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An *Ubuntu*-informed exploration of cyberbullying experiences among students at a university in the Eastern Cape

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Authors:
Mqokeleli Zaza[1]
Mahlodi M.R. Makupula[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Psychology, Social Work and Criminology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Mahlodi Makupula,
mmakupula@ufh.ac.za

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Cyberbullying has become an increasing concern within higher education, particularly since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, when university students began extensively utilising digital communication platforms for both academic and social interaction. This study examines students' experiences of cyberbullying at a university in the Eastern Cape through the lens of *Ubuntu* [I am because we are]. *Ubuntu* emphasises human interconnectedness, harmony, respect and moral responsibility among individuals. A qualitative research design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences of cyberbullying. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 participants who had experience of cyberbullying. Data were collected through three focus group discussions, each comprising five participants. Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Three key findings emerged from the analysis: (1) participants reported various forms of harassment, including public humiliation, threats and the spread of private information, which resulted in anxiety, social retreat and academic disengagement, (2) to cope with harassment, participants utilised strategies such as blocking bullies, deactivating social media accounts and seeking peer support and (3) participants suggested Ubuntu-informed restorative initiatives such as perpetrator education and awareness campaigns rather than solely punitive measures.

Contribution: The study contributes to emerging decolonial scholarship on cyberbullying within South African higher institutions. It demonstrates how an Ubuntu-informed framework offers a culturally relevant lens for understanding online harm, students' coping strategies and institutional responses to cyberbullying in higher education.

Keywords: cyberbullying; psychosocial well-being; digital technology; *Ubuntu*; university students.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies, including computer networks and social media platforms, has changed how university students interact, learn and socialise. The digital environment, commonly referred to as cyberspace (Gibson 1984), has become a significant part of modern academic and social life within higher education institutions (HEIs). Students utilise online platforms to collaborate on academic work, access information and maintain social connections beyond the physical boundaries of the university environment (Khanyile & Ngema 2025; Patel & Quan-Haase 2023). Despite providing opportunities for communication and knowledge sharing among communities, digital technologies have also facilitated harmful online behaviours, including harassment, denigration, privacy violations and cyberbullying (Ansary 2020; Bussu et al. 2025).

Vismara et al. (2022) define cyberbullying as the use of digital technologies to intentionally and repeatedly humiliate, intimidate or harass others through online platforms. Students have historically experienced forms of peer bullying such as name-calling, exclusion from social gatherings and physical threats, even before the widespread use of digital technology (Kowalski, Giumetti & Feinn 2023). However, the proliferation of smartphones, instant messaging applications and social media platforms has exposed cyberbullying as a critical issue in many African universities (Chukwuere, Chukwuere & Adom 2021; Luo et al. 2025).

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Within the current literature on cyberbullying, emphasis has largely been on evidence that demonstrates the existence of cyberbullying in nations other than South Africa (Paruk & Nassen 2022). There is, therefore, a need for an exploration of the experiences of South African university students with cyberbullying; its impact on their psychological well-being, and the coping strategies they utilise. Additionally, current research on cyberbullying in South African higher education has largely been conducted using Western theoretical frameworks that focus on individual psychological outcomes. Collective principles such as *Ubuntu* [I am because we are] which inform relational and social interaction in African cultures, have received little attention. Moreover, few studies have focused on students' recommendations for how institutions should respond through the lens of indigenous philosophies. This study aims to address these gaps by using *Ubuntu* as an analytical lens to explore how students experience and respond to the psychological impact of cyberbullying in a selected South African institution. Thus, the objectives of this study were to: (1) explore the experiences and impact of cyberbullying on the psychological well-being of students, (2) identify the coping strategies employed by the students and (3) evaluate the role of *Ubuntu* values in institutional responses to online harm.

Having established the experiences and consequences of cyberbullying in higher education and the gap in Ubuntu-informed research, the following section provides a review of existing literature on cyberbullying among university students.

Literature review

Cyberbullying in higher education institutions

Cyberbullying has become a significant concern within HEIs. Studies have reported a growing prevalence of cyberbullying among university students both locally and internationally (Pillay & Sacks 2020). For example, Nwosu, Ngozi and Eberechi (2018) found that more than 50% of Nigerian undergraduate students had experienced cyberbullying, while Faucher, Cassidy and Jackson (2018) reported that between 48% and 57% of Canadian undergraduate students had been cyberbullied. South African university students are also affected by this phenomenon. Saloojee's (2020) study, conducted in Gauteng province, reported that 31% of university students admitted to perpetrating online bullying. Similarly, in the Eastern Cape, Cilliers (2021) found that 27% of university students identified themselves as victims of cyberbullying. Recent studies conducted in South African universities indicate that over 40% of students have experienced online harassment (Khanyile & Ngema 2025).

Higher education institutions are globally beginning to explore intervention strategies to mitigate the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying. For example, Canadian universities have implemented peer-led awareness programmes and online support systems to help students manage cyberbullying incidents (Patel & Quan-Haase 2023). In South Africa, many universities face challenges, including inadequate reporting mechanisms, limited awareness initiatives and insufficient counselling support systems (Khanyile & Ngema 2025; Kubayi, Dube & Radebe 2025), making it difficult to plan effective interventions. Nevertheless, some institutions are beginning to implement proactive measures. For example, the Vaal University of Technology introduced workshops titled *Combating Bullying Within Higher Learning* to promote safer digital environments (Ngomane 2025). In addition, to protect students' well-being in cyberspace, Siddiqui and Schultze-Krumbholz (2023) advocate for digital literacy programmes and restorative justice approaches to mitigate cyberbullying in higher education settings.

Cyberbullying and mental health of university students

Several studies have highlighted the way cyberbullying affects the holistic well-being of university students (Khanyile & Ngema 2025; Lucas-Molina et al. 2022). Well-being is a multifaceted concept that includes physical, psychological and social aspects, making it a comprehensive indicator of health (Eloff & Graham 2020). Within higher education, both well-being broadly and psychological well-being specifically are of significant concern as they influence students' overall capacity to thrive. Empirical studies consistently link cyberbullying victimisation to poorer psychological well-being. Victims report higher levels of anxiety, depression, stress and lowered self-esteem, all of which can impair social functioning and academic engagement (Ansary 2020; Luo et al. 2025). In addition, cyberbullying, public humiliation and the spread of harmful and embarrassing content through social media can contribute to severe emotional distress, social withdrawal and suicidal tendencies (Lucas-Molina et al. 2022; Nkwanyana 2025).

Narrative reviews focused on university populations highlight that consequences of cyberbullying extend beyond emotions to include sleep disruption, reduced concentration, disengagement from campus life, and, in some cases, intentions to drop out (Bussu et al. 2025; Lucas-Molina et al. 2022). These emotional effects often accumulate over time, making it difficult for students to regulate their emotions or maintain healthy coping strategies.

Student responses to cyberbullying

Coping strategies are emotional, cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals utilise to manage stressors and challenging experiences (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). When encountering stressors such as cyberbullying, students are required to draw on various coping mechanisms that may either promote psychological well-being (adaptive coping) or worsen distress (maladaptive coping). Adaptive coping strategies are constructive responses that help individuals manage stress effectively while promoting resilience and psychological well-being (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Among university students, common adaptive mechanisms include social support, problem-solving, emotional regulation and engaging in positive reframing of stressful experiences.

Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies are responses that may provide temporary relief but eventually contribute to negative psychological consequences (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Students experiencing victimisation may engage in avoidance behaviours such as social withdrawal and emotional suppression (Zaza 2026). Some individuals cope by ignoring the problem entirely, blocking the perpetrators or disengaging from online platforms (Byrne 2021; Zaza 2026). While these responses may reduce immediate distress, they can also limit access to social support and delay constructive problem-solving. Universities need to employ effective prevention and support programmes for the student community to manage the negative impact of cyberbullying on students' well-being.

Legal and institutional responses to cyberbullying in South Africa

Cyberbullying is considered a criminal offence that is punishable by law in South Africa. The *Cybercrimes Act 19 of 2020* states that anyone who uses an electronic communication device to spread offensive messages that trespass on others' rights shall be found guilty of an offence. The *Cybercrimes Act* also provides for a fine or imprisonment not exceeding 2 years (Pokwana & Kyobe 2016). Furthermore, the *Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act No. 101 of 1997)* stipulates that every HEI must establish a code of conduct to guide students on how to behave during their studies (Makori & Agufana 2020). Although at the national level legislative developments such as the *Cybercrimes Act* provide a legal backdrop, institutional policy implementation and enforcement in universities remain a challenge (Cilliers 2021; Bussu et al. 2025).

Theoretical framework

Ubuntu philosophy as a framework for understanding cyberbullying

Much of the existing literature on cyberbullying is grounded in Western theoretical frameworks that emphasise individual psychological outcomes. Limited attention is given to relational and communal values, such as *Ubuntu*, which shape social interactions in African contexts. The principle of *Ubuntu* holds that individual identity and well-being are achieved through meaningful social relationships and mutual belonging within a community. Emphasis is placed on interconnectedness, dignity, empathy and collective responsibility (Le Grange 2012; Mkabela 2015).

Instead of viewing the individual mainly as autonomous and independent, *Ubuntu* emphasises interconnectedness and collective social responsibility. Mkabela (2015) asserts that the following three principles are interrelated with *Ubuntu*: (1) holistic orientation, (2) collective ethics and (3) respect. Holistic orientation emphasises the communal life of Africans, prioritising harmonious relationships with others and the preservation of their humanity. In the context of this study, cyberbullying is understood as the erosion of moral values that disrupts the relational harmony in the community. Cyberbullying behaviours such as public humiliation, harassment and spreading rumours about others undermine the dignity of others and disrupt the respectful relationships that sustain communal well-being (Kroeze 2024). Collective ethics explains the strong sense of shared responsibility that Africans possess (Mkabela 2015). There is a belief in the interconnectedness of all things. This includes the community's collective nature and sense of belonging, as well as the significance of interpersonal relationships. Conversely, cyberbullying reflects a breakdown of the moral values of the community and a disruption of *Ubuntu* in digital spaces. Finally, the principle of *ukuhlonipha* [respect] acknowledges the humaneness of each person, emphasising that everyone should be treated with dignity and humanity. According to Mkabela (2015:289), respect in *Ubuntu* is characterised by 'humility, empathy, maturity, hospitality, politeness, and understanding'. In the context of this study, respect will be determined by students' ethical behaviour on digital platforms and how empathy and dignity can be preserved in digital spaces. Together, these principles shape ethical conduct in many African communities and guide expectations for appropriate interpersonal behaviour.

The *Ubuntu* philosophy is pertinent in university contexts, where students are part of a shared academic and social community. It is important to apply a culturally relevant lens for understanding how online harm may be experienced and interpreted within African communities. Because of its emphasis on collective well-being, *Ubuntu* offers an alternative lens on how students perceive online harm and how institutions of higher learning can foster supportive, respectful digital environments.

Research methods and design

A qualitative research method complemented by an exploratory research design guided this study. May and Perry (2022) assert that qualitative research is designed to explore new phenomena, especially when limited knowledge exists about a particular subject. Because of the limited research on cyberbullying experiences among university students within the South African higher education context, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate for this study. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions and responses to cyberbullying.

Sampling strategy and sample demographics

Because of the sensitive nature of the study, purposive and snowball sampling were employed to select participants. This sampling method ensured that only participants who had experienced cyberbullying and could provide rich information and valuable insights were selected for the study. Participants who volunteered for the study invited others they knew, thereby creating a snowball effect in establishing the sample.

A total of 15 (n = 15) participants were selected to take part in the study. Of the 15 participants, 7 participants were females and 8 participants were males, with 11 in their fourth year of study and 4 in their third year. Participants

reported being bullied on the following platforms: (1) WhatsApp (n = 7), (2) Facebook (n = 5), (3) Twitter/X (n = 2), and (4) Instagram (n = 1). WhatsApp seemed to be the most common platform where cyberbullying occurred because students utilise it for academic purposes and group work. All the selected participants met the following inclusion criteria: (1) they were registered students at a university in the Eastern Cape; (2) they personally experienced cyberbullying and (3) they consented to being part of a focus group.

Data collection procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were intended to be exploratory and flexible, allowing for varied and in-depth responses to emerge. Three focus groups, each with 5 participants, took part in the discussions. Owing to the diversity of the groups, discussions were conducted in English to accommodate all participants; however, participants were encouraged to express themselves in their home language should they so wish. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached (May & Perry 2022). Participants consented to be audio recorded before the sessions began. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. Where vernacular was used, the extracts were later translated into English to ensure that the meaning was not lost.

Data analysis

Data were analysed through the six steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2023). The steps were as follows:

- Familiarisation with the data: The transcripts were read multiple times to understand the data and ensure transcription accuracy.
- Generating initial codes: Initial codes were created by assigning brief phrases to capture the meaning of the extracts.
- Searching for themes: Relevant codes were grouped to form potential themes, and their interrelationships were evaluated to create a unified narrative (Braun & Clarke 2023; Terry et al. 2017). At the same time, themes, recurring ideas and experiences across the coded data were identified and grouped based on similarities in meaning and context to produce themes and subthemes.
- Reviewing themes: The accuracy of themes was verified by analysing whether codes accurately represent their data and by confirming that themes maintain consistency, clear boundaries, and a direct relationship with the research objective (Braun & Clarke 2023). The iterative approach enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis by confirming that the themes accurately captured the dataset's diverse characteristics.
- Naming the themes: It was ensured that the theme names accurately reflected the meanings found in the data, and themes were defined according to their relevant meanings.
- Generating the report: Finally, a report of the findings was generated.

Trustworthiness of the study

The four principles for trustworthiness of qualitative research, namely: (1) dependability, (2) credibility, (3) transferability and (4) confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985), were employed to guarantee rigour of the study. To ensure dependability in this study, a comprehensive research process was documented. Additionally, data collection and analysis were consistent to ensure stability and consistency over time (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Credibility was sustained through clear documentation of the study methods to maximise trustworthiness and ensure reproducibility through the steps used (Ayton 2023; Lincoln & Guba 1985). To enhance transferability, the research context and the sample of university students were described in detail. The detailed description of the setting and the methods and procedures utilised to conduct the study will enable a proper assessment of the applicability of the findings to similar contexts (Ayton 2023). To establish confirmability, reflexivity was employed to reflect on biases and assumptions, considering how these may have influenced the process and outcomes. An audit trail was employed to document the research process, ensuring transparency and accountability (Lincoln & Guba 1985; May & Perry 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Faculty Research Ethics Committee (IFREC) (No. REC-270710-028-RA Level 01). Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Results

From relational harm to relational healing

This study aimed to explore the cyberbullying experiences of students at a university in the Eastern Cape through the philosophical lens of *Ubuntu*. Three themes emerged from the study. Each theme integrates participants' narratives to provide an in-depth understanding of how cyberbullying is experienced and addressed within an Ubuntu-informed framework. The themes are presented and discussed in detail next.

Online psychological harm and disrupted relational well-being

This theme presents participants' experiences of cyberbullying and its psychological impact on well-being. Participants reported various forms of online harassment, including demeaning comments, threats, and the circulation of private information:

> 'My experience started in my second year when a close friend of mine got involved in a scandal at university. She was accused of

leaking sensitive information from a student council meeting, which was not true, but social media blew up with rumours and accusations. Because I was close to her, people assumed I had been involved as well. The cyberbullying started on Twitter [*or X*]; people tagged me in posts calling me a liar and a traitor. It escalated to direct messages where people threatened me. There were even fake accounts created in my name, posting inflammatory comments to make it look like I was admitting guilt.' (P4, Male, Fourth year)

'It all started on Facebook after falling out with a close friend. We had a disagreement about something personal, and she started posting about me online. She posted screenshots of private conversations we had, twisting the context to make it look like I was talking badly about others. People I didn't even know started calling me names like "snake" and "backstabber." It felt like I was being ganged up on by an entire community.' (P7, Female, Fourth year)

Participants reported some of the hurtful online behaviours that they experienced. These behaviours include threats, insults and invasions of privacy, which other studies (Kowalski, Giumetti & Feinn 2023; Pillay & Sacks 2020) have also reported as common forms of online bullying meant to isolate and create an environment of fear for victims. From an *Ubuntu* ethical lens, actions that intentionally cause harm to others undermine the communal value that supports social harmony (Mzamane 2009).

Participants further reported that cyberbullying negatively affected their studies and interpersonal relationships:

'The stress affected my studies; I was constantly worried about what people were saying about me. I didn't feel safe, and I started avoiding campus events because I didn't know whom I could trust.' (P6, Male, Fourth year)

'It completely shattered my trust in people. I stopped talking to our mutual friends because I didn't know who was genuinely on my side. I became depressed, stopped going to social events, and my grades dropped. It felt like I had no one to turn to because everyone believed her version of the story.' (P7, Female, Fourth year)

'The stress it caused affected my studies, and I started to lose sleep over it.' (P15, Female, Fourth year)

It is evident from the above extracts that online humiliation and reputational damage may compromise students' sense of belonging within the university community. Other studies also confirm that students who experience cyberbullying may develop a negative perception of the university environment. The perceived lack of support and feelings of insecurity affect students' social engagement and academic persistence (Bauman 2023; Bussu et al. 2025). This may result in social withdrawal and loss of institutional trust. Within an *Ubuntu* framework, emotional and psychological well-being are tied to the quality of social relationships (Sefotho & Letseka 2024). Cyberbullying not only harms individuals psychologically but also weakens the bonds of connections that contribute to communal well-being within the university community (Mkabela 2015). The results indicate that cyberbullying has significant psychological consequences for students.

Navigating cyberbullying through digital disengagement and peer support

When asked about the coping strategies they employ to manage cyberbullying, participants described various strategies such as blocking the bully, deactivating social media accounts and seeking support from peers:

'At first, I tried to ignore it, thinking it would die down … eventually I deactivated my Twitter [*or X*] account, but even that wasn't enough.' (P6, Male, Fourth year)

'There was a time when I blocked someone on WhatsApp, and they just moved over to Facebook to continue bothering me. I blocked them there too, but they created different accounts to harass me. It got to the point where I stopped using Facebook altogether. I used to post a lot on Facebook, but now I barely use it, except for school-related things. I just don't feel safe anymore, especially when I know that person might be waiting on different accounts.' (P5, Male, Fourth year)

Participants highlight moving from the online platform where they were bullied, which, on digital platforms, may not be enough because the bully can move to other platforms or create fake accounts to continue harassing the victim. These narratives illustrate how victims sometimes withdraw from digital spaces to protect themselves from continued harassment (Byrne 2021; Pillay & Sacks 2020). While the strategies may reduce immediate exposure to harmful online interactions, they may also limit students' participation in online social communities, which are an important part of university life. Drawing on *Ubuntu* philosophy, when cyberbullying leads individuals to disengage from social interactions within communal digital spaces, the collective and harmonious well-being of the community is also affected (Kroeze 2024).

Participants also emphasised the importance of seeking support from others:

'Talk to someone you trust, whether it's a friend, a family member or a counsellor. And don't be afraid to take legal action if things get serious.' (P2, Female, Fourth year)

'We should establish peer support groups where we can discuss our experiences and share coping strategies.' (P14, Male, Fourth year)

Social support has been widely reported to play an important role in helping students cope with cyberbullying. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) applaud it as one of the adaptive coping mechanisms that victims can rely on. Because *Ubuntu* emphasises interconnectedness and mutual support within communities, it becomes apparent that victims will rely on collective support mechanisms during times of distress (Khanyile & Ngema 2025). This indicates that social support networks influence the way victims cope with cyberbullying and restore their sense of social belonging within the community.

The role of *Ubuntu* values and the university community in restoring relationships

This theme focused on experiences related to preventative mechanisms. It highlighted participants' challenges in

seeking help after experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying, revealing a significant gap in institutional support. Participants emphasised the importance of respect and empathy in addressing cyberbullying within the university community. They also stated that, instead of primarily punishing the perpetrator, universities should create supportive environments through awareness campaigns to discourage cyberbullying:

> 'We should leverage social media campaigns that promote kindness and respect. Using humour or relatable content to spread positive messages can help change the narrative around online interactions.' (P12, Male, Fourth year)

> 'We should encourage open dialogues about cyberbullying in our classes and student forums. Creating awareness is essential. Workshops on digital citizenship and the impacts of online behaviour could help foster empathy.' (P15, Female, Fourth year)

Participants supported dialogue to educate and sensitise others about problematic online behaviours, while promoting respectful, empathetic online engagement. The extracts above highlight the importance of universities in promoting ethical digital conduct (Patel & Quan-Haase 2023). They indicate the importance of encouraging empathy and respect among students and fostering student communities in which individuals recognise their responsibility for others' well-being. Participants recommended awareness campaigns to ensure that all students understand their expectations in digital spaces and that the core *Ubuntu* values of respect and empathy in communication are adhered to (Khanyile & Ngema 2025). They also reflected on the importance of holding perpetrators accountable and facing the consequences of their actions:

> 'As for the perpetrators, I think there should be both immediate consequences and education. Punishment is necessary, but we can't just punish them without helping them understand why what they did was wrong. If someone spreads lies about another student online, they should be held accountable. At the same time, they should also be required to attend workshops or training on cyberbullying and its effects. If they are given suspension or some other consequence but don't understand the emotional and psychological harm they've caused, they are more likely to do it again in the future. Education can help prevent that.' (P9, Female, Third year)

> 'I believe there should be consequences, but I also understand that sometimes people act out without fully realising the impact of their actions. For perpetrators, I think there should be an escalating system of consequences. For minor offences, maybe a formal warning or mandatory counselling sessions where they learn about the impact of their actions.' (P3, Male, Third year)

The extracts from participants above demonstrate that punishment is desirable for the perpetrator depending on the severity and persistence of the offence. However, there is also a need for restorative approaches, such as counselling or compulsory training, to help perpetrators understand the effects of their behaviour and not repeat it. Within an *Ubuntu* framework, addressing cyberbullying involves not only protecting victims but also fostering awareness, accountability and communal healing among community members (Sefotho & Letseka 2024).

Although participants recommended counselling and training for perpetrators, they also reported on shortfalls in university resources for dealing with cyberbullying. They narrated their expectation on how the university can support victims of cyberbullying in terms of mental health services and policy enforcement:

> 'If there were better systems in place, like counselling services, workshops on emotional resilience, or even a platform to report bullying, it could really make a difference. We need better support systems put in place for students who are going through this, support programmes from the institution that deal with this type of bullying.' (P13, Female, Fourth year)

> 'That's something the university really needs to fix – access to mental health services. We need more counsellors as well as social workers available to deal with issues like cyberbullying and stalking … it took me so long even to secure a counselling session, I gave up.' (P7, Female, Fourth year)

> 'I know that many institutions have anti-cyberbullying and anti-bullying policies, but I think these policies are brilliant in theory. I think the university is not enforcing that policy; the policy is there, but it's just the enforcement that's lacking.' (P8, Male, Third year)

The above extracts expose the limited counselling support for students experiencing cyberbullying at the institution. Participants expressed a need for more counsellors and social workers, as well as confidential spaces to discuss their experiences. The waiting period before someone obtains a counselling service appointment reflects a lack of human resources, which demotivates students from seeking mental health support. In addition, participants found that existing policies are not enforced, creating a perception that the university does not take cyberbullying seriously. This highlights the need to strengthen and implement policies that protect students against cyberbullying in HEIs.

Discussion

Relational harm and Ubuntu-informed responses

This study explored university students' experiences of cyberbullying from an Ubuntu-informed perspective, which emphasises relational personhood, dignity and communal responsibility. Cyberbullying in this study is acknowledged not only as an act of online aggression but also as a violation of relational and communal values that promote social harmony. Harmful online behaviours, such as harassment, humiliation and the spread of false rumours, may disrupt students' sense of belonging and dignity within the university community. These experiences may result in psychological distress and social isolation among victims (Byrne 2021).

Participants described cyberbullying as involving insults, humiliation and the spreading of rumours on digital platforms. These experiences mirror findings in previous studies, which indicate that cyberbullying frequently

manifests through public shaming, exclusion and reputational harm in online spaces (Ansary 2020; Byrne 2021). Participants' experiences of public humiliation and verbal abuse reflect a breakdown of communal respect, that is, *ukuhlonipha* (Mkabela 2015). The described incidents demonstrate the lack of *Ubuntu* as they reflect a disregard for fellow human beings and deprive them of their dignity. Cyberbullying constitutes a moral violation that undermines *Ubuntu* within digital connections, disrupting relational identity and communal embeddedness (Khanyile & Ngema 2025; Kroeze 2024). Respectful communication and engaging compassionately can contribute to healthier digital interactions.

The findings further demonstrate that cyberbullying affects students' psychological, emotional, social and academic well-being negatively. Participants reported experiences of emotional distress, loss of trust, social withdrawal and academic disengagement. These findings resemble other studies, which found that cyberbullying is strongly linked to psychological distress, emotional dysregulation and reduced academic functioning among university students (Kowalski, Giumetti & Feinn 2023; Lucas-Molina et al. 2022). The psychological distress that students experience from cyberbullying triggers their disengagement from social interactions and campus activities. The *Ubuntu* principle of holistic orientation acknowledges that the disruption caused by cyberbullying on the students' social, emotional and spiritual well-being also affects their sense of belonging and identity within the university community (Kroeze 2024).

Participants in this study employed different coping strategies to manage the effects of cyberbullying. These included emotion-focused strategies such as blocking perpetrators and deactivating social media accounts. Although emotion-focused strategies may offer temporary relief, in the long term, they may exacerbate loneliness and psychological distress (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Some participants utilised problem-focused strategies, such as seeking support from peers, to cope with cyberbullying. The reliance on peers for support illustrates the importance of collective care in restoring personal dignity. This supports the notion of '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' [a person is a person through other people], reflecting the idea that healing occurs within a supportive and nurturing environment rather than in isolation (Sefotho & Letseka 2024).

It was significant that participants relied mostly on informal support systems rather than formal university professional counselling services and reporting systems. This preference is similar to broader findings in South African and international literature, which indicate that students often distrust institutional support services because of fear of exposure, stigma or perceived inefficiency (Bauman 2023; Cilliers 2021). In agreement with previous research (Bauman 2023; Byrne 2021), the current findings highlight the importance of social connectedness and supportive networks in reducing the psychological impact of cyberbullying on students' well-being.

Participants emphasised the need for visible institutional support and awareness within the university context. The suggestions included the formation of peer support groups, awareness campaigns, workshops on digital citizenship, and clearer reporting mechanisms. These recommendations align with various calls in the literature for universities to adopt inclusive strategies that combine prevention, education and psychological support (Khanyile & Ngema 2025; Luo et al. 2025). Such initiatives reflect the principle of collective responsibility, where members of the community actively contribute to maintaining respectful and supportive relationships.

A significant finding of this study relates to participants' preference for educational and restorative responses to cyberbullying, rather than mainly punitive measures. Although participants appreciated the importance of holding perpetrators accountable, they emphasised the need for awareness programmes and opportunities for perpetrators to understand the consequences of their actions. This perspective resonates strongly with *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on restorative justice, reconciliation and moral repair (Otieno 2020; Sefotho & Letseka 2024). Rather than focusing solely on punishment, Ubuntu-informed approaches seek to rebuild relationships, restore dignity and reintegrate individuals into the community, providing them with a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging within higher education has implications for students' overall success and well-being.

The findings indicate that there are shortcomings in understanding the experiences of students with cyberbullying, and more should be done to feature these aspects within African frameworks. The recommendations derived from this study pave the way for practical and research implications.

Limitations of the study

Despite providing valuable insights into the cyberbullying experiences of students at a university in the Eastern Cape through an *Ubuntu* ethical lens, the following limitations should be acknowledged.

Firstly, a small sample of 15 participants was drawn from a single campus at a university in the Eastern Cape. The findings may therefore not represent the experiences of students on different campuses and other universities in South Africa.

Secondly, the use of focus group discussions predominantly in English may have influenced the nature of participants' responses. Some participants may have been reluctant to express themselves in English or felt unsafe disclosing sensitive personal experiences in a group setting.

Thirdly, the study focused mainly on the perspectives of students who had experienced cyberbullying. Perspectives of bystanders, perpetrators or university personnel were not explored. Including them may provide a comprehensive view of the dynamics and institutional responses to cyberbullying.

The study's findings yielded recommendations useful to universities, future researchers and policymakers.

Recommendations for universities

Based on the findings, HEIs should strengthen support structures and resources for students who experience cyberbullying. Practically, South African universities should consider adopting Ubuntu-informed restorative approaches that emphasise accountability and the rebuilding of respectful relationships in response to cyberbullying. Such interventions may help promote a campus culture that encourages respect and ethical engagement in digital spaces.

Recommendations for future research

A larger, more diverse sample of students from multiple universities across South Africa would be useful. In addition, the perspectives of other stakeholders within institutions of higher education may be explored to understand institutional responses to cyberbullying and identify effective prevention strategies.

Recommendations for policymakers

The findings indicate that although sufficient policies and institutional guidelines are available, they are not consistently enforced. Policymakers should provide guidance on how policies can be effectively implemented for visible results.

Conclusion

This study explored the cyberbullying experiences of students at a university in the Eastern Cape through the philosophical lens of *Ubuntu*. It further demonstrated that indigenous frameworks such as *Ubuntu* offer a culturally grounded and ethically robust lens for understanding student cyberbullying in South African higher education. By unveiling cyberbullying as a relational and moral disconnection, the study contributes to African psychology and supports calls for decolonised, context-specific interventions on the continent. Finally, the findings of this study emphasise the urgent need for universities to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies. This includes stronger policies, digital literacy programmes and accessible support systems grounded in respect and shared humanity to create safer, more inclusive digital learning environments.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Mqokeleli Zaza: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. Mahlodi M.R. Makupula: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Mahlodi M.R. Makupula, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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