Cyberbullying Status of Students of Phuentsholing Middle Secondary School, Bhutan

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Abstract: A mixed method study with purposive sampling was carried out with 357 students studying in grades six to ten at Phuentsholing Middle Secondary School, Bhutan to evaluate the status of students on cyberbullying for their cyber-safety during lockdown (2021) when they had access to the internet most of the time to attend online classes. The study found that 86% of the total participants did not experience cyberbullying, while, 14% fell victim, among which only 7% have reported the cyberbullying incident to their parents or siblings, on the other hand, the rest of the victims managed themselves by blocking, ignoring or saving the evidence and warning them to report to police. A majority of the students (58.8%) were aware of the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying at the same time a group of students (41.2%) was found unaware. Recommendations are suggested to the school management and the school counsellor for intervention and prevention.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Harassment, Reported the Incidence, Students, And Social Media

1. Introduction

Technology has been an integral part of our life as it assists us in our work and learning, however, it comes with disadvantages like cyberbullying, addiction to particular sites, addiction to games, and many more. With more youth accessing the internet and joining social media, cyber safety has become a concern. In the olden days, bullies mostly took place on school premises or on the way back home (Glover et al., 2000), which had limited face-to-face time for bullies and bully-victim. Cyberbullying is described as a disastrous by-product of the combination of technological communication and youth aggression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008), and its gaining popularity is a cause for concern. Communication using digital gadgets has made it easy for youth to get easily cyberbullied through social media. The survey conducted with 357 participants of classes six to ten, age range 12 to 20 during the first week of May 2021 revealed that 91.3% of the student participants had a Facebook account, 89.9% had an account in Facebook messenger, 48.7%

had an Instagram account, 65.0% were in telegram, 23.0% were using WhatsApp, 21.8 % of them uses other social apps. The other data collected from the same group stated that 20.4% of the respondent spends less than 1 hour, 34.2% spends 1-2 hours, 20.7% spends 2-3 hours 9.5% spends 3-4 hours, 6.2% of them spends 4-5 hours, and 9.0% of them spends more than 5 hours daily on social media.

The data says that teens are active on social sites, it has therefore become crucial to study the cyber-safety of the students to create awareness of cyber-bullies, their consequences, and their preventive measures. A statistical report on the impact of Cyberbullying by Broadband Search (2021) says that 41% of Cyberbullying victims developed social anxiety, 37% developed depression, 26% had suicidal thoughts, another 26% deleted their social media profiles, 25% engaged in self-harm, 20% started skipping classes, 14% developed an eating disorder and another 9% started abusing alcohol. In Bhutan, one of the 15-year-old victims of Cyberbullying shared on BBS (2021) that she was diagnosed with a severe eating disorder and anxiety and that she had no strength to walk after she was cyberbullied by a person with a fake profile. The statistics are evident that Cyberbullying has serious implications.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of schools, and the children having to learn virtually through digital platforms, there is a high risk for the children to be the victim of Cyberbullying. Charles et al. (2013) stated that physical strength or fastness was not required for someone to cyberbully others, an electronic device with an internet connection and the purpose to hurt others was enough. Anyone can be a cyberbully as one just needs to create an anonymous account on social sites to reach the targeted person.

The students of Phuentsholing Middle Secondary School had to continue online classes when the third lockdown took place at Phuentsholing due to community transmission of the COVID-19 virus from 17th April 2021, students were free to stay online for long hours on social sites on the pretext of attending classes making themselves prone to become the victim of Cyberbullying. While UNICEF (2021) shared their concern that the well-being of children who are out of school during a global coronavirus pandemic is a great risk.

Therefore, it has become the sole responsibility of a teacher and manager to study the prevalence of Cyberbullying among students and ensure their safety (Gurmin, Yu, & Cohen, 2020). It is also equally important to create awareness among teens about Cyberbullying, and its impact on psychosocial and mental well-being. Students from grades six to ten were chosen as participants as they are more active on social media, whereas smaller students are guided by their parents. Researchers in this study intended to study whether our (their) students are safe from Cyberbullying, the awareness of students about Cyberbullying, and the (its) types, and severity.

2. Literature Review

Cyberbullying is related to the misusing of digital communication platforms to text or call someone through instant messenger, emailing, WhatsApp, we-chat, telegram, or other social sites (Smith et al., 2008; Willard, 2007 as cited in the work of Machackova, et al., 2013). Bully according to the oxford dictionary is the use of the strength of power to frighten or hurt weaker people. Englander et al. (2017) claimed that cyberbullying is likely to happen outside the school with extensive use of digital devices and

it is more severe than traditional bullying with a high risk of causing self-psychological harm. They also added that victims of cyberbullying might have a feeling of being weak or powerless. UNICEF (2021) defines Cyberbullying as repeated acts, intended to scare, tiger anger or aggression, and disgrace the targeted individuals. Cyberbullying is also defined as "wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). There was a study conducted by Wong, Bullock, and Gable (2011) involving 62 adolescents and 75 parents that sums to 137 participants responding to their survey questions. It was found that 90% of the adolescent participant's group either fell prey to or witnessed Cyberbullying. Additionally, 70% of the victims were cyberbullied one to two times within a month among them, and 50% of the victims were not aware of the person behind. Kopecký (2014) conducted descriptive research on the occurrence of Cyberbullying among 386 students of Palacky University in the Czech Republic and found that 38.73% of them were bothered by drop calls, 36.97% experienced verbal attacks and 12.23% were embarrassed by spreading their photos. In comparing the two types of bullying, Cyberbullying seems more severe in the case of adults than physical bullying (Englander et al., 2017). Safaria (2016) reported 80% of the 102 seventh-grade students fall victim to cyberbullying sometimes to almost every day and suggested a positive correlation between cyber-victimization and the level of students' psychological distress.

A connection between Cyberbullying and academic performance, school violence, family problems, and low self-esteem were observed (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007); (Muzamil & Shah, 2016). Kowalski and Limber (2012) found bully victims to have faced the most psychological and physical health issues with a decline in academic performance. Similarly, Baruah, Fashora, and Parmar (2017) found bully victims to have low self-esteem, low physiological health, and a moderate level of depression and anxiety and claimed to cyberbully to have (has) a negative impact on the psychological health of adolescents. The other study by Schneider et al., (2012) reported a majority of cyberbullying victims to be the victims of a bully at school where the victims reported lower school performance and enthusiasm to go to school. They also found both the cyberbullying and physical bullying victims to show signs of depression with suicide attempts while others suffered high levels of distress. Zhu et al. (2021) in their literature review with 63 references, found the rate of cyberbullying to have rapidly increased in the last 5-year period and suggested researchers from low and middle-income countries focus more on research and creating awareness of cyberbullying. Emotional support of parents to their children on the other was found to affect the cyberbullying behavior of adolescents (Gurmin, Yu, & Choen, 2020).

There are various types of bullies depending on the different authors. Jun (2020) in his research found verbal abuse to be a major type of Cyberbullying among adolescents and it took place mostly through instant messaging. Cyberbullying is one type of bullying with the increasing number of fake accounts being created on social sites such as Facebook, Instagram, etc., there is an increased risk of Cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is further categorized into various types depending on different authors. According to Zapal (2020) harassment, masquerading, exclusion, doing, and trolling were some of the categories.

1. Harassment is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as repeated illegal behaviour towards someone to cause mental or emotional pain through, insulting, threatening, or using offensive language. Harassment includes repeated sending of text that disturbs the peace of mind and inflicts

psychological discomforts to the victim in long run. Any teen or adult having accounts on social media are susceptible to such acts of cyber harassment at any time in their life.

2. Masquerading is when one creates a fake profile on social media using someone's photos with the intention to tease, call their nicknames, or harm the other person by sending texts or their secrets which disturbs them.

3. Exclusion is an act of excluding someone from becoming a part of a group created on the social platform or avoiding one person within the group by ignoring their points or views that generate the feeling of being isolated from the victim.

4. Doxing is when someone obtains an individual's information like their home address, phone numbers, or other private data and shares them on social media to call for harassment, scam, or even illegal activity upon the victim, Zapal (2020). The adults are more susceptible to doxing.

5. Trolling is an act of sending insulting messages to someone through social media or passing negative comments to provoke unnecessary disputes among other people.

2.1 Purpose

The study on the status of cyberbullying among the students of Phuentsholing MSS is carried out to see if all the students are safe from cyberbullying when they are given access to using mobile phones to attend their online classes during a series of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also was conducted to evaluate if they were aware of cyberbullying and its impact, and to see if they report the case to their parents, teachers, siblings, or to police to seek help and prevent its negative implications like falling into distress, depression, and self-harm.

2.2 Research Questions

1. What percentage of students of Phuentsholing MSS are safe from cyberbullying?
2. Are students aware of the negative implications of cyberbullying?
3. Do students report the case to their parents, teachers, or police when they are cyberbullied?

3. Method

The descriptive research method was used to find the prevalence of Cyberbullying among the students of classes 6 to 10 during the lockdown in the year 2021. Quantitative data was collected through a set of close-ended questions and qualitative data was collected through an open-ended question. A set of questionnaires were prepared in Google form and validated with pilot testing, and Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 was obtained to test the internal consistency and reliability. The questionnaires comprised of three sections; the first section contained questions related to demographic information, and the second section had a set of questions based on 5 types of cyberbullying. The last question was open-ended to share their experience if they had been cyberbullied. These questionnaires were sent to students through Google classroom and class groups created by the teachers in the other social forum. Participants were given period of one week to respond to the questionnaires. The questionnaires were analysed using percentages and graphs in Microsoft Excel 2013.

3.1 Sampling

Deliberate sampling was used to study the prevalence and awareness of Cyberbullying. The questionnaires were shared with all the grade 6 to grade 10 students (about 450) studying in the school. A total of 357 of them responded to the questionnaires among which, 161 (45.1%) were male and 196 (54.9%) female participants. The participants were aged between 12 to 20 years. 219 (61.3%) aged 12 to 14 years, 128(35.9%) aged 15 to 17 years, 9(2.5%) aged 18 to 20 years, and 1(0.3%) above 20 years who were merged with the age group of 18 to 20 years for the analysis as there were only 2 participants falling under this age group.

4. Findings

This section contains the responses of students on the awareness of cyberbullying, their experience of cyberbullying as a victim or as bullies, and what the victims did when they were being bullied.

A question yes/no question was asked on students' knowledge of cyberbullying before moving into the structured section II questions and the responses revealed that 210(58.8%) chose yes stating that they are aware of cyberbullying. Another 38(10.6%) chose no, stating that they were not aware of cyberbullying while, 109(30.6%) responded not sure, stating that they are not sure if cyberbullying takes place in reality. Generally, 58.8% are considered to be aware and 41.2% are not aware of the prevalence of cyberbullying.

Table 1: Frequency and the forms of cyberbullying the participants experienced so far

	Never		1- 2 times		3-4 times		5-6 times		> 7 times	
Items (section II)	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
2. Did you ever receive hurtful, threatening, or aggressive text messages through social media?	307	86.0	43	12.0	7	2.0	0	0.0	0	0
3. Did someone pass undesirable or hurting comments on your social media (FB, Instagram, etc.) to insult you?	319	89.4	36	10.1	1	0.3	1	0.3	0	0
4. Did you ever send hurtful, threatening, or aggressive text messages to your friends through social media?	325	91.0	29	8.1	2	0.6	1	0.3	0	0
5. Did someone with a fake account send you harassing or annoying text?	294	82.4	58	16.2	4	1.1	1	0.3	0	0

6. Did you ever create a fake account using the photos of other people and chatting with their friends?	345	96.6	12	3.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0
7. Did someone use your photos and create fake accounts on social media?	334	93.6	21	5.9	0	0.0	2	0.6	0	0
8. Did your mates ever exclude you from the social chat groups or social forums?	310	86.8	44	12.3	2	0.6	1	0.3	0	0
9. Did someone share your private information, secret, photos, or other embarrassing information on social media to harass you?	345	96.6	9	2.5	2	0.6	0	0.0	1	0.3
10. Did you ever share information, secrets, photos, or other embarrassing information about your schoolmates in social media to harass them?	348	97.5	9	2.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0
11. Did someone frequently leave negative comments on your photos or posts to annoy, insult or defame you?	324	90.8	33	9.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0

Table 1 consists of responses from the student participants represented in the form of numbers and percentages. The survey revealed that 307(86%) of the students never received any threatening or hurtful messages, 43(12%) received them 1 to 2 times, and 7(2%) received 3 to 4 times. 319(98.4%) responded never received, 36(10.1%) responded 1 to 2 times, 1 (0.3%) 3 to 4 times, and 1(0.3%) of the students responded that someone passed an undesirable or hurting comment on their social media platform to insult them. The third question was to see if the students were involved in cyberbullying others. Where 325(91%) stated that they did not send any text to harass others while 29(8.1%) did 1 to 2 times, 2(0.6%) did 3 to 4 times, and 1(0.3%) 5 to 6 times. 294(82.4%) of the participants never received an annoying text from any fake accounts, on the other hand, 58(16.2%) received 1 to 2 times, 4(1.1%) 3 to 4 times, and 1(0.3%) 5 to 6 times. 345(96.6%) of the participants never created a fake account using someone's photos or information while 12(3.4%) created a fake account using others' personal information 1 to 2 times. Did someone use your photos and create accounts on any social media? 334(93.6%) responded never, 21(5.9%) responded 1 to 2 times, and 2(0.6%) responded 4 to 5 times. 310(86.8%) of the participants were never excluded from any social groups or platforms, on the other hand, 44(12.3%) were excluded 1 to 2 times,

2(0.6%) 3 to 4 times, and 1(0.3%) were excluded 5 to 6 times. 345(96.6%) stated that their private information, secrets, photos or embarrassing information were never sent on social media by others, at the same time other 9(2.5%) said 1 to 2 times, 2(0.6%) 3 to 4 times and 1(0.3%) more than 7 times. 448(97.5%) of the participants never shared other's secrets, photos, or their personal information on social media, while 9(2.5%) did 1 to 2 times. 324(90.8%) responded that no one left any negative comments on their social sites on the other hand 33(9.2%) of them responded that someone left negative comments about them on their social media sites to embarrass them.
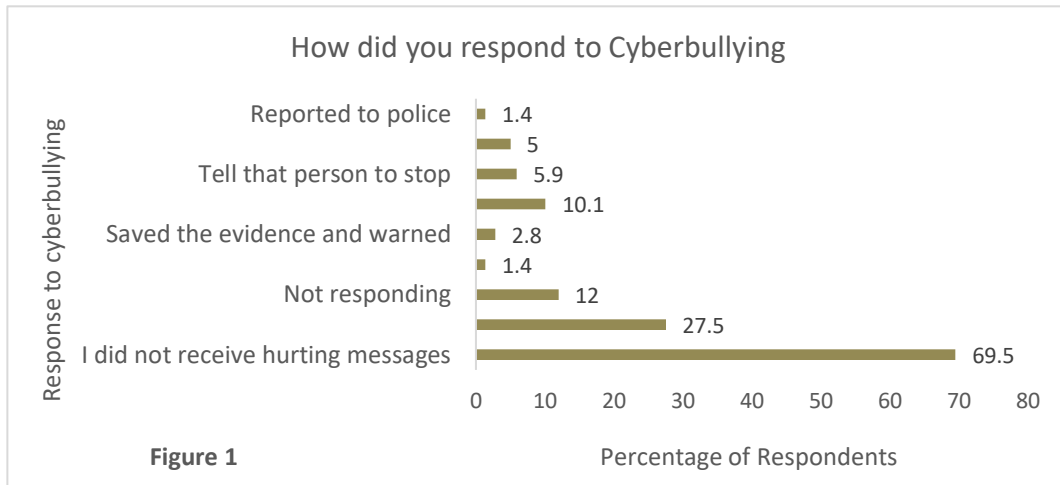

Figure 1

Figure 1: represents responses of the student participants' responses to cyberbullying. 248(69.5%) did not receive any hurtful messages, 98(27.5%) responded by blocking, 43(12%) avoided by not responding, 5(1.4%) took revenge, 10(2.8%) saved the evidence and warned the person to report the case, 36(10.1%) decided to ignore, 21(5.9%) of the participants told the person to stop cyber bullying, 18(5%) reported to parents or teachers, and 5(1.4%) reported to the police.
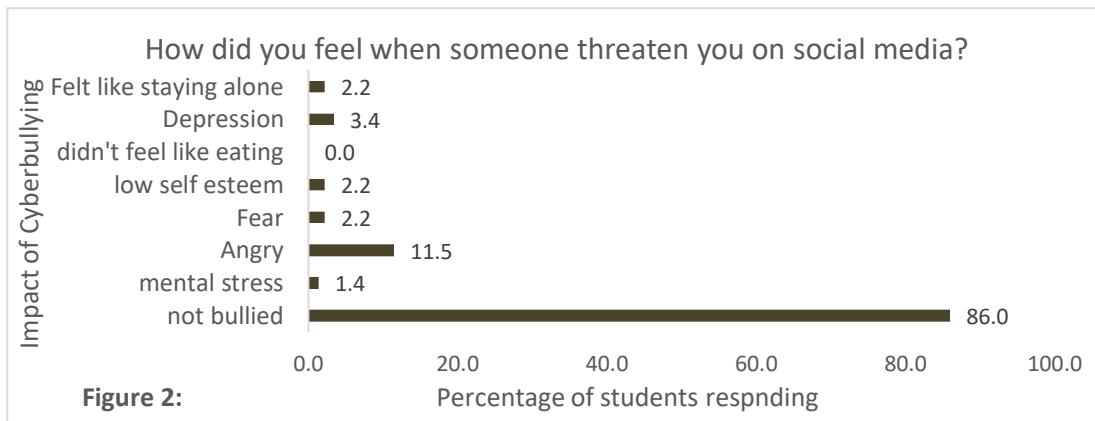

Figure 2:

Figure 2: represents the impact of cyberbullying on students where 307(86%) of the participants responded that they are not being bullied but there is also a section of students who experienced shared the impact they faced after they were being bullied. 5(1.4%) of the participants experienced mental stress, 41(11.5%) of the victims experienced anger, 8(2.2%) of the victim's experience fear, another 8(2.2%) experienced

low self-esteem, 12(3.4%) of the victims experienced depression, and 8(2.2%) felt like stay alone. 307(86%) stated that they did not experience bullying while out of 14% who experienced it, only 25(7%) reported the case to parents, siblings, and teachers. 25(7%) of the participants out of 14% who felt a victim of cyberbullying have reported their incidents to parents, siblings, or friends.
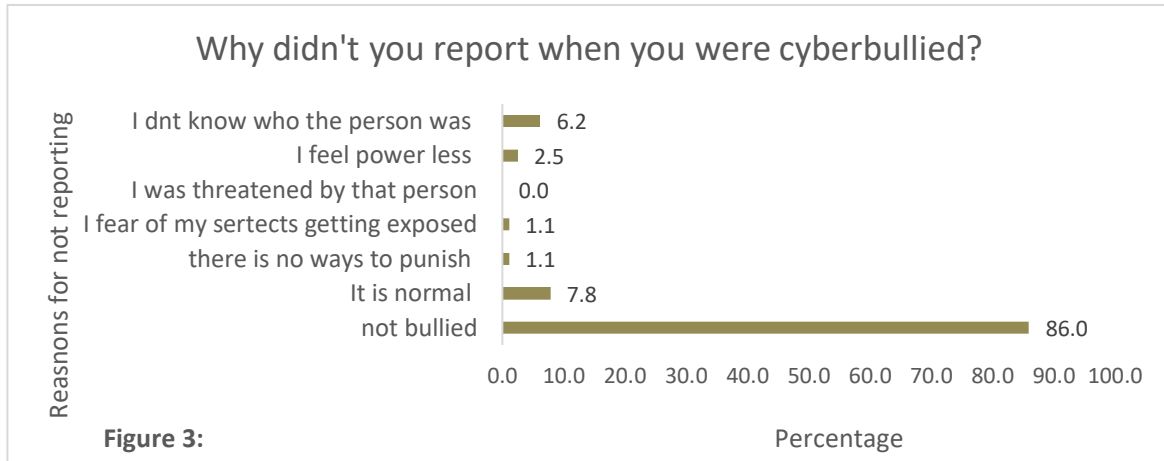

Figure 3:

Figure 3: represents the responses of the victim to cyberbullying and the reasons for not reporting the case. Among the total of 357 respondents, 307(86%) reported that they are not bullied. There are another 14% of students who had been a victim of cyberbullying at times. 28(7.8%) felt it is normal so did not report, 4(1.1%) felt that there are no ways to punish them, 4(1.1%) stated that they feared their secrets might get revealed, 9(2.5%) felt powerless, 22(6.2%) did not know who was on the other end so that they felt helpless, and no one (0%) was threatened not to report.

There was an open-ended section where victims were given the opportunity to share their experiences. "One person was harassing me by saying he/she will create a fake profile of me and post prone videos and photos. That person did the same to one of my friends in the nearby school but it got sorted out afterward". The other two participants said, "Someone sent me a friend request on Facebook, I started chatting but later that person started asking for my personal photos so I blocked the person". One of the participants reported the experience of being harassed repeatedly at a gaming site. Another shared experience of being trolled and harassed on Instagram, where he/she had to delete the Instagram account to get rid of foul messages. "Someone asked me to send private pictures and threatened to kill me if I do not, I was so scared that I could not report it to anyone, I could not sleep well nor could talk with friends. I blocked that stranger and ignored and things got better soon", said the other participant. Two participants also shared similar experiences one of which is,

Someone made a fake account of mine on Facebook with the same profile picture and name of my account. That account blocked my original account so I couldn't see it. One of my close friends said that the account was chatting with different people using my photos as the profile. She sent me screenshots of her friend chatting with that account and the person was approaching different people using my name. Some people thought it was me or people might still think it is me. That person who stole my profile was asking my friends to send private photos or else harassing them. I informed all my friends not to receive friend

requests or chat with accounts similar to mine as someone has created an account with my photos and name.

Table 2. Represents awareness of students on the prevalence of cyberbullying grouped class-wise for easy interventions. The data reveals that the majority of students from classes 6 and 7 falling under the age range of 12 to 14 are not aware, therefore they need immediate attention if school management plans to conduct awareness on cyberbullying.

Table 2: Students' awareness of the prevalence of cyberbullying

	Aware		Not Aware		Total
Class	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Participants
Class X	53	66.3	27	33.8	80
Class IX	63	70	27	30	90
Class VIII	28	57.1	21	42.9	49
Class VII	27	46.6	31	53.4	58
Class VI	38	47.5	42	52.5	80

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that all students are not safe from cyberbullying. There are 14% (N=50) of students who received threatening or aggressive text messages through social media (Safaria, 2016), and some of them received undesirable or hurting comments through their Facebook or Instagram that disturbed them psychologically (Wong, Bullock, & Gable, 2011). Most of the disturbing messages were received from a person with a fake ID. There was also exclusion where the students were excluded from taking part in group chats in their social forum. Leaving a negative comment on their profile (Kopecký, 2014) and someone sharing their secret information or photos on social media (Machackova et al., 2013) were some of the acts that students experience which made them stay aloof, causing depression, lowering their self-esteem, making them angry, and causing mental stress to the students. Students being teenagers are more venerable to distress and experiencing mental stress (Kowalski & Limber, 2012). They tend to worry more about their safety and as a result, they will not be able to concentrate on their studies.

On the other hand, there is a section of students who have responded to the cyberbullies by reporting it to the police, teachers, and parents, while others managed by simply ignoring them and warning them not to repeat it again. Responding to bullies will prevent one from getting dragged into a plethora of distress to some extent. Although there is some evidence of cases being reported, there is also a group of students who lack awareness of reporting the cyberbullying cases leading to a risk of self-harm.

The most worrying part is that a few students lack awareness of cyberbullying as a result when they fell victim, they felt powerless and felt that it was normal to receive threatening messages through strangers. Some of them felt that there is no way to punish the offender as they did not know who was there on the other end as the one messaging was using a fake profile. A small group of people did not respond due to fear of getting exposed. Cyberbullying can have long-term health implications (Safaria, 2016), it is, therefore, necessary to educate students on the safety measures for cyberbullying and its implication for their psychosocial and mental health. Parents play a key role (Gurmin, Yu, & Choen, 2020) in monitoring the safety of their children as they spend most of their time with them. It is also equally important for the school management and teachers to create awareness of cyberbullying as there are a huge group of students who are not aware of it starting from class six to class ten.

5.1 Limitation

The study is limited to students of classes 6 to 10 of Phuentsholing MSS only. The students of Pre-primary to five are not included as they are assumed to be guided by their parents for their online studies as most of them use their parents' phones for the same.

5.2 Recommendation

Based on the research findings, the team would like to make the following recommendations to the school management, parents, and school counselor.

1. There is a prevalence of cyberbullying among our students. The majority of the students are aware of its existence and its impact while the minority are not aware therefore, all the students from classes six to ten need to be created awareness of the prevalence and safety measures of cyberbullying.
2. During the awareness, the children need to be oriented on informing the cyberbullying cases to elders, parents, or teachers for their psychological safety and to avoid mental stress.
3. Parents must also be equally made aware of cyberbullying as their emotional support plays a vital role in the confidence of children to report the cases.
4. As a part of parenting activities, teachers must ask parents to describe the types of social networks and applications used by their children regularly. This will not only make parents aware but also teachers will have the data of awareness of parents on monitoring their children.
5. Parents must keep themselves updated on the types of activities their children are engaged in and that they love or if they have any problems, through regular conversations.
6. Parents must be encouraged to let their children share their digital activities and demonstrate their skills so that they remain connected with their parents and feel free to share when they face problems.

5.3 Future Scope

The researchers have the scope of further studying the severity of the impact of cyberbullying on the cyberbullying victims and also there is room for studying the perception of Bhutanese adults on cyberbullying. The researchers can also study teachers' understanding of cyberbullying and their support

for creating awareness of cyberbullying. The researchers also intend to perform a similar study in the future after the awareness program to have a comparative study.

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