



Adolescent Cyberstanders' Experience of Cyberbullying in the Era of Covid-19 in South Africa

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Segun Emmanuel Adewoye

Department of Psychology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa

Indications are that cyberstanders can be negatively affected by witnessing cyberbullying incidents and are even more likely than direct victims of cyberbullying to report symptoms of stress. However, cyberbystanders are understudied in the cyberbullying literature because most research predominantly focuses on perpetrators or direct victims of cyberbullying. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of adolescent cyberbystanders who witnessed cyberbullying in the COVID-19 era. Twenty adolescent cyberbystanders were purposely selected to participate in this study. The qualitative data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that cyberbullying has various detrimental effects that include educational, psychological, and emotional consequences for those exposed to it. It is recommended that anti-cyberbullying programmes should be incorporated into the curriculum so that teachers and educational psychologists can emphasise the negative impact of cyberbullying on bullies, victims and bystanders. With more awareness of the detrimental consequences of cyberbullying on all parties involved, adolescents may become more competent in respecting people's rights and privacy within cyberspace.

Keywords: cyberbullying, cyberbystanders, educational, psychological and emotional consequences, adolescents, COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic altered how people lived their daily lives. The lockdown introduced as a measure to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus had a drastic and global impact on the social life of adolescents

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Corresponding author. Email address: adewose@unisa.ac.za

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(Schmidt et al., 2020). The sudden school break and home confinement were reported to have multiple consequences on the social life of adolescents (Luijten et al., 2021). According to Lee and Rhew (2020), the disruption in social relations due to social distancing measures might increase anxiety and loneliness among adolescents. Previous research revealed that adolescents' social anxiety and loneliness are positively correlated with social media and internet addiction (Dalbudak et al., 2013; Koyuncu et al., 2014; Weinstein et al., 2015).

In the COVID-19 era, South African adolescents' use of digital platforms for social and educational purposes increased (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). The shift to a remote form of contact following the outbreak of COVID-19 further necessitated using digital platforms for social and educational purposes (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). As the use of the internet and information technology for social and educational purposes increase, adolescents prone to bullying behaviour are provided with increased opportunities to perpetrate aggressive behaviour online and also possibly, are more likely to cyberbully (Barlett et al., 2016; Cara, 2022; Paek et al., 2022). Cyberbullying is a devastating type of bullying that has emerged due to technological advancements in the twenty-first century (Singh & Steyn, 2014). Cyberbullying is an act of harming others repeatedly and purposefully through electronic media (Kowalski et al., 2020).

Adolescents are the most frequent and fastest-growing users of the internet and information technology; hence they are most likely to be victims of cyberbullying (Grunin et al., 2020; Messias et al., 2014). Research findings on the prevalence of cyberbullying among South African adolescents showed that cyberbullying incidents in the COVID-19 era have continued to escalate (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). For example, a study by Mkhize and Gopal (2021) to assess cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation among adolescents in South Africa amidst the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that most participants reported cyber-victimisation in various forms, ranging from offensive messaging and exclusion to cyber-stalking and trolling.

The prevalence of cyberbullying in the COVID-19 era among adolescents is not a concern exclusive to South Africa; it is a global phenomenon (Klatt, 2021; Rideout et al., 2021). For instance, research on adolescents in 11 European countries indicated that 49 per cent of the participants had experienced cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Lobe et al., 2021). In another study, Rideout et al. (2021) reported that one in four adolescents in the United States of America encountered online harassment, social cruelty, denigration, impersonation or electronic bullying in the present COVID-19 era.

Wide accessibility and utilisation of electronic and mobile devices have led to a spike in internet use, even from home. The prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents is also on the rise because perpetrators of cyberbullying within cyberspace are usually anonymous (Naik, 2020). The anonymity advantage that allows perpetrators to conceal their identities to hurt victims makes it difficult to enforce punitive measures to curb the moral disorderliness inherent in bullying behaviour (Englander et al., 2013; Kowalski et al., 2020). Anonymity results in the proliferation of different forms of cyberbullying behaviour among adolescents.

Cyberbullying victimisation has been associated with several short and long-term consequences for adolescents' general well-being, psychological functioning and mental health (Carvalho et al., 2018; Nixon, 2014). According to Savage and Tokunuga (2017), adolescents involved in cyberbullying victimisation are at

higher risk of developing negative outcomes, including aggression, depression, substance abuse, hostility, low self-esteem, anxiety and even suicidal attempt.

Furthermore, Zych et al.'s (2019) research findings indicated that cyberbullying victims exhibited feelings of isolation, loneliness, peer rejection, and decreased self-confidence. Studies also indicated that adolescent cyber-victims reported internalised problems such as feelings of sadness, fearfulness, social withdrawal, emotional exhaustion, somatic symptoms, shame, worry and mood fluctuations as major impacts of their cyberbullying experiences (Cole et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2016; González-Cabrera et al., 2018; Guarini et al., 2019). Similarly, cyberbullies themselves are also subject to consequences. Research reveals that as a result of their cyberbullying behaviour, cyberbullies experience higher levels of anger and social anxiety, lack of social skills and low self-esteem (Musharraf et al., 2018; Nixon, 2014).

Cyberbullying frequently occurs in the context of many cyberbystanders (Chen et al., 2020; Pouwels et al., 2016). Cyberbystanders are those who observe cyberbullying within or beyond their personal social networks; whose reactions range from inaction to intervention. According to a study by Jenaro and colleagues (2018), cyberbystanders were present in 68% of cyberbullying scenarios. That is to say, cyberbullies, cyberbystanders and cyberbystanders are all frequently involved in cyberbullying incidents.

Cyberbystanders are important, but often understudied in cyberbullying literature, even though there are indications that they may be harmed by bullying incidents that they witness (Domas & Midgett, 2020; Niblack & Hertzog, 2015). For instance, Barlinska et al. (2013) investigated how adolescent cyberbystanders reacted to cyberbullying. Their study indicated that witnessing cyberbullying increased the likelihood of psychological distress among adolescents. Similarly, Caravita et al. (2016) studied the emotional, psychological, and behavioural responses of young people who watched cyberbullying videos. The results indicated that exposure to cyberbullying as a cyberbystander produced a higher risk of stress and negative emotions among young people. The findings of these studies indicate that the consequences of cyberbullying might not be limited to cyberbullies or cyberbystanders only but extend to those who witness cyberbullying as a cyberbystander (Allison & Bussey, 2016).

Domas and Midgetts (2020) as well as Wright et al. (2018) argued that witnessing a distressing occurrence either online or offline may cause bystanders to think or feel differently about themselves. Such feelings and thoughts could probably stem from empathy for the direct victims and fear of becoming the next target (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). Cyberbystanders may experience emotional and behavioural problems such as increased degrees of trauma, frustration, sadness, discomfort and sensitivity due to fear of potential direct victimisation and cognitive dissonance (Midgett & Domas., 2017; Hase et al., 2015). Cognitive dissonance develops when one's views, beliefs, or attitudes conflict with one's actions and behaviour. Therefore, cyberbystanders may experience cognitive dissonance in situations where they believe cyberbullying is wrong and want to interfere on behalf of the victim but are unable to do so because they are terrified of becoming the next victim (Domas & Midgetts, 2020).

Furthermore, the theory of learned helplessness (Seligman, 2006) could help to understand the negative emotional and behavioural reactions that cyberstanders may experience when witnessing cyberbullying. The theory of learned helplessness states that emotional distress may result when there is a real or perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation. According to Samnani (2013), when an individual encounters a negative event or situation they perceive to be uncontrollable, they may believe that their efforts will be unrelated to outcomes and will feel a sense of helplessness. However, the tendency to experience learned helplessness can be reduced when an individual has a sense of control over a situation or event, indicating a lowered state of anxiety and fear.

Drawing from the theory of learned helplessness, the willingness but inability of cyberbystanders to stop the cyberbullying incidents they witness may also generate feelings of helplessness which can lead to internalising problems. Consequently, fear of subsequent direct victimisation, and cognitive dissonance combined with feelings of helplessness, can contribute to cyberbystanders having adverse reactions to witnessing cyberbullying (Doumas & Midgets, 2020; Zych et al., 2019).

Despite indications that cyberbystanders can be harmed and are more likely than direct victims of cyberbullying to report symptoms of psychological stress such as empathic distress, anxiety, sadness, guilt, shame, disbelief, and self-blame, (Allison & Bussey 2016; Pabian et al., 2016; Wang & Kim 2021), research on cyberbystanders has yet to garner adequate attention (Panumaporn et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2018). According to Desmet et al. (2016), the cyberbystander has received little attention in the cyberbullying literature because most research on cyberbullying predominantly focuses on perpetrators or direct victims of cyberbullying. This is because the consequence of cyberbullying victimisation is perceived to be less visible in cyberbystanders (Englander, 2013; Panumaporn et al., 2020). As a result, direct victims of cyberbullying receive greater attention because of the perceived more severe negative impact of cyberbullying on them (Fisher et al., 2016), while cyberbystanders who may suffer emotional scars as a result of witnessing cyberbullying victimisation are likely to be mostly overlooked when it comes to cyberbullying research (Allison & Bussey, 2016).

Since cyberbullying incidents frequently involve three major parties (Balakrishnan, 2018), and cyberbullies, cybervictims and cyberbystanders co-exist in cyberspace (Cara, 2022; Paek et al., 2022), the experiences of cyberbystanders who witness cyberbullying deserve more study as well (Kowalski et al., 2020; Midget & Doumas, 2017). This is especially important because cyberbystanders make up the majority of participants in cyberbullying incidents and research, and, as stated above, cyberbullying may have negative consequences for all parties involved (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Leukfeldt & Yar, 2016).

The Current Study

Mkhize and Gopal (2021) as well as Cilliers and Chinyamurindi (2020), reported that studies on cyberbystanders in South Africa are relatively scarce. Cyberspace, which has become an integral part of adolescents' everyday life, especially in the COVID-19 era, allows a potentially unlimited audience. This

prompted the initiation of this study to offer adolescent cyberbystanders a voice, better comprehend their lived experiences of witnessing cyberbullying during the COVID-19 era, and contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic. Specifically, this study addressed the following research question: What is adolescent cyberbystanders' experience of cyberbullying in the era of COVID-19 in South Africa?

Method

Research Design and Approach

The philosophical assumption supporting this research led to the adoption of an interpretivism paradigm that, by definition, seeks to explain the world through the lens of people's lived experiences (Morgan & Pretorius, 2013; Sefotho, 2018). A phenomenological research approach was used because this study aimed to examine the phenomenon of witnessing cyberbullying as well as its social and contextual implications. Creswell (2014) asserts that phenomenology is appropriate when the phenomenon being studied is difficult to measure, and new insights are needed. The objective of the study was to understand how witnessing cyberbullying affects the emotional and psychological well-being of adolescent cyberbystanders, so a phenomenological research design was utilised to explore the phenomenon as participants narrated it.

Sampling strategies and research participants

Twenty adolescent cyberbystanders who had responded to an invitation letter to participate in the study were purposefully selected. The invitation letter was pasted on the school notice board after securing the consent and approval of the school principal. The criteria for inclusion and exclusion were contained in the letter. Participants had to be a student at the school chosen for the research site, an early adolescent between the ages of 13 and 14 years, a bystander to cyberbullying in the last three months and had to be in Grade 8. As a result, all learners who appeared to meet all the inclusion criteria were included in the initial round of the sampling process. One of the schools in Mamelodi, predominantly attended by black students from low socio-economic status families, was chosen as the research site. The school ground was conveniently chosen for the interviews to minimise potential disruption for the participants. It is assumed that the school's proximity to participants' homes would further motivate them to attend the interview sessions.

In the first phase, 50 early adolescent learners were divided into two groups in a classroom and asked to write about the cyberbullying incidents they witnessed in the last three months. Ten of the 50 stories collected did not meet all the inclusion criteria, indicating that participants should be a cyberbystander rather than perpetrators or direct victims. As a result, learners who said they were perpetrators or direct victims in their stories were not included. The final 20 participants, 10 males and 10 females, were chosen for the study based on the level of self-reflection and details shown in their written narratives of cyberbullying incidents they had witnessed.

Instrumentation

As Yin (2016) points out, an interview is a significant data gathering source in qualitative phenomenological research. Semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews were undertaken to learn more about and understand the experiences of participants who were bystanders to cyberbullying in the COVID-19 period. McMillan and Shumacher (2014) noted that an important feature of qualitative research is that data is collected in natural settings where participants live or work and where they could exhibit their usual behaviour. The interviews were conducted in a classroom so that participants could respond naturally and honestly. The interviews were specifically conducted after school hours for two weeks in order not to disrupt any school activities. During the interviews, field notes were taken as a backup plan and a reflective journal was used to keep track of observations. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

The participants were given ample opportunities to express their feelings and experiences of witnessing cyberbullying. For example, they were asked to describe how being a cyberbystander affected them. The questions were arranged so that each one led to the next. For instance, participants were asked if they intervened or not when they witnessed cyberbullying. As a follow-up, they were then asked to describe how they felt about not being able to intervene when they witnessed cyberbullying.

Ethical procedures

After getting the necessary ethical clearance, a meeting was arranged with the potential participants to describe the project and obtain their written agreement and consent from their guardians or parents. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of the scheduled interviews, and the types of questions they should expect. They were also told that their personal information would not be shared with anyone and that their privacy would be protected by using pseudonyms. A registered counselling psychologist was also hired to help with a debriefing session at the end of the data collection session.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the aim of using inductive thematic analysis in qualitative research is to examine, identify, and record patterns in data. The themes were analysed using a coding process that began with familiarising with the data, producing initial codes, checking for themes, scrutinising the themes, and defining and labelling the identified themes to construct meaningful patterns. Transcripts were reviewed carefully until saturation was reached with the information supplied. After reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, there was enough information to identify and classify codes representing themes from the data. The search continued for possible themes by identifying all of the codes. The codes found to be similar were grouped and given names. A comparison of all the prospective themes was done to produce a summary of the themes. Three different independent coders were used to cross-validate the emerging themes. This process is believed to increase the credibility of the themes identified and lowered unhelpful subjectivity. After each interview, two coders met to discuss notes

and compare their findings. Differences that emerged were handled by a third coder, who looked over the undecided responses and selected an appropriate category without knowing what the other independent coders had chosen.

A further review of the initial transcripts to ensure all participants' perspectives were sufficiently conveyed in the themes. Comments from the reflective notebooks were incorporated in developing the themes. Verbatim excerpts were also used to illustrate each theme. Lastly, two more processes were implemented to ensure appropriate data trustworthiness. Firstly, the participants had to endorse the findings of the data to avoid distortion or misinterpretation of the content and context of the data. This was done through member checking, allowing participants to cross check the themes that emanated from the interviews and confirm that the interpretation of the data truly captured their voices of the participants. Secondly, the data was compared to existing literature to see if any similarities or differences needed to be investigated further.

Findings

Theme 1: Willingness to intercede

The participants in this study expressed readiness to intervene when they witnessed cyberbullying. They recounted the cyberbullying instances they observed in the COVID-19 era and whether they intervened on behalf of the victim or not. Most participants interviewed showed a desire to stand up for the victims of cyberbullying if they had their way. The first participant replied that “I did feel like assisting her and urging the bully to stop abusing her online”, while participant 2 remarked: “Yes, I do feel like I should intervene when I witness cyberbullying. I wish I could step in and intervene whenever I see bullying online” Participant 15 expressed a similar willingness “I feel like that to help the victim, but if I can't, I just switch off my data and log out of the internet”

The participants were moved by the victims' plight and expressed sympathy for them. They were well aware that cyberbullying was unacceptable and wished they had the power to defend the victims. Participant 6 said, although he sympathised with the victim, the fear of being cyberbullied overwhelmed his desire to help. He further stated it thus: “Yes, I want to send a message online to the bully to stop. But I'm worried and afraid because they may turn to me to bully me too like they're doing to the victim” It looked like cyberbystanders were caught up in a situation where they wanted to support victims in a cyberbullying scenario but were also concerned about their vulnerability and safety.

Theme 2: Feeling guilt and self-blame for failing to intervene

Nearly all of the participants blamed themselves and expressed regret for not intervening to help cyberbullying victims. Participant 4 stated:

Yes, when I observe cyberbullying, I feel quite guilty. Sometimes, I wish I could identify the cyberbully and confront him or her, but when I think that the bully can even turn to me, I step back, and I feel guilty.

When asked how she felt about not being able to intervene when she witnessed cyberbullying, Participant 5 expressed dissatisfaction in herself. She said:

I don't feel good at all because I couldn't help to stop the spread of gossip and rumours about the victim, and I know she got hurt, to me, it is like I failed her.

Participant 8 also felt she betrayed her friend when the cyberbully spread false messages about her online to damage her reputation by failing to intercede on her behalf when she saw her being cyberbullied. As a result, she blamed herself and believed she was responsible for the victimisation her friend suffered. She remarked:

Yaa, I blame myself; I wish I could have assisted or called the attention of everyone who cares to listen that the rumour about my friend is not true, but I was unable to do so. Therefore, I blame myself.

It was noted that most participants felt remorse for not defending the victims when they witnessed cyberbullying. After making this observation, a remark was made in the research journal:

After conducting individual semi-structured interviews with participants, I discovered that the majority of them engaged in personalisation, which resulted in self-blame and trauma-related guilt in their reactions to witnessing cyberbullying [Reflective journal 13/6/2021].

Participant 13, when describing how he felt about himself for not being able to protect victims who were being cyberbullied, verified this observation when he remarked; "I do feel awful and guilty, and I do hold myself accountable."

Cyberbystanders appear to experience feelings of self-blame and remorse when they take personal responsibility for the cyberbullying they witnessed and believe they were the sole cause because they were powerless to stop it.

Theme 3: Concentration problems as a result of fear of direct victimisation

Most of the participants reported having trouble paying attention in class and in their daily activities because of fear of direct victimisation. They expressed these difficulties multiple times during the interview. Participant 4 said:

Sometimes when I'm in class, it really bothers me. Even when I'm preparing for test, I find myself thinking about the mean pictures and videos they posted on the victims' Facebook page just to hurt him.

Participants 10 added:

I can't focus in class and even sometimes at home because my head is always worried that they'll cyberbully me". Participant 7 noted: "yes, I get carried away anytime I think about the intimidating and

harmful text messages they send to my friend. I feel like it is me that is getting those harmful text messages.

Participant 8 explained that she occasionally forgets she is in class, even while the lesson is on, because her mind is far away. She said:

Even when my teacher is teaching me or when my parents are talking to me, my mind wanders, and even if they ask me questions, I will simply stare at them because I am not paying attention due to the cyberbullying I witnessed.

Cyberbystanders' emotional uneasiness and doubt appear to be exacerbated by the anxiety created by fear of being directly victimised, difficulty maintaining concentration on academic work and experiencing learning difficulties at school.

Theme 4: Emotional and behavioural negativity

As a result of witnessing cyberbullying, the majority of participants reported unpleasant emotions and behaviour. Participant 5 narrated her experience when she said:

When I witnessed cyberbullying, it makes me sad because this is not the first time that the bully will be sending rude and cruel comment to the victim for everyone to see. He does that several times, he continues to intimidate people online. So, I'm nervous.

According to Midgett and Doumas (2017), cyberbystanders' negative behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing cyberbullying may be influenced by the fear of being directly victimised. Participant 3 alluded to this assertion by saying:

I feel scared because those cyberbullies can pick on me also. I feel they can share my personal pictures or personal information online that I don't want everyone to see. Whenever I have this thought in my mind, I have sleepless night(s) and bad dreams.

Anger, despair, restlessness, mistrust, frustration and moodiness may accompany thoughts of becoming the next victim of cyberbullying. This is reaffirmed in the experience of Participant 2 when he said,

I feel restless because witnessing cyberbullying makes me unhappy, it depresses me because I am unable to do much at school because of fear.

When asked how witnessing cyberbullying impacts her mood generally, participant 7 responded by saying:

I don't trust anyone online because I feel like they too can be a cyberbully. I always believe they too are part of those hiding their identity to threaten others.

Theme 5: Feelings of fear and insecurities

This theme highlighted cyberbystanders' concerns about their vulnerability to bullying victimisation. Thinking about their vulnerability and the fear of being the next target of cyberbullying, along with negative feelings like anger, despair, and restlessness, reduced their capacity to engage socially online.

Participants were asked to describe how they felt about their online safety after witnessing cyberbullying. They stated unequivocally that they feel insecure online because they are constantly afraid of being cyberbullied. Participant 11 remarked:

I don't feel safe online at all because even someone I know can pretend to be someone else just to send mean or embarrassing message directly to me just to hurt me like they did to others I witnessed. So, I don't think I am safe online.

Participant 4 admitted feeling insecure online due to his worry of being the next target of bullies. He said:

I am not sure if I can feel safe online because there are [a] lot of cyberstalkers online, and most times they hide their identity. There is no one to report them to. I am afraid they can make a fake profile to send threatening message[s] to me.

Almost all the participants appeared to have feelings of insecurity, which they attributed to thoughts and fears of becoming the next victim after witnessing bullying. Participant 3 said:

It does affect my likeness for social media generally. Sometimes I even consider deleting all my social media accounts because I see a lot of people abuse and attack another person online.

The digital environment is expected to be safe where adolescents, referred to as digital natives, can interact and socialise freely without harassment, intimidation and fear. However, this may not be the case for cyberbystanders who are continuously preoccupied with fears, anxiety and concerns about being directly victimised.

Discussion

The digital platforms' use for educational purposes and social interaction amongst adolescents significantly increased during the COVID-19 lockdown (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021). Research evidence suggests that as adolescents' academic and social lives were displaced due to the virtual environment during COVID-19, adolescents prone to bullying behaviour were possibly more likely to cyber bully (Barlett et al., 2016; Paek et al., 2022). The findings of this study show how cyberbystanders react emotionally and behaviourally when they witness cyberbullying during the Covid-19 epidemic.

First, cyberbystanders experienced cognitive dissonance because they believed cyberbullying was bad and intended to intervene on behalf of the victim, but they were afraid of being the next victim; thus, their intention did not convert into defending action. According to Salmivalli (2014), while most bystanders feel

uneasy about not taking a defensive role and sympathising with victims, the fear of becoming the next victim of bullying outweighs the desire to intervene and defend the victims. However, cyberbystanders in this study did not report promoting bullying behaviour by cheering, laughing or hailing the bullies, in contrast to findings of earlier studies (Padgett & Notar, 2013; Polani et al., 2012), which point to the bystanders' moral disengagement and lack of empathy. Instead, despite being unable to help, they expressed their disapproval of bullying.

Secondly, cyberbystanders reacted by blaming themselves and feeling guilty for failing to defend the victims. This finding is similar to that of Hutchinson (2012), who found that bystanders may feel more stress and shame for failing to speak up to the bully on behalf of the victim. Thirdly, because of the fear of direct victimisation, cyberbystanders had trouble concentrating on academic work. It appeared that adolescents might experience emotional and physical distress due to their fear of being directly victimised in the future, which may interfere with their ability to concentrate on their schoolwork. This finding corroborated Midgett and Doumas' (2017) finding that bullying bystanders may feel afraid and distracted in school.

After witnessing cyberbullying, intrusive thoughts and visualisations filled the minds of the cyberbystanders, causing them to identify with the grief and suffering of the victim. As a result of the cyberbullying instances they witnessed, they felt like co-victims, which elicited unpleasant emotions and behaviours like restlessness, worry, grief, anger, mistrust, and sadness. This finding supported Hutchinson's (2012) point of view that bystanders are more prone than bullied victims to have secondary trauma symptoms such as despair, anxiety and insecurity, as a result of witnessing bullying,

Lastly, concerns about being the next victim of cyberbullying also created feelings of fear and insecurity, which negatively influenced cyberbystanders' perceptions of social media and their willingness to socialise online. This finding indicated that if adolescents think the digital environment is unfriendly, they may be denied the opportunity to use digital technology and social media to enhance socialisation and, consequently, develop a phobic attitude towards social media and the internet. The willingness but inability to intervene on behalf of the victim, feelings of fear and insecurities as well as emotional and behavioural negativity experienced by cyberbystanders mirrors the tenet of the learned helplessness theory proposed by Seligman (2006). This theory states that emotional distress may arise when there is a real or perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation.

Implications for emotional education

This study, which focused on how adolescents experience cyberbullying as cyberbystanders in the COVID-19 pandemic, is especially relevant because most studies on cyberbullying have concentrated on just the experiences of adolescents who are bullies or direct victims of cyberbullying. The findings of this study support previous studies that suggest cyberbullying is a collective phenomenon that includes cyberbystanders as well as cyberbullies and cybervictims (Chen et al., 2020; Doumas & Midgetts, 2020). The findings of this study also demonstrated that cyberbystanders could suffer emotional, psychological and academic consequences. This

information may be useful to school counsellors, teachers, educational psychologists, and social workers in understanding the effects and consequences of cyberbullying on cyberbystanders' emotions, cognition and social adjustment, when developing strategies to assist victims and bystanders of cyberbullying.

Limitation of the study

This study utilised a relatively small number of participants. Therefore, the findings may not be widely generalised. Also, response bias in a qualitative study may be difficult to control, as there is a likelihood that the participants in this study may have responded in a way they felt was expected. Participants were reassured however, that there were no right or wrong responses and that their responses would be kept secret to minimise response bias.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research adds to the knowledge on cyberbullying bystanders in South Africa. Studies on cyberbystanders have received little attention in the literature (Panumaporn et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2018). One reason for this could be that there have been few attempts to create more collaborative encounters, which, of course, makes data on cyberbystander experiences scarce. This study allowed cyberbystanders to share their experiences and emotional reactions to witnessing cyberbullying. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that anti-cyberbullying programmes should be incorporated into the curriculum. This will ensure that teachers, counsellors and educational psychologists can emphasise the emotional, psychological, and educational impact of cyberbullying and also emphasise that cyberbullying has detrimental consequences for everyone exposed to it. With more information on the negative consequences of cyberbullying on all parties involved, adolescents may be equipped to respect other people's rights and privacy within cyberspace. It is also recommended that teachers should train cyberbystanders how to recognise and practice good behavioural strategies to lessen the impact of witnessing cyberbullying. Lastly, legislation to combat cyberbullying should also be enacted and implemented.

Disclosure

There was no conflict of interest in this study.

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