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DEVIANT BEHAVIORS IN MALAWIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN LILONGWE URBAN.

Dr. Rightwell K Gondwe

(PhD in Leadership and Management Administration)
kupagondwe@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the prevalence, nature, and impacts of cyberbullying among secondary school students in Lilongwe Urban, Malawi, focusing on Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools. The research aims to explore how cyberbullying affects students psychologically, socially, academically, and physically, while evaluating the effectiveness of strategies implemented by these schools to address the issue. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The study involved 50 participants drawn from a total population of 1,000, which included students, teachers, and school administrators. The study identifies common forms of cyberbullying, such as spreading rumors and sending offensive messages, predominantly through platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and TikTok. The findings highlight the significant negative impacts of cyberbullying, including emotional distress, social isolation, academic decline, and physical harm. Contributing factors include uncontrolled access to technology, lack of awareness, peer pressure, and inadequate reporting mechanisms. While schools have implemented strategies such as counseling services, awareness programs, and smartphone bans, these efforts are often hindered by inconsistent application, lack of formal policies, and limited school-wide approaches. The study concludes that more comprehensive, consistent, and proactive measures are needed to effectively combat cyberbullying in secondary schools.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Deviant Behaviours, psychological impact, social impact, physical impact, academic impact, Secondary Schools, Lilongwe Urban, Malawi, Digital platforms, Students wellbeing, school intervention strategies.

1.0. Background of the Study

With the advent of digital technology, students worldwide are increasingly using online platforms such as social media, messaging apps, and gaming environments to communicate and socialize. Unfortunately, this shift has also given rise to new forms of deviant behavior, including cyberbullying. Defined as bullying that occurs through electronic means, cyberbullying can take many forms, including harassment, threats, impersonation, and the spreading of rumors, often with the intention of harming or humiliating the victim (Smith et al., 2018).

Globally, cyberbullying has been recognized as a growing problem in schools, with various studies highlighting its detrimental effects on students' mental health, academic performance, and social relationships (Patchin & Hinduja, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2018).

In high-income countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, substantial research has been conducted to understand cyberbullying's prevalence, contributing factors, and impacts (Smith et al., 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). However, in sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in Malawi, research on this issue is still in its infancy. Existing studies primarily focus on traditional forms of bullying, leaving a significant gap in the understanding of cyberbullying in Malawian schools (Chilimampunga, 2014; Kunkuyu, 2020).

In Malawi, the penetration of digital technology and the widespread use of social media platforms, especially among the youth, have led to a rise in cyberbullying cases. According to Chawinga (2017), platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram have become part of the daily communication routine for many students. These platforms, while beneficial for social interaction and education, have also become tools for perpetuating harmful behaviors, including cyberbullying. Despite this reality, most schools in Malawi, particularly in Lilongwe, have not developed specific policies or interventions to address the issue effectively (Gogo, 2020).

Theoretical frameworks such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) and Cohen and Felson's Routine Activity Theory (1979) provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the occurrence of cyberbullying. According to Bandura's theory, behaviors, including deviant ones like cyberbullying, are learned through observation, imitation, and modeling from peers, media, and the online environment. Cohen and Felson's theory further suggest that the availability of suitable targets and the absence of capable guardians increase the opportunities for deviant behaviors, including cyberbullying. In the case of secondary schools in Lilongwe Urban, where smartphone usage is rising and there is often limited adult supervision in online spaces, these factors may significantly contribute to the prevalence of cyberbullying (Mukhongo, 2018; Gogo, 2020).

In neighboring countries, research has started to address the issue of cyberbullying. Studies in Kenya and South Africa have shown that cyberbullying can lead to poor academic performance, increased absenteeism, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Tustin & Zulu, 2019). However, similar studies in Malawi are lacking, particularly in urban areas where access to digital technology is higher than in rural areas.

The limited research on cyberbullying in Malawi highlights a critical gap that this study aims to address. By focusing specifically on secondary schools

in Lilongwe Urban; particularly Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka where students have greater exposure to digital technology, this research provides empirical evidence on the prevalence, nature, and impact of cyberbullying. It will offer insights into the psychological, social, and academic consequences of cyberbullying in Malawian secondary schools. Furthermore, the findings are expected to inform the development of more targeted anti-bullying policies and interventions that not only address traditional forms of bullying but also account for the unique characteristics of cyberbullying. The study will also evaluate existing anti-bullying measures and recommend strategies for effective prevention and intervention, tailored to the specific challenges posed by cyberbullying.

1.2. Problem Statement

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue in secondary schools globally, and Malawi is no exception. With the rapid growth of digital technology and social media platforms, students in urban centers like Lilongwe are increasingly exposed to this form of bullying. Traditional forms of bullying have been widely studied in the Malawian context, but cyberbullying presents new challenges, including anonymity, broader reach, and its nature. Despite the global attention it has received, there is limited research on the specific impact of cyberbullying on students in Malawi, particularly in urban settings such as Lilongwe.

Globally, cyberbullying has been associated with various negative outcomes for students, including mental health problems, academic difficulties, and social isolation (Smith et al., 2018). However, Malawi lacks comprehensive studies on these impacts, and existing literature mainly focuses on traditional forms of bullying (Kunkuyu, 2020). The growing penetration of smartphones and social media in Lilongwe Urban has created an environment where cyberbullying is increasingly prevalent, yet it remains an underexplored area in Malawian educational research.

While studies on bullying in Malawi, such as those by Chilimampunga (2014) and Chigona (2019), have documented the effects of verbal and physical bullying on student performance and well-being, little attention has been given to the cyberbullying phenomenon. The few studies that have been conducted often generalize cyberbullying under the broader umbrella of bullying, failing to investigate its unique characteristics and implications.

As a result, the specific psychological and social challenges faced by students in Lilongwe Urban secondary schools, where technology usage is more prevalent, remain largely undocumented.

This gap in research presented an urgent need to explore the prevalence, nature, and consequences of cyberbullying on secondary school students in Lilongwe Urban. The study analyse how cyberbullying affects student's the psychological, social relationships, physical and academic performance in Lilongwe Urban secondary schools. Additionally, it evaluated the effectiveness of existing anti-bullying measures and recommend ways to strengthen cyberbullying prevention and intervention. Without targeted research and intervention strategies, many students remain vulnerable to the detrimental effects of this phenomenon. This study sought to fill this gap by examining the specific impacts of cyberbullying on students at selected secondary schools: Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka in Lilongwe Urban and proposing measures for effective mitigation.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

In alignment with research guidance offered by Creswell and Poth (2018), the central purpose of this phenomenological strategic enquiry sought to explore the prevalence, nature, and impacts of cyberbullying on secondary school students in selected schools within Lilongwe Urban, Malawi. The aim was to understand how cyberbullying affects students psychologically, socially, academically, and physically while evaluating strategies that schools use to combat this phenomenon.

1.4. Research objectives

- ➢ To identify the most prevalent forms and digital platforms used for cyberbullying among students at Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools in Lilongwe Urban.
- ➢ To analyze the psychological, social, academic, and physical impacts of cyberbullying on students in these schools.
- ➢ To explore the key factors contributing to the occurrence of cyberbullying within this educational context.
- ➢ To assess the effectiveness of strategies implemented by Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools to combat cyberbullying.

1.5. Research Questions

According to Creswell and Poth (2007), phenomenological strategic of enquiry was useful for addressing what and how questions. The research questions for this study were:
- ➢ What are the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying, and which digital platforms are commonly used for cyberbullying among students at Glorious Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools in Lilongwe Urban?
- ➢ How does cyberbullying impact students psychologically, socially, academically, and physically in these schools?
- ➢ What factors contribute to the occurrence of cyberbullying among students at Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools?
- ➢ How effective are the strategies implemented by Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools in mitigating and combating cyberbullying?

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews available literature to set the basis for the study. The study sought to explore the prevalence, nature, and impacts of cyberbullying on secondary school students in selected schools within Lilongwe Urban, Malawi with a special consideration of Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools. While global research into cyberbullying is extensive, especially in high-income countries like the United States and the United Kingdom (Patchin & Hinduja, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2018), studies in sub-Saharan Africa remain sparse. In Malawi, the digital revolution has introduced new forms of interaction among students, particularly through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram (Chawinga, 2017).

However, the downside of this technological advancement is the rise of cyberbullying, which is often overlooked in policy discussions on education and student welfare. In recent years, the surge of digital technology has fundamentally altered how students interact with each other, both in and outside of school. In Lilongwe Urban, where access to smartphones and social media is rapidly increasing, secondary school students now communicate through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Tiktok and snap chant. While these platforms provide opportunities for social connection, they have also opened the door to harmful practices like cyberbullying. Unlike traditional bullying, which occurs face-to-face and is often limited to school grounds, cyberbullying can take place at any time and can follow students into their homes, making them feel unsafe in their private spaces.

In a study by Gogo (2020), it was noted that while many secondary school teachers and administrators in Lilongwe Urban acknowledged the rise of cyberbullying, most were ill-equipped to handle it. This is compounded by the lack of policies and frameworks to address cyberbullying specifically, with many schools focusing on traditional bullying interventions. Additionally, Chilimampunga's (2014) research on bullying in Malawi highlights that much of the local research does not differentiate between forms of bullying, leading to a lack of tailored strategies to combat cyberbullying.

Studies from other African countries, such as Kenya and South Africa, have begun to address the issue of cyberbullying in urban schools (Mukhongo, 2018; Tustin & Zulu, 2019), identifying its correlation with poor academic performance, increased absenteeism, and mental health issues. However, these findings have not been replicated in Malawi, and the specific socio-cultural context of Lilongwe Urban, where poverty, digital access, and traditional social hierarchies intersect, remains underexplored. In the context of Malawian secondary schools, cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon, largely driven by increased access to digital technology, particularly in urban areas like Lilongwe. This literature review aims to provide a critical exploration of the theoretical foundations, prevalence, contributing factors, and consequences of cyberbullying in secondary schools. It also reviews existing measures to address the issue in the educational system. To address the gap this literature review draws on global and regional insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of cyberbullying in secondary schools. The literature critically explores how cyberbullying affects students' academic performance, social relationships, psychological and physical impacts in secondary schools and evaluate the effectiveness of existing anti-bullying measures to strengthen cyberbullying prevention and intervention.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study employs three key theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to cyberbullying in secondary schools: Social Learning Theory, Routine Activity Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory. Each theory offers unique insights into the mechanisms driving cyberbullying behaviors, how students are influenced, and the contextual factors that shape these behaviors.

2.1.1. Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and modeling of others' behaviors. Individuals, especially adolescents, often emulate behaviors they see in their peers, on media, or in their immediate surroundings. In the context of cyberbullying, this theory helps explain how students may adopt cyberbullying behaviors by observing others engaged in similar activities. These behaviors may be reinforced if they are rewarded or go unpunished, leading to continued imitation and escalation.

Bandura identified four key processes in social learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. In the case of cyberbullying:

- **Attention**: Students observe cyberbullying behaviors online, particularly through social media, where they may witness their peers engaging in acts of harassment, trolling, or ridicule.

- **Retention**: The observed behavior is retained in memory, and the students may recall it when they encounter a similar situation.

- **Reproduction**: The students may imitate the cyberbullying behaviors they have observed, employing the same tactics or methods.

- **Motivation**: This behavior is often reinforced by external factors such as peer approval, a sense of power, or lack of consequences.

Research supports this theory in explaining aggressive behaviors, including cyberbullying, in adolescents. Studies have shown that exposure to violence in media, as well as observing aggressive behavior in peers, correlates with higher incidences of aggressive behavior in youth (Bandura, 1986; Williams & Guerra, 2007). The theory also highlights the role of online influencers, social media platforms, and digital environments as powerful avenues through which negative behaviors can be transmitted.

2.1.2. Routine Activity Theory by Cohen and Felson

The Routine Activity Theory, developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979), suggests that the occurrence of a crime is the result of the convergence of three factors: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians. This theory has been applied to cyberbullying by identifying the conditions that increase the likelihood of students being involved in or becoming targets of cyberbullying.

In a school context, cyberbullying is more likely to occur when:

- **Motivated offenders** (students with intentions to bully) are online and have access to potential victims.

- **Suitable targets** (students who may be vulnerable or less able to defend themselves) are present in the digital space.

- **Absence of capable guardians**, such as teachers, parents, or even monitoring systems, reduces the oversight and accountability of students' online behavior.

The digital environment of students today provides a fertile ground for cyberbullying as social media platforms often lack real-time oversight, and students spend significant amounts of unsupervised time online. Routine activities, such as frequent social media use, online gaming, or communication in group chats, create opportunities for cyberbullying to take place.

Studies have demonstrated that cyberbullying tends to be more prevalent among students who engage in these routine activities, particularly those who are more active on social media platforms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Without adequate supervision or intervention by "guardians," such as parents monitoring online activities or school authorities regulating behavior in digital platforms, students find greater opportunities to engage in cyberbullying.

2.1.3. Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a comprehensive framework for examining how multiple environmental systems influence human behavior. The theory posits that individuals are embedded within a series of interrelated systems, ranging from immediate environments such as family and school (microsystem) to broader societal contexts (macrosystem). The theory helps to explore how various environmental factors contribute to the prevalence of cyberbullying among secondary school students.

Bronfenbrenner's theory is structured into five environmental systems:

- **Microsystem**: The immediate environments such as family, peers, and school. In the case of cyberbullying, students may be influenced by

their family dynamics, peer relationships, and school culture. For instance, poor parental oversight or a permissive peer environment can foster cyberbullying.

- **Mesosystem**: The interconnections between microsystems, such as the relationship between family and school. If there is a lack of communication between these environments, students may be more likely to engage in cyberbullying without repercussions.
- **Exosystem**: External environments that indirectly affect the individual, such as parental workplace stress or school policies that may not adequately address bullying.
- **Macrosystem**: The broader cultural and societal norms that shape behavior, including attitudes toward violence, aggression, and social media usage.
- **Chronosystem**: The dimension of time, which considers changes over time in both the individual and the environment, such as evolving digital landscapes or growing awareness of cyberbullying.

By using this framework, the study highlights how different environmental factors at multiple levels interact to either promote or mitigate cyberbullying behavior. For example, a student's likelihood of engaging in or being targeted by cyberbullying may increase if they come from a home with limited digital oversight (microsystem) and attend a school with lax policies on online conduct (mesosystem). Furthermore, societal attitudes toward the seriousness of cyberbullying (macrosystem) play a crucial role in shaping behaviors.

2.2. Understanding the Concept Deviant Behaviors and Cyberbullying in Schools

Deviant behavior, as defined by sociologists such as Emile Durkheim, refers to actions that violate societal norms and rules. In school settings, such behaviors can range from minor offenses like tardiness and talking out of turn to more serious behaviors like physical bullying, cheating, and substance abuse (Durkheim, 1897). Deviant behaviors disrupt the learning environment and can have lasting impacts on students' social and academic lives. In schools, such behaviors may include physical bullying, substance abuse, cheating, and vandalism. However, the advent of technology has introduced new forms of deviance, with cyberbullying being one of the most pervasive.

According to Hinduja and Patchin (2009), cyberbullying refers to "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices." This form of bullying is particularly harmful because it allows perpetrators to reach victims anytime and anywhere, often with anonymity. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2009), cyberbullying occurs when a student deliberately uses digital technology to inflict harm on another student repeatedly. This can include sending threatening messages, spreading rumors online, or posting inappropriate images or videos of the victim.

Cyberbullying is generally defined as the use of digital technology to harass, intimidate, or harm individuals, typically through the internet and mobile devices. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying allows perpetrators to remain anonymous, increasing the level of harm to victims (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). According to Tokunaga (2010), cyberbullying typically involves repeated aggressive behavior that is intended to cause emotional, psychological, or social harm. It often takes place on social media platforms, messaging apps, emails, and online gaming communities.

One defining characteristic of cyberbullying is its permanence. Harmful messages, posts, or images shared online can persist and be reshared indefinitely, making it difficult for victims to escape the abuse. As Kowalski et al. (2012) note, the digital nature of cyberbullying means that victims are often subjected to bullying outside school hours, in their homes, and in other spaces where they would otherwise feel safe.

The above concepts suggest that while cyberbullying shares similarities with traditional bullying, it has distinct characteristics that amplify its impact, such as the ability to spread harmful content rapidly and the potential for the abuse to persist indefinitely (Smith et al., 2008). In Malawian secondary schools, where mobile phone and internet use are increasing, cyberbullying is becoming an emergent issue, necessitating a deeper exploration of its causes and effects.

2.3. Cyberbullying in Urban Secondary Schools

2.3.1. Prevalence, Forms, and Platforms

Cyberbullying manifests in various forms and across multiple platforms, particularly in urban secondary schools where students have greater access to digital technology. The prevalence of cyberbullying in urban schools is driven by the widespread use of smartphones, social media, and messaging platforms by students. Studies conducted in different regions show that the most common forms of cyberbullying include harassment, spreading rumors, impersonation, and exclusion (Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying can take place via different online platforms, with the most frequent being social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Snapchat (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

In urban secondary schools, cyberbullying is often exacerbated by the fact that students are connected to each other through multiple digital channels. Kowalski et al. (2012) point out that students are more likely to engage in cyberbullying in urban settings because of the increased exposure to technology. A study conducted in South African urban schools by Willard (2011) highlighted that around 30% of students reported experiencing or witnessing some form of cyberbullying, primarily through social media.

In Malawi, while research on the specific prevalence of cyberbullying in urban areas like Lilongwe is still limited, anecdotal evidence and reports from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) suggest that the issue is becoming more common. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok have become popular among students, providing avenues for both social interaction and cyberbullying (Moyo & Banda, 2020).

2.3.2. Impacts of Cyberbullying

The effects of cyberbullying on students are profound, with research indicating that victims experience a range of negative emotional, social, physical, psychological, and academic outcomes.

2.3.2.1 Psychological Impacts

Cyberbullying has profound psychological effects on students, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) argue that cyberbullying's persistence and the anonymity of perpetrators make it more harmful than traditional forms of bullying. Victims often feel powerless, isolated, and fearful, which can lead to more severe consequences, such as suicidal ideation (Bauman et al., 2013). These psychological impacts are magnified by the fact that cyberbullying can happen at any time, including outside school hours, giving victims no respite. Victims of cyberbullying often report feelings of isolation, helplessness, and fear. Unlike traditional bullying, which may occur during school hours, cyberbullying can happen at any time and is often difficult to escape. According to Bauman et al. (2013), the persistent nature of cyberbullying exacerbates the psychological toll on victims, as they may feel that they are constantly under attack, even in the safety of their own homes.

In Malawi, a study by Banda et al. (2022) found that students in Lilongwe who were victims of cyberbullying reported higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to their peers who had not experienced cyberbullying. The study also found that female students were more likely to experience emotional distress as a result of cyberbullying, particularly when the bullying involved the sharing of personal or intimate information online. This distress is particularly evident among female students, who are more likely to experience anxiety and depression as a result of online harassment.

2.3.2.2 Social Impacts

Cyberbullying also affects students' social interactions and relationships. Victims often withdraw from social activities, fearing further harassment from their peers. According to research by Wang et al. (2011), victims of cyberbullying are more likely to experience social isolation and have difficulties forming friendships, which can lead to long-term social anxiety. The breakdown of social relationships at a critical time in adolescents' development can have far-reaching consequences on their ability to navigate social settings in the future.

2.3.2.3 Academic Impacts

The academic performance of students who experience cyberbullying tends to decline as a result of emotional distress. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2010), victims of cyberbullying are more likely to miss school, have trouble concentrating, and perform poorly on assignments and exams. This is often due to the emotional distress caused by bullying, which makes it difficult for victims to concentrate on their studies.

In Malawian context, the academic consequences of cyberbullying are similar. A study by Mpasu and Banda (2022) found that students who experienced cyberbullying reported lower grades, decreased motivation, and an increased likelihood of dropping out of school. Teachers and school counselors interviewed for the study also noted that cyberbullying often leads to absenteeism, as victims try to avoid confrontations with their bullies.

2.3.2.4 Physical Impacts

Although cyberbullying does not involve physical aggression, the stress and emotional toll of cyberbullying can manifest physically in victims. According to Bauman et al. (2013), victims often experience headaches, sleep disturbances, and stomach problems as a result of the emotional distress caused by cyberbullying. These physical symptoms can further affect students' academic and social lives, compounding the negative effects of cyberbullying.

2.4. Factors Contributing to the Occurrence of Cyberbullying

Several factors contribute to the prevalence of cyberbullying in urban secondary schools. In Malawi, the lack of digital literacy among students, parents, and teachers is a significant contributing factor. A study by Moyo and Banda (2020) found that most Malawian secondary school students lack proper guidance on appropriate online behavior, increasing the likelihood of engaging in deviant activities like cyberbullying. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors such as family background and peer pressure also play a crucial role. In urban schools in Lilongwe, students from wealthier backgrounds who possess smartphones are often targeted by those who feel envious or threatened by their status (Chimera & Nkhoma, 2021).

2.4.1 Access to Digital Technology

The widespread availability of smartphones and internet access in urban areas makes it easier for students to engage in cyberbullying. Students with unrestricted access to social media platforms are more likely to participate in online bullying or be victims of it (Kowalski et al., 2012). In Malawi, where urban students have greater access to smartphones than their rural counterparts, the risk of cyberbullying is elevated (Moyo & Banda, 2020).

2.4.2 Peer Influence and Social Pressure

Adolescents are highly influenced by peer pressure, and in some cases, students may engage in cyberbullying to gain social acceptance or avoid becoming targets themselves (Brown, 2004). In urban schools, where students often have larger peer networks on social media, the pressure to conform to group behavior can drive students to participate in cyberbullying.

2.4.3 Anonymity of Online Platforms and the Disinhibition Effect

One of the unique aspects of cyberbullying is the anonymity provided by digital platforms, which allows perpetrators to hide their identities. This anonymity creates what psychologists refer to as the "disinhibition effect," where individuals feel less restrained and more likely to engage in deviant behaviors online than they would in face-to-face interactions (Suler, 2004). The ability to remain anonymous emboldens perpetrators, allowing them to harass others without fear of being caught or facing consequences.

In the Malawian context, this anonymity may be particularly appealing to students who seek to avoid accountability for their actions. A study by Moyo and Banda (2020) found that most students in Blantyre urban secondary schools who engaged in cyberbullying admitted that the anonymity provided by social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook made them feel more confident in their actions.

The anonymity offered by digital platforms reduces the fear of reprisal for cyberbullying, making students more likely to engage in harmful behaviors online (Suler, 2004). Cyberbullies often feel that they can escape detection or punishment, which emboldens them to harass their peers.

2.5. Urban Secondary Schools Strategies to Combat Cyberbullying

2.5.1 Education and Digital Literacy Programs

Some schools in urban areas have introduced digital literacy programs aimed at teaching students' responsible internet use and the dangers of cyberbullying. These programs also cover online safety and provide students with the tools to protect themselves from becoming victims of cyberbullying (Mkwanda, 2023).

2.5.2 Reporting Mechanisms

Schools have begun to establish confidential reporting mechanisms where students can report incidents of cyberbullying without fear of retribution. These mechanisms are often managed by school counselors or peer support groups, allowing victims to seek help discreetly.

2.5.3 Legislative Efforts and School Policies

Some countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have enacted specific laws that criminalize cyberbullying and hold perpetrators accountable. These laws have been successful in reducing the prevalence of cyberbullying in schools by providing clear consequences for those who engage in this behavior. Malawi could benefit from similar legislative efforts that explicitly address cyberbullying in schools and provide a framework for protecting students from online harassment. At the national level, the *Computer Crimes Act* (2016) in Malawi provides a legal framework for addressing online offenses, including cyberbullying. However, the Act does not specifically focus on cyberbullying in schools, and there is a need for more targeted legislation that addresses the unique challenges posed by cyberbullying in educational settings.

2.6. Conceptual Framework for Cyberbullying Impact in Malawian Secondary Schools

This conceptual framework is designed to explore the interplay between various factors contributing to cyberbullying in secondary schools within Lilongwe Urban, particularly focusing on its prevalence, nature, and impacts on students' social, academic, and mental health. By synthesizing Social Learning Theory, Routine Activity Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory, the framework seeks to illuminate the pathways through which cyberbullying manifests and affects students.

2.6.1. Prevalence and Nature of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, unlike traditional bullying, is amplified by the digital environment, which allows students to interact anytime and anywhere. The framework posits that the prevalence of cyberbullying is driven by increased smartphone access, social media usage, and digital literacy. Specifically:

- Social Media Use: Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram are frequently used by students, leading to both positive social interactions and negative behaviors like harassment, trolling, and exclusion.

- Student Vulnerabilities: Some students, due to personality, socio-economic status, or family dynamics, may be more vulnerable to becoming targets of cyberbullying.

2.6.2. Factors Contributing to Cyberbullying

Social Learning Theory (Bandura) suggests that behaviors such as cyberbullying are learned through observation and imitation of others, particularly influential figures like peers and online influencers. When students witness cyberbullying that goes unpunished, it reinforces the behavior as acceptable or even beneficial in achieving social status or peer approval. This leads to:

- Peer Influence: Students may imitate peers who engage in cyberbullying, especially if the behavior garners positive reinforcement.

- Media Influence: Exposure to aggressive behaviors in media, online forums, or influencer content can normalize cyberbullying behaviors.

Routine Activity Theory (Cohen and Felson) introduces the idea that certain conditions make cyberbullying more likely:

- Lack of Supervision (Guardianship): Limited oversight from parents, teachers, or monitoring tools leaves students unsupervised in digital spaces, increasing the likelihood of cyberbullying.

- Accessible Targets: Students who spend significant time on social media or have limited support networks are more susceptible to being targeted by cyberbullies.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner) places the individual within interconnected environmental systems that influence behavior:

- Microsystem (Immediate Environment): The school culture, peer interactions, and family dynamics directly impact students' behaviors and susceptibility to cyberbullying.

- Mesosystem (Interactions Between Microsystems): Lack of communication between family and school may prevent early intervention, allowing cyberbullying behaviors to continue unaddressed.

- Macrosystem (Cultural and Societal Context): Broader societal attitudes toward digital interactions and cyberbullying determine the prevalence of these behaviors. In Malawi, where cyberbullying awareness is still growing, students may not recognize the severity of their actions.

2.6.3. Impacts of Cyberbullying on Students

The impact of cyberbullying is examined through the framework's focus on multiple areas:

- Academic Impact: Students targeted by cyberbullying may experience decreased academic performance due to stress, anxiety, or absenteeism. The social pressures and emotional toll associated with cyberbullying can lead to a lack of focus and disengagement from school.

- Mental Health and Emotional Well-being: Cyberbullying can contribute to mental health issues such as depression, low self-esteem, and social isolation. For some students, the negative impact may extend to physical health symptoms, like sleep disturbances and headaches.

- Social Relationships: The relational damage caused by cyberbullying may leave students isolated or socially excluded, impairing their ability to form healthy peer connections. This isolation can be exacerbated by the constant presence of digital harassment, affecting students both inside and outside the school environment.

2.6.4. Interventions and Policy Implications

To address the prevalence of cyberbullying effectively, this framework suggests the importance of multi-level interventions:

- School Policies and Digital Literacy Programs: Implementing comprehensive policies and educational programs to increase awareness of cyberbullying can empower students to recognize and report harmful behaviors.

- Parental Involvement and Digital Supervision: Strengthening parent-school communication and encouraging parental supervision can help protect students online.

- Broader Cultural Change: Advocacy at the societal level is needed to recognize cyberbullying as a serious issue that impacts students' well-being. By promoting awareness campaigns and fostering a culture of responsible digital citizenship, schools and communities can collectively work to reduce the prevalence of cyberbullying.

This framework provides a foundation for understanding cyberbullying's multi-dimensional nature and the layered interventions necessary to combat its effects on secondary school students in Malawi.

3.Research Methodology

3.1. Qualitative Research Design and Strategy

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the prevalence, nature, and impacts of cyberbullying on students. The phenomenological approach was selected due to its suitability in capturing and interpreting lived experiences, essential for understanding students' perspectives on cyberbullying's psychological, social, academic, and physical effects. Phenomenology allows researchers to gain in-depth insights through

participants' descriptions, making it an ideal approach for exploring sensitive topics like cyberbullying (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2007).

3.2. Sampling Method

To fulfill the research purpose, the method of purposive sampling which is a non-probability sampling method was utilized to draw up a sample of participants. The sample participants selected had a special relationship with the phenomenon under exploratory. This was to ensure that the data gathered is rich and relevant. Sample members were selected on the basis of their knowledge, relationships and expertise regarding a research subject (Freedman et al., 2007). Two non-probability sampling approaches were used to select the participants for this study. The sampling method was a combination of judgment and snowball techniques. The rationale behind for the chosen approach is that the researcher was interested in the representativeness of the concepts in their varying forms and that the method is mainly applied to find out how a small group or a representative group, is doing for purposes of illustration or explanation.

3.3. Study Population and Sample Size

A population is an entire group of individuals, events or objects having common characteristics that conform to a given specification (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012). Orodho (2004) on the other hand defines population sample as all the items or people under consideration. Yin (2014) states that a qualitative study requires a smaller sample size in order to allow for greater depth of inquiry.
The study targeted a sample size of 50 participants selected purposively from a study population of over 1,000 students, teachers and school administrators at Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools. Both genders were represented to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and school administrators from the three selected schools. The data collection process involved the following methods: Semi-structured interviews to explore students' experiences with cyberbullying. Focus group discussions with teachers and administrators to gain insights into how schools address cyberbullying and the effectiveness of these interventions. Document analysis of school policies related to bullying, with a particular focus on whether and how cyberbullying is addressed.

3.5. Data Analysis

The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. These themes were then interpreted within the context of the chosen theoretical frameworks to draw meaningful conclusions about the impact of cyberbullying and the effectiveness of school interventions. Data analysis involved critical examination of the processed data to see what the findings revealed and if they answered the research questions asked in Chapter One. Qualitative research data analysis is described as "taking things apart" and "putting things together" in order to analyse and synthesize the data collected during the study to find the common or shared meaning in the data (Stake, 2010, p. 133). Data are taken apart to pull relevant ideas and perceptions from the data and then put back together into categories to organize ideas into common themes within the data (Stake, 2010). Yin (2014) offered four general strategies to qualitative data analysis to include relying on theoretical propositions, working data from the "ground up" (p. 136), developing a case description, and examining plausible rival explanations. The purpose of the general strategy is to use qualitative data to give the researcher an idea of concepts of interest so that the researcher can use those concepts of interest to give a sense of direction in analysing the data (Yin, 2014).

4.Study Findings and Discussions

Accordingly, the present section focuses on the presentation of study findings from the research. It provides a narrative analysis of the study findings. This section is divided into four major themes based on different schools of thought that emerged from the study findings. These themes represent and answers research questions, problem statement, achieve the objectives and the purpose of the study. The chapter presents the empirical evidence with regard to the nature, and impacts of cyberbullying on secondary school students in Lilongwe Urban and understand how cyberbullying affects students psychologically, socially, academically, and physically while evaluating strategies that schools use to combat this phenomenon. The findings are based on the administrators, teachers and students' perspectives within the selected secondary schools of Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka in Lilongwe Urban.

4.1. Prevalent forms and Digital Platforms used for Cyberbullying

In this section, the findings of the study are presented with regard to the prevalent forms of cyberbullying and the digital platforms most commonly used for this phenomenon among secondary school students in Lilongwe Urban, specifically within Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools. These findings are crucial as they help in understanding the nature of cyberbullying in the study area and guide the development of appropriate intervention strategies.

4.1.1. Prevalent Forms of Cyberbullying
The study identified two main forms of cyberbullying that were most commonly experienced by students across the three schools: spreading rumors and offensive messages. These forms were reported by both students, teachers and school administrators during interviews and focus group discussions. Each form of cyberbullying was characterized as having distinct psychological, social, and academic consequences for the victims.

4.1.1.1. Spreading Rumors
Spreading rumors involves circulating false or malicious information about a person or group with the intent to damage their reputation or relationships. In the context of cyberbullying, this often occurs via text messages, social media posts, or through private chats.
The research found that rumors were one of the most common ways students experienced cyberbullying. This could involve fabricated stories about a

student's personal life, relationships, or behavior. For example, students were often subjected to rumors regarding their sexual orientation, relationships, or behavior at school. These rumors quickly spread within peer groups, causing social alienation and reputational damage.

4.1.1.2. Offensive Messages

Offensive messages include direct verbal attacks, insults, threats, or harassment delivered via text messages, direct messaging on social media platforms, or public posts meant to humiliate or belittle the victim.

Students at all three schools reported receiving threatening or insulting messages, often containing derogatory comments about their appearance, academic performance, or personal characteristics. These messages were often sent anonymously, or from known peers who used digital platforms to hide behind the anonymity of the internet.

4.1.2. Digital Platforms Used for Cyberbullying

The study also aimed to identify which digital platforms were most commonly used to carry out cyberbullying among students. The results indicated that the following platforms were most frequently cited as tools for cyberbullying:

4.1.2.1. Facebook

Facebook, a popular social media platform, was reported as one of the primary platforms used for spreading rumors and offensive messages. Students used Facebook to create posts or group chats where malicious content about a victim could be shared widely. Facebook's vast reach and the ability to form groups made it an ideal platform for bullying behavior

4.1.2.2. WhatsApp

WhatsApp was another major platform used for cyberbullying, particularly for sending offensive messages and spreading rumors in group chats. The study revealed that students often use WhatsApp's private and group messaging features to communicate in a more intimate setting, which is sometimes exploited for bullying. WhatsApp messages can be sent directly to individuals or in group chats, making it a more personal and direct form of harassment. Victims reported feeling trapped in the cycle of bullying because of the constant notifications and group discussions that often targeted them. The instant and continuous nature of communication on WhatsApp made it difficult for victims to escape or ignore the bullying.

4.1.2.3. Snapchat

Snapchat was another platform commonly used for cyberbullying. The disappearing nature of Snapchat's messages and images encouraged students to send content that they might not otherwise share, often including offensive or explicit images, messages, and threats.

4.1.2.4. TikTok

TikTok, a video-sharing platform, was also reported as a source of cyberbullying, especially in the form of public humiliation. Students used TikTok to create or share videos that mocked or ridiculed others, often targeting their physical appearance, social status, or behavior. TikTok videos, once shared, could easily go viral, amplifying the bullying and making it more difficult for victims to escape the humiliation. The platform's focus on trends and challenges also meant that bullying could be disguised as part of a viral trend, making it harder for teachers or administrators to identify and address the behavior effectively.

The findings from this section illustrate the pervasiveness of cyberbullying among secondary school students in Lilongwe Urban and highlight the digital platforms that facilitate such behavior. The combination of spreading rumors and offensive messages as primary forms of cyberbullying shows the aggressive and often personal nature of online harassment. This aligns with previous research indicating that cyberbullying typically manifests through hurtful communication, where digital tools amplify the impact on victims.

The popularity of social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and TikTok as vehicles for cyberbullying reflects global trends, where digital spaces serve as a battleground for social interactions, both positive and negative. These platforms provide anonymity, reach, and immediacy factors that encourage harmful behavior, particularly among adolescents who may not fully grasp the long-term consequences of their actions.

4.2. The Psychological, Social, Academic, and Physical Impacts of Cyberbullying on Students

This section, analyzes the impacts of cyberbullying on students at Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools in Lilongwe Urban, focusing on the psychological, social, academic, and physical consequences that victims face. The findings reflect how deeply cyberbullying affects various aspects of a student's life, highlighting the multifaceted nature of this issue.

4.2.1. Psychological Impact

The psychological effects of cyberbullying on students in the study were profound and varied. Victims of cyberbullying often experienced a range of emotional and mental health issues that affected their overall well-being. Based on data collected from students, teachers, and school administrators, the following psychological impacts were most commonly reported:

4.2.1.1. Anxiety

Students reported experiencing anxiety as a result of the persistent nature of cyberbullying. The constant fear of receiving offensive messages, being publicly humiliated, or being the subject of rumors led to heightened levels of anxiety. Victims often felt a sense of impending dread, not knowing when or where the next attack would come from. For example, a student from Glorious Secondary School mentioned, *"I couldn't stop thinking about what people were saying about me online. I would check my phone constantly, worrying if I was being talked about or if someone had posted something bad about me."*

4.2.1.2. Low Self-Esteem and Loss of Confidence

Low self-esteem was another significant psychological effect observed among victims. The constant verbal abuse, mockery, and spreading of false rumors led students to internalize negative beliefs about themselves. This erosion of self-worth resulted in a loss of confidence, with students doubting their abilities, looks, and social status.

Victims of cyberbullying from both Bwaila and Chigoneka Secondary Schools reported feeling ashamed of their appearance or actions, often withdrawing from social interactions to avoid further judgment. One student from Chigoneka School shared, *"I don't like looking in the mirror anymore. I feel ugly because of what they said about me online. I feel like I'm not good enough."*

4.2.1.3. Depression

Cyberbullying contributed to depression among many victims, who expressed feeling hopeless and worthless. The emotional toll was particularly severe for those who experienced long-term or frequent cyberbullying. The isolation, stress, and constant emotional pain led to deep sadness and even despair

in some cases.

Students reported that the bullying made them feel as though there was no way out, which led to episodes of hopelessness and depression. These mental health issues often went unnoticed due to the secretive nature of cyberbullying.

One student from Bwaila noted, *"I felt like I was trapped. The bullying made me feel like I had no one to turn to, and I didn't want to go to school anymore."*

4.2.1.4. Stress and Anger

Stress and anger were common emotional responses to cyberbullying. The constant harassment and negative messages led students to experience frustration and emotional exhaustion. In some cases, this anger manifested as irritability in their interactions with peers, teachers, or family members.

A student from Glorious described their experience: *"I was always so angry. The more they insulted me online, the more upset I became. It felt like everything I did was wrong."* This anger, if not addressed, sometimes led to destructive behaviors or conflicts with others.

4.2.2. Social Impacts

Cyberbullying had significant social consequences for victims. The social exclusion and changes in peer relationships that students experienced were detrimental to their ability to engage in a healthy social environment at school.

4.2.2.1. Social Exclusion

Social exclusion was one of the most noticeable effects of cyberbullying. Victims often reported being isolated or ostracized by their peers. This was particularly true for students who had been the subject of rumors or mocking on social media platforms. When classmates joined in or supported the bullying, the victim found it increasingly difficult to fit in.

At Chigoneka Secondary School, a victim shared, *"I was left out of group chats, and no one would talk to me in class. I felt so alone, like everyone was against me."* This exclusion led to a lack of social support, which exacerbated feelings of loneliness.

4.2.2.2. Damaged Peer Relationships

Peer relationships were severely affected, as students who were once close friends began distancing themselves from victims due to fear of being targeted as well. Cyberbullying often created a divide among students, with those bullying forming groups or alliances, while victims were left feeling unsupported and alienated.

In many cases, the bullying did not remain private and spilled over into physical spaces, like classrooms and school corridors. The social fragmentation caused by cyberbullying led to an erosion of friendships and a loss of trust among peers.

A student from Bwaila expressed, *"I used to hang out with my friends, but after the rumors spread online, I felt like everyone turned their back on me. No one wanted to be seen with me anymore."*

4.2.3. Physical Impacts

Although the effects of cyberbullying are primarily psychological and social, there were also notable physical impacts on victims, which were often related to stress, anxiety, and attempts to cope with the bullying.

4.2.3.1. Physical Withdrawal

Many victims exhibited signs of physical withdrawal. This included avoiding school, staying home from social events, or not participating in physical activities. The stress caused by cyberbullying led some students to feel physically exhausted, which contributed to their reluctance to engage in regular school routines.

A student from Chigoneka shared, *"I used to go out for sports, but after the bullying started, I just wanted to stay at home. I didn't feel like doing anything anymore."* Physical withdrawal is often a coping mechanism for students who are unable to face the emotional toll of cyberbullying.

4.2.3.2. Fatigue

Fatigue was another common physical symptom, often linked to the emotional distress that victims of cyberbullying experienced. Anxiety, stress, and sleepless nights due to worry or fear of further bullying led many students to feel physically drained. Victims of cyberbullying reported feeling tired and unable to concentrate during the school day, which impacted their physical and mental energy levels.

One student from Bwaila stated, *"I would stay up late checking my phone, waiting for the next message. By the time I got to school, I was exhausted and couldn't focus in class."*

4.2.3.3. Drug and Substance Abuse

In more extreme cases, drug and substance abuse was identified as a coping mechanism for victims of cyberbullying. Some students resorted to substances such as alcohol or recreational drugs to numb the emotional pain and stress they experienced.

Although less common, it was noted that students who faced prolonged bullying sometimes turned to these substances to escape their feelings of helplessness or to "fit in" with peers who engaged in such behaviors. This, in turn, contributed to noticeable changes in their physical appearance and general health.

4.2.3. Academic impacts

Cyberbullying also had a direct impact on students' academic performance. The emotional and social toll of being bullied often resulted in disengagement from school activities, leading to a decline in academic achievement.

4.2.3.1. Decreased Academic Performance

Victims of cyberbullying often reported a decline in academic performance. This was attributed to the emotional distress they faced, which made it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork or complete assignments. Many students mentioned that they were so focused on the bullying that their studies suffered.

A student from Glorious Secondary School explained, *"I couldn't concentrate on my homework because all I could think about was the bullying. I failed some of my exams, and it just made things worse."*

4.2.3.2. Absenteeism

Absenteeism was another major academic impact. Many students who experienced cyberbullying found it difficult to attend school regularly. The fear of facing their peers or being further harassed online often led to frequent absences. Some students admitted to skipping school to avoid bullying, which further exacerbated their academic struggles.

One student from Bwaila shared, *"I started missing classes because I couldn't handle the bullying. It got to the point where I didn't want to face anyone at school."*

4.2.3.3. Disengagement in School Activities

Victims of cyberbullying were also less likely to participate in extracurricular activities or social events. School activities, which usually provide students with opportunities for personal development and interaction with their peers, were seen as environments where bullying could occur, either through gossip or direct harassment.

A student from Glorious noted, *"I used to enjoy being part of the Ant AID club, but after everything started, I just stopped going. I didn't want to be around people who might judge me or talk behind my back."*

The findings of study reveal that cyberbullying has far-reaching impacts on students in Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka secondary schools. The psychological effects (anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and anger) significantly affect students' emotional well-being. Socially, students suffer from exclusion and damaged relationships. Physically, there is withdrawal, fatigue, and, in some cases, substance abuse as a coping mechanism. Academically, cyberbullying leads to poor performance, absenteeism, and disengagement from school activities. These findings underscore the need for effective interventions that address all aspects of cyberbullying's impact, including psychological support, social reintegration, and academic assistance for affected students.

4.3. Factors Contributing to the Occurrence of Cyberbullying at Bwaila, Chigoneka and Glorious Secondary Schools

The study explored several factors that contribute to the occurrence of cyberbullying among students at Bwaila, Chigoneka, and Glorious Secondary Schools. These factors were identified through interviews, and focus group discussions gathered from students, teachers, and school administrators.

The findings reveal a complex interplay of environmental, social, and technological factors that facilitate cyberbullying within these schools. Below are the key factors identified:

4.3.1. Uncontrolled Access to Technology (Mobile Phones and the Internet)

One of the primary factors contributing to cyberbullying among students is uncontrolled access to technology, particularly mobile phones and the internet. In the context of these schools, many students have access to smartphones and personal devices that enable them to connect to social media platforms, messaging apps, and online games. While technology offers numerous benefits for communication and learning, it also creates opportunities for cyberbullying.

4.3.2. Lack of Awareness and Education on Cyberbullying

A second significant factor contributing to cyberbullying is the lack of awareness and education on the issue. Many students, teachers, and even parents are not fully aware of the definition, scope, and consequences of cyberbullying. This gap in knowledge exacerbates the problem and prevents timely intervention.

4.3.2.1. Inadequate School Programs

The schools involved in the study Bwaila, Chigoneka, and Glorious have limited or no comprehensive programs in place to educate students about the dangers of cyberbullying and the importance of responsible online behavior.

While some teachers discussed the issue informally in classrooms, there was no structured curriculum to address cyberbullying prevention or digital citizenship. This lack of formal education leaves students vulnerable to becoming either perpetrators or victims without understanding the consequences of their actions.

4.3.2.2. Lack of Parental Involvement

Students reported a lack of parental involvement and awareness, which leads them to engage in harmful online behaviors without fully understanding the potential consequences.

4.3.3. Peer Pressure and Social Influence

Peer pressure emerged as another key factor influencing the prevalence of cyberbullying. Adolescents are at a stage where social acceptance and peer relationships are of critical importance. As such, the desire to fit in or be seen as "cool" can lead to students participating in cyberbullying behaviors, either as perpetrators or passive bystanders.

4.3.3.1. Conformity to Group Norms

Within these secondary schools, students reported that some peer groups actively encouraged online bullying as a means of exerting power or gaining social status. In some cases, individuals were coerced into sending hurtful messages or sharing embarrassing content to gain approval from more influential peers. The need to belong to a social group often outweighs concerns about the well-being of others, which perpetuates a cycle of cyberbullying.

4.3.3.2. Fear of Retaliation

Students expressed fear of becoming targets of bullying themselves if they refused to participate in or condone the bullying behavior of their peers. This fear of retaliation prevents students from reporting incidents of cyberbullying or standing up against their peers, thereby allowing the behavior to continue unchecked.

4.3.4 Inadequate Reporting Mechanisms and School Response

The research identified a final contributing factor to cyberbullying: the lack of effective reporting mechanisms and inadequate school responses to incidents. Although students may recognize that cyberbullying is wrong, they often feel powerless to stop it or report it due to the insufficient support systems in place within the school environment.

4.3.4.1. Reluctance to Report

Students reported a fear of not being believed or facing retaliation if they reported incidents of cyberbullying. Students felt that the school administration would not take the issue seriously or provide adequate support. As a result, incidents of cyberbullying often go unreported, leaving the perpetrators free to continue their harmful actions.

4.3.4.2. Limited Intervention by Teachers and Administrators

The research also found that teachers and school administrators were often not trained or equipped to address cyberbullying effectively. While some teachers were aware of specific cases of cyberbullying, they lacked clear protocols or strategies for intervening and supporting affected students. This lack of training and awareness among school staff exacerbates the problem and leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse.

The occurrence of cyberbullying among students at Bwaila, Chigoneka, and Glorious Secondary Schools is influenced by a combination of factors, including uncontrolled access to technology, lack of awareness about the risks of online bullying, peer pressure, and inadequate reporting and intervention mechanisms within the schools. Addressing these factors requires a multi-faceted approach that involves increasing awareness among students, parents,

and teachers, implementing stronger monitoring of students' use of technology, fostering positive peer relationships, and establishing clear and accessible channels for reporting and addressing cyberbullying incidents. By addressing these underlying factors, schools can create safer, more supportive environments that reduce the prevalence of cyberbullying.

4.4. Strategies Implemented by Secondary Schools to Combat Cyberbullying

The study examined the strategies employed by Glorious, Bwaila, and Chigoneka Secondary Schools to combat cyberbullying. While it was found that none of these schools had formal, written policies specifically dedicated to addressing cyberbullying, several strategies have been put in place to address the issue. These strategies aim to minimize incidents of cyberbullying and support victims, although the effectiveness of these measures varies. Below are the key strategies implemented, along with an explanation of their strengths and limitations:

4.4.1. Guidance and Counseling Services
One of the key strategies used to combat cyberbullying across all three schools is the provision of guidance and counseling services. The schools have counselors available to help students who are either victims or perpetrators of cyberbullying. This service offers a safe space for students to report their experiences, seek emotional support, and discuss strategies to cope with the effects of online bullying.

4.4.1.1. Support for Victims
Victims of cyberbullying can approach the counseling department for psychological support, coping strategies, and guidance on how to handle the situation. Counselors provide a non-judgmental environment where students can express their feelings and concerns.

4.4.1.2. Rehabilitation for Perpetrators
Counselors also work with students who engage in cyberbullying to understand the consequences of their actions and help them develop more positive online behaviors. This restorative approach aims to prevent repeat offenses by addressing the underlying causes of bullying behavior, such as insecurity or peer pressure.

However, the study suggests that while the counseling services provide valuable support, there is no evidence that these services are sufficiently promoted or accessible to all students, which may limit their impact.

4.4.2. Reporting Mechanisms
The schools have put in place reporting mechanisms to allow students and teachers to report incidents of cyberbullying. These mechanisms are intended to ensure that cyberbullying is identified early and can be addressed swiftly.

4.4.2.1. Teacher and Peer Reports
Teachers are encouraged to report any suspicious behavior they witness, and peer reports are also encouraged to foster a culture of mutual responsibility. While these mechanisms provide an avenue for addressing cyberbullying, the study found that some students are still hesitant to report incidents due to concerns about trust and confidentiality. Though this strategy is essential for early detection and intervention, there is a need for more awareness and trust-building around the reporting processes to ensure its full effectiveness.

4.4.3. Suspension
Suspension is used as a disciplinary measure in the event that a student is found to be involved in cyberbullying. These Secondary Schools have employed suspension as a way to deal with serious incidents of cyberbullying.

4.4.3.1. Temporary Removal of Perpetrators
When students engage in severe forms of cyberbullying, they are temporarily suspended from school. This serves as both a punitive measure and a deterrent to other students, sending a strong message that such behavior will not be tolerated.

4.4.3.2. Break in Negative Behavior
Suspension provides a break in the negative cycle of cyberbullying, allowing the perpetrator time away from the school environment to reflect on their actions. However, the study indicates that this measure is often not followed up with adequate support for the students to understand why their behavior was harmful, which reduces the effectiveness of suspension as a long-term solution.

4.4.4. Awareness Programs
Bwaila and Glorious Secondary Schools have been more proactive in conducting awareness programs aimed at educating students about the dangers of cyberbullying and promoting responsible online behavior. These programs, which were held in the last academic year, are designed to increase student awareness of what constitutes cyberbullying and how to prevent it.

4. 4.4.1. Workshops and Presentations
The schools organized workshops led by the head teacher and Principal where students were educated on the emotional and psychological impacts of cyberbullying. The head teacher and principal addressed students on the importance of empathy, online etiquette, and the legal consequences of cyberbullying.

4.4.4.2. Peer Education
Peer-led initiatives were also introduced, where older students took the lead in educating their peers about cyberbullying and providing guidance on how to avoid becoming involved in harmful online behaviors. These peer programs are beneficial because students are often more receptive to messages delivered by their peers.

While these programs are a positive step toward raising awareness, the study found that such programs are not regularly conducted, and their reach may be limited if they are not incorporated into the broader school curriculum or enforced consistently.

4.4.5. Punishments for Culprits
In addition to suspension, other forms of punishment are imposed on students found guilty of cyberbullying. These punishments vary by severity and include detention and loss of privileges

4.4.5.1. Deterrence
Punitive measures such as removal of certain privileges are intended to act as deterrents to discourage students from engaging in cyberbullying in the first place. The punishment aim to signal to students that their actions have consequences and that the school takes cyberbullying seriously.

4.4.6. Ban on Smart Phones at School

To minimize the opportunities for cyberbullying, smartphones have been banned on the school premises at Bwaila, Chigoneka, and Glorious Secondary Schools. This policy restricts students from using their mobile phones during school hours, reducing the chances for online bullying to occur on campus.

4.4.6.1. Reducing Online Interaction

 By preventing students from accessing social media or messaging platforms during school hours, the ban reduces the likelihood of students engaging in or becoming victims of cyberbullying while on school grounds.

4.4.6.2. Limitations of the Ban

 While the ban on smartphones is seen as a proactive measure to minimize cyberbullying, it is not without its challenges. Some students still manage to access their phones during breaks or after school, making it difficult to control their online interactions entirely. Additionally, the policy may be viewed as overly restrictive by students and parents, leading to resistance.

4.4.7. Overall Effectiveness of the Strategies

The study indicates that while these strategies have made some impact on reducing cyberbullying, their effectiveness is often limited by inconsistent implementation, lack of formalized policies, and the need for a more comprehensive, school-wide approach. Guidance and counseling services, reporting mechanisms, and awareness programs are important steps in addressing cyberbullying, but they need to be more structured and widely accessible to all students. Additionally, while punitive measures such as suspension and smartphone bans may provide short-term relief, they do not necessarily address the root causes of cyberbullying or help students develop long-term strategies for responsible online behavior.

5.0. Limitations of the Study

Limitations are potential weaknesses or challenges in the research that the researcher cannot control. These factors may impact the generalizability or accuracy of the findings. For this study,the following limitations were encountered:

1. **Limited generalizability**: The study was confined to secondary schools in Lilongwe Urban, meaning the findings may not be generalizable to rural schools or other cities in Malawi. Differences in socioeconomic status, technology access, and cultural factors between urban and rural areas may lead to varying experiences with cyberbullying.
2. **Self-reported data**: As the study relies heavily on surveys and interviews, there is the potential for bias in self-reported data. Students may underreport their involvement in cyberbullying either as perpetrators or victims due to fear of consequences or social desirability bias (Bryman, 2016).
3. **Limited local research on cyberbullying**: While global research on cyberbullying is extensive, there is little in-depth research specific to Malawi or other low-income countries, making it difficult to fully contextualize the findings in the Malawian setting (Chilimampunga, 2014). This study, therefore, relies on global and regional findings, which may not fully capture the local nuances of the problem.
4. **Evolving technology**: As technology is rapidly evolving, the platforms and methods used in cyberbullying can change, making it difficult for the study to account for new trends or apps that may emerge during or after the research process.

6.0. Conclusion

The study identifies common forms of cyberbullying, such as spreading rumors and sending offensive messages, predominantly through platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and TikTok. The findings highlight the significant negative impacts of cyberbullying, including emotional distress, social isolation, academic decline, and physical harm. The findings emphasize the serious emotional, social, physical, and academic consequences of cyberbullying for students. Contributing factors include uncontrolled access to technology, lack of awareness, peer pressure, and inadequate reporting mechanisms. While schools have implemented strategies such as counseling services, awareness programs, and smartphone bans, these efforts are often hindered by inconsistent application, lack of formal policies, and limited school-wide approaches. The study concludes that more comprehensive, consistent, and proactive measures are needed to effectively combat cyberbullying in secondary schools.

7.0. Recommendations

1. **Implementation of Formal Cyberbullying Policies**: Schools should develop and implement formal written policies on cyberbullying to create clear guidelines for prevention and intervention.
2. **Comprehensive Education Programs**: Schools should introduce regular, structured programs to educate students, teachers, and parents on the dangers of cyberbullying and responsible online behavior.
3. **Enhanced Reporting Systems**: Schools need to establish more accessible and confidential reporting mechanisms, ensuring students feel safe to report cyberbullying incidents.
4. **Improved Counseling Services**: Counseling services should be promoted and made more accessible, with counselors working not only with victims but also with perpetrators to prevent reoccurrence.
5. **Peer-Led Initiatives**: Encourage peer-led education and support groups to foster a culture of empathy and mutual respect among students.
6. **Monitoring Technology Use**: While banning smartphones during school hours may help, schools should also focus on monitoring technology use outside of school and involve parents in regulating and guiding their children's online behavior.

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