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UCT research delves into the experiences of ‘bully-victims’

According to a new study by Dr Nombulelo Jokazi, a PhD graduate from the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) [Faculty of Commerce](#), socially integrated mobile bully-victims possess complex characteristics. Her thesis is titled “Identifying the characteristics of socially integrated mobile bully-victims using a mobile application”.

Her thesis focused on developing a mobile application to help universities and practitioners identify the characteristics of socially integrated mobile bully-victims (SIMBVs) and educate students about mobile bullying.

The findings showed that individual characteristics of SIMBVs mainly include characteristic adoption (learned aggressive behaviour), hostility, low agreeableness, openness, previous victimisation, frequent engagement in bully-victim behaviour, retaliation, popularity and high consciousness.

“Some of these characteristics are the result of immediate and distal environmental factors. For example, learned aggression behaviour is reported to result from parents coercing students to complete their chores. The qualitative findings presented showed that most parents tend to shout when the students do not attend or complete their chores,” said Dr Jokazi. She added that hostility and low agreeableness displayed by SIMBVs can be attributable to being exposed to violence and witnessing extreme forms of violence, such as gang violence and community justice.

She said that it is crucial to note that the individual characteristics of SIMBVs, such as hostility and popularity, impacted how they conducted themselves in the digital environment. Due to their hostile attitude, she added that SIMBVs frequently retaliated when they felt attacked on social media.

“The fact that SIMBVs were popular played a role in them frequently engaging in mobile bully-victim behaviour,” said Jokazi. “This group could use their implicit power to defend themselves and close friends. Based on the qualitative findings of iteration one, the SIMBVs would mock the mobile bullies. This act is not surprising as SIMBVs knew they had a larger audience that would react to their comments.”

The study's results showed that a majority of SIMBVs were females. Jokazi said this is not surprising, given South Africa's cultural norms and history.

Some LGBTQIA+ students were also identified as socially integrated mobile bully-victims, even though they were few. Students also highlighted this group was discriminated against based on cultural norms. Therefore, shared Jokazi, it would be interesting for future studies to identify the severity of the cultural norms and their impact on the development of bully-victim behaviour of LGBTQIA+ students.

"Future research can be done to explore further the challenges that young females face in society and how this influences the development of socially integrated mobile bully-victim behaviour," she said.

She added: "Future studies can also incorporate machine learning algorithms to analyse posts and daily social media activities of the SIMBVs App users; this would provide psychologists and policymakers with more context of how mobile bullying emerges and evolves. Keeping them up to date and ensuring treatments and policies tailor-made for mobile bullying roles remain up to date and effective. Moreover, a dashboard that provides real-time insights of the prevalence of each mobile bullying role and the associated top drivers and characteristics per role."

Jokazi said that universities can use this study's findings to craft anti-cyberbullying policies and awareness campaigns. Given their characteristics, she added that university healthcare centres could also use the findings to develop appropriate treatments for SIMBVs.

"Policymakers, whose focus is on privacy regulations of the country, ought to partner up with universities to craft regulations that clearly stipulate the anti-bullying responsibilities of social media companies. This would ensure that social media companies exert greater effort in developing safety measures for their users and are held accountable for incidents that are not addressed adequately," she said.

She further said: "The law enforcement in South Africa ought to have a unit dedicated to dealing with bullying online and in physical environments. This unit can take cases reported to social media companies by users and address them accordingly. This would also lessen the number of bully-victims as students will feel heard, and it will also decrease the likelihood of other users bullying students as they will be held accountable for their actions."

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