were aware of a friend being bullied, approximately a quarter (23.3%) admitted to have bullied other learners. The study also revealed high prevalence rates of traditional forms of bullying and more importantly the emergence of cyber bullying as a new phenomenon. This was evident from 55.3% of learners who had experienced emotional bullying while almost one in every five (16.9%) had experienced cyber bullying.

## Affecting everyone's life

According to the research authors, the emergence of cyber bullying needs to be noted as a distinct phenomenon affecting the lives of many young people, families and communities and that, if ignored, it could reach undesirable crisis levels, which could impact negatively on broader society.

This assertion is substantiated by findings of the study that most learners who participated in the study perceived that bullying in general (67.7%) and cyber bullying in particular (40.3%) had increased over the past two years.

The nature and extent of cyber bullying experienced among secondary school learners in Gauteng is shown in Figure 1. The figure shows that almost half the learners who were cyber bullied (53.6%) received upsetting messages, experienced gossip and rumours spread about them (49.0%) and were called names (48.0%). Other cyber bullying incidents reported includes exposure to sexual remarks (24.5%), unflattering and suggestive personal photos spread online (13.3%) and being bullied, recorded and photos/videos distributed online (8.7%). These statistics also revealed evidence of sexting as a new phenomenon emerging among young people.

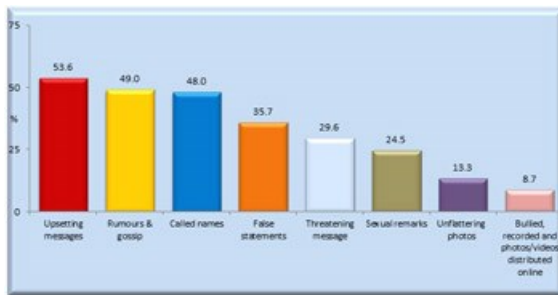


Figure 1

[click to enlarge](#)

## Cyber education needed

When considering learners' efforts to avoid online bullying, Zulu maintains that there is an urgent need to address cyber bullying in particular. In this regard, approximately seven in every 10 learners (74.5%) who were cyber bullied, reported that they avoided chat rooms (26.5%) and MXit (25.5%), following the cyber bullying incidents.

According to Zulu, these efforts indicate some level of self-protection that victims of cyber bullying have resorted to and demonstrate nonverbal cues to care givers about emotional trauma experienced by the youth. Furthermore, the YRU study confirmed that cyber bullying takes place predominantly through SMS and social networking accessed through cellphones. According to Zulu, this finding supports continuous cyber safety education directed at learners, parents and broader society.

## Leads to depression

Analysis of traditional forms of bullying (physical, emotional and verbal), revealed that most of the learners who were bullied mainly experienced name-calling, physical encounters and threats and intimidation mainly by younger perpetrators. Notably, most bullying occurs off school premises, which places a burden on especially parents and the community to familiarise themselves with and refrain from trivialising this behaviour and take the bullying phenomenon more seriously. To this end, the YRU study highlights concerns regarding the seriousness of the impact of bullying among young people, who revealed feelings of sadness and depression.

According to Tustin, these impacts primarily affect young people's emotional development and functioning and it is anticipated that such negative emotions could contribute to the youth being trapped in a vicious cycle of exploitation and not being able to cope psychologically within the learning environment and broader society.

Tustin pronounces that should these feelings persist, young people may engage in self-destructive behaviour such as alcohol and drug abuse in an attempt to escape these feelings, which would further exacerbate the impact of bullying.

This finding suggests a need for intervention strategies directed at developing coping mechanisms among both victims and perpetrators, who also expressed that their bullying behaviour impacts negatively on their emotions.

## Reporting to authorities, mixed responses

A positive finding from the YRU research study is that half the learners (51.6%) who are victims of bullying had reported the bullying incidents (parents, peers, teachers and NGOs) while 48.7% indicated that appropriate action was taken to prevent bullying.

However, a concerning statistic emerging from the research shows that 44.0% of learners who were bullied reported that no action was taken to reprimand the perpetrator or deal with the bullying incident. According to the research authors, the absence of action following the reporting perpetuates the violence, as bullies do not face any consequences, potentially increasing the risk of heightened victimisation.

Zulu is of the opinion that the absence of action can also be a contributory factor to learners feeling a sense of helplessness and despair. This may lead to a lack of future reporting owing to a lack of trust in adults who are entrusted with protection powers. This finding highlights a need to develop binding guidelines or strengthen and monitor the implementation effectiveness of existing guidelines to deal with reported bullying incidents, especially within the education system.

In general, the study provides relevant information for the development of suitable prevention programmes that aim to address the increase in bullying incidents among the South African youth.

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