

Defense Mechanism of Students Experiencing Cyberbullying: A Qualitative Analysis on Students' Internet Interaction

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Abstract –Every child should be protected from any form of emotional abuse like bullying. At present, as the digital technology arises, internet had been vast in terms of availability providing limitless opportunities to communicate to other users such posting and commenting different forms of expressions that may lead to offensive forms. Reflecting from the current scene in the cyber-world, this study targeted to identify the effects of cyberbullying to an individual and the mechanisms of the victims to overcome the experience. The investigation utilized phenomenological approach concentrating on the employment of thematic analysis through coding to generate the themes based on the experiences of the participants. The researcher purposively chose and semi-structurally interviewed nine (9) students who experienced cyberbullying reflected to the literature-based criteria. Researchers observed triangulation in the conduct of coding and generating themes, then merged the results to finalize the emerging themes based on the target objectives. Research findings emerged into three themes signifying that cyberbullying affects the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of an individual. In terms of defense mechanism or the activity of safeguarding themselves from bullies, students are able to cope and adjust through engaging their own self to school activities, social activities, and personal development activities. The study recommends different schools to conduct different programs on inclusivity and gender and equality increasing social awareness and responsibility on the use of social media and other social platforms. Furthermore, the department on social welfare and development (DSWD) in partnership with Population Commission (PopCom) to generate national and local policies to mandate social media to automatically filter content and block expressions promoting bullying.

Keywords –Cyberbullying, Bullying, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements have been the focused in the past years, creating new systems available in business and industry and social media for online communities [1]-[2]. With high availability of social networks, a new era of content creation has emerged, where internet users can easily see the experiences and information of other users [3]-[4]. The general availability of the internet has given individuals the opportunity to enhance their familiarity on social media applications (e.g. Twitter and Facebook), leading to communicate without the need of face-to-face meetings [5]. Information technology has brought big impact into people's lives – both in positive and negative aspects. During the last fifteen-year span, the abundance of the worldwide web has become widespread, making a significant drop on the usage rate (or extinction) of familiar tools. Among these tools are telephone directories, newspapers, the libraries, and even familiar study skills such as memorization [6].

Social media as a channel of social internet are the ones that employ mobile and web based technology to generate highly interactive platforms through which a person or community shares, co-creates, discusses and modifies user-generated contents[7]-[8]. It is any website that is use for social interactions which utilize networking sites [9]. These social platforms are widely used by students for interacting activities rather than educational purposes [10]. It offers different values for different social activities, such as enhanced popularity [11], facilitating word-of-mouth communication [3],[12], sharing information [13] and generating social support [14]-[15]. In other words, social media serves as a way for the youth to connect to an online conversation [16]. It forms relationships that exist between network of people. Social media is a set of internet-based application that constructs on the ideological and technological foundation of web and that permits the design and exchange of user generated content [17].

Despite the advantages of social media to communication, it brings great impact to students'

academic achievement. Jeong [18], unfortunately, has noticed that addiction on internet is inversely related to student's academic performance and emotional attributes. At present, youth have access to a variety of sources of information and experiences, which may be affected by other user's recommendations [19]. In addition, most of the teens consume at least six hours per day in using social media. These statistics shows that social media has become a day-to-day basis of youth's life. It also has made youth closer to other parts of the world [20]. While many experiences diversity of social media as of today, different interactions among youth "netizens" have existed and may exist from the future. Netizens are the citizens of the digital network; they are the people who uses internet to express their thoughts and ideas via network [21]. This leads to inappropriate expression of ideas and media resulting to offensive acts.

According to Olweus [22], bullying occurs when a person is liable to negative actions repeatedly and overtime by one or more person. There are three forms of bullying such as physical, verbal, and psychological bullying. Hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, stealing and destruction of property are examples of physical bullying [23]. Taunting, malicious teasing, name calling, and making threats are example of verbal bullying. Spreading rumors, manipulating social relationships, exclusion from a peer group, extortion, and intimidation are the examples of psychological bullying. Some researchers have revealed that, boys are more likely to be bullies and to be victim at the same time [24]. Boys use physical violence, while girls are usually teasing and taking social exclusion when they are bullying [25]. Most of the girls bully other girls while boys bully either boys or girls.

Bullies repeatedly fight others to state dominance and to recruit friends to bully for them. Bullies have generally average high self- confidence. They may be popular with their teachers and classmates and do well in school [26],[22]. Cohn and Canter [23] claim that most of the bullies' experience lack of adult supervision. They also included that most of the victims are physically or emotionally weak. Consequently, bullies also experience negative outcomes. They have few friends and can be engaged in criminal activities. On the other hand, victims are more likely to be anxious, insecure, cautious, quiet, and sensitive [26]-[28]. They often choose to be in isolated area and tend to make excuses to stay at home as much as possible [22]. In addition, they also experience humiliation, insecurity, loss of self-esteem, depression, and mental health problems [26].

Physical force is not the only covered in assaults, but also situations where a person's fears nearly become

harm by means of a verbal threat [29]. In definition [29]-[30], "cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others". Cyberbullying, when compared to traditional bullying, is different due to the anonymity that internet can provide [28]. Cyberbullies know that they are anonymous to the victim that is why they tend to send more hurtful and offensive messages to them unlike when they are face-to-face [29]. Some adolescents are seeking revenge the reason they are triggered to do cyberbullying and they search someone who is weaker than them and make them their target. Other individuals do it for their pleasure, to make themselves happy and to boost their ego [30]. Some adolescents or young people do it because they see it a trend [31]. No matter how old the victims are, cyberbullying is hard to deal with while individual's emotional development can be affected by cyberbullying and can have lasting effects [32].

Cyberbullying have different forms including flaming, which is sending rude messages, and harassment, which is repeatedly threatening a person through sending messages online. Other ways of cyberbullying are cyberstalking, which means intimidation and denigration, which is spreading false or cruel rumors. In addition, masquerading, when someone pretends to be another person and shares information to damage the reputation of someone and outing, when someone reveals the information which was shared confidentially and lastly, are both act of bullying on internet. Lastly, exclusion, which is maliciously leaving a person in a group chat is also included [33]-[34].

Bullying is phenomenon in diverse and multiple forms in varying degrees as experienced by children across the globe [35]. Examining bullying activity by region, it is found out that South Asia and West and Central Africa experience most bullying. Conversely, Central and Eastern Europe including those Commonwealth of Independent States encounter the lowest rates of bullying occurrence [36]. Cyberbullying as coined in the Philippines as cyberviolence affects half of Filipino children with ages 13 – 17. Based on the National Baseline Survey on Violence Against Children (NBS-VAC), males and females in the country almost experience cyberbullying at equal scene having one-third of the violence are in the form of verbal abuse in the internet using cellphone and one-fourth are through sexual messages[37]. More females receive comments focusing on sexual nature of the content than male. In

contrast, many males are reported having nudity and sexual activities (whether real or falsified) online.

Founded on the cited rationale, cyberbullying is becoming a serious problem in global-scale internet. Increasing rates of cyberbullying cases among youth, especially students, catch the attention of the researchers. As the cyberbullying cases increases exponentially, real life effects such as suicide, murders, stalking, teenage wars, and conflict also come into the familiarity and limelight. Cyberbullying is also accountable to cybersex and online pornography. Thus, the problem requires in-depth understanding so that an effective action may be conducted to lessen the impact of the phenomenon.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to describe the lived experience of students who underwent cyberbullying based on the literature-based criteria. Specifically, it directs to identify the impact of cyberbullying to students at different levels and determine the strategic ways on how they react and adjust with cyberbullying activities posed on them.

METHODS

This section presents the research method followed to obtain the most explicit and authentic qualitative data. Thoroughly, this part provides discussion about the research design, the phases of the study, the participant’s background and sampling technique, the instrument used for data collection, process for data analysis and the ethical considerations that are considered in the conduct of this inquiry.

Research Design

Qualitative approach is utilized for it is designed to describe life practices and situations and give them unique meanings. Through this design, the researcher can have an in-depth description of the situations like cyberbullying as experienced by students. Specifically, this research employs phenomenological approach. In line with this, the study uses descriptions by the students who are involved to examine their lived experiences.

Sampling and Participants

Sampling is the method of choosing a participant in a certain population. It influences the sample size that is why sampling strategy should be precise and specific. In this study, purposive sampling, a critical, discriminating, and one-sided technique of choosing the participants. Applying purposive sampling, table A shows the distribution of the participants based on school and grade level. In this study, the participants that provided the

information to construct a reliable conclusion were composed of nine individuals who are active on social networking sites and dramatically experienced cyberbullying. The study is composed of eight females and one male.

Table A. Participants of the Study

School	Grade Level	Male	Female	Total
A	SHS	1	2	3
B	SHS	0	1	1
C	SHS	0	1	1
D	SHS	0	1	1
E	JHS	0	1	1
F	JHS	0	1	1
G	Tertiary	0	1	1
total		1	8	9

For specifics of their internet interaction, Figure 1 below shows the standing of social media application in terms of interaction with other people. In general, the participants of the study often use Facebook as their social media platform because they find it more interesting and convenient to use.

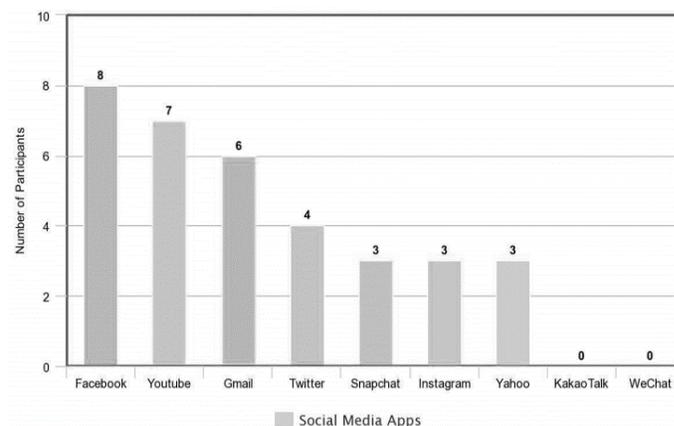


Figure 1. *Social Media Applications*

In terms of the age of the participants when they started to use social media applications, Figure 2 shows the distribution of frequency count.

Five out of nine participants start using internet with the age that ranges from 13 to 16 years old. The result justifies that the teenage years are the stage where they like using internet. Only one participant identified ages 5-8 years old, three out of nine for the ages 9-12 years old.

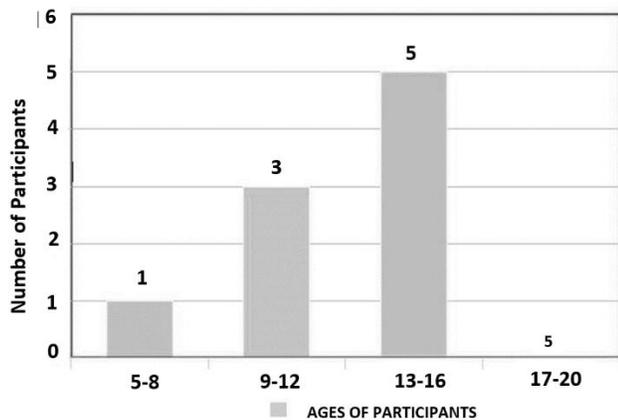


Figure 2. *Starting Age of Internet Usage*

Talking about the participants usage of internet to socialize, Figure 3 shows time ranges by which the participants of the study used social media application for social interaction. Based on the graph, most of the participants use internet for time range of 13 to 16 hours. This further means that they spend their day most of the time in using their gadgets in socializing with others.

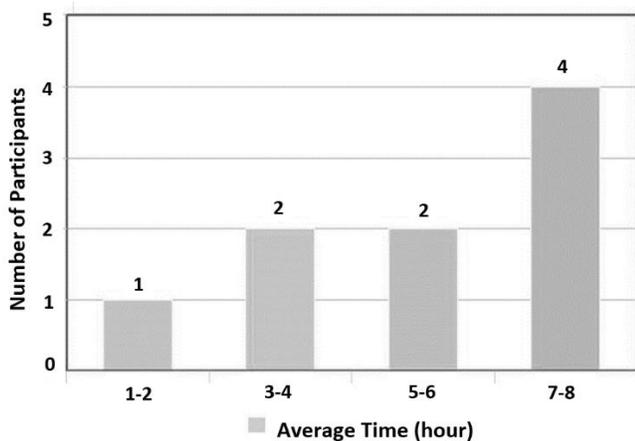


Figure 3. *Time Usage of Internet per day*

Figure 4 shows the type of gadget that the participants used in browsing the internet. All participants responded for smart phones on the gadgets they use in surfing the internet because it is convenient and easy to take to somewhere. Tablet and laptop got four and five responses, respectively. In general, most of the time, the most used gadget in surfing the internet is smart phone.

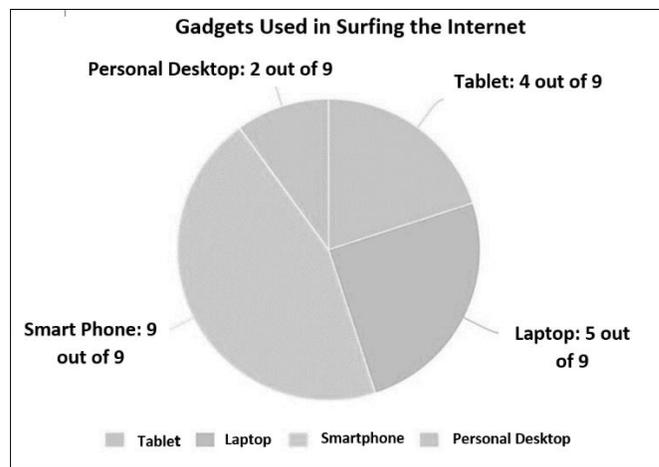


Figure 4. *Gadget Used for Internet Use*

In terms of search engines that are browsed by the participants is shown in Figure 5. The participant uses different kinds of search engines. In general, most of the participants use Google as their search engine obtaining the highest frequency.

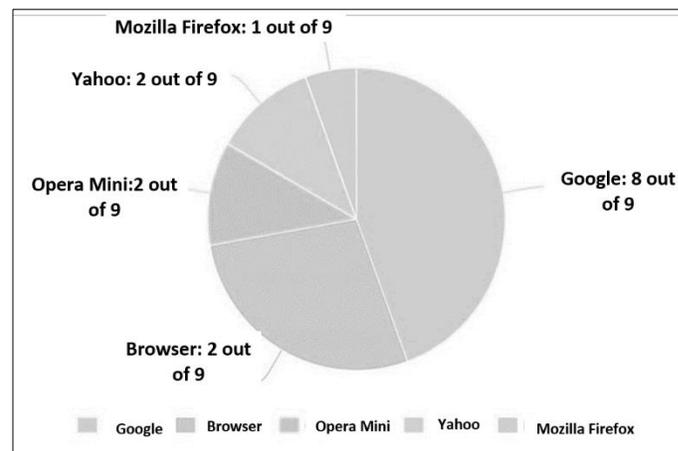


Figure 5. *Search Engine Used by Participants*

Instrument

This study utilized interview guide that underwent validation process. The interview guide helps the researcher to go or ask some questions directly in the conversation regarding the topics that researchers want to earn. The interview guide utilized in this study was composed of questions that are related to the main topic. There were two types of questions in the provided interview guide, the essential questions, and the probe questions.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the use of researcher made and validated interview guide. It took approximately one hour to conduct an interview for every participant. There were two types of question in the interview guide, the essential questions and probe questions. The interview started at the minor questions going to the major questions. It allowed the participant to share their knowledge about certain experience like cyberbullying. The interview accepted face to face in a place where the participant is convenient to share their experiences.

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis as a method in conducting research synthesis [38]. Thematic analysis is a class of analysis in qualitative research and gives an exposed idea about the data with unequal distribution of interpreted subject [39]. This analysis also provides understanding that is essentials in investigating cyberbullying cases among the participants. Moreover, the inductive and deductive methodologies are granted because the flexibility of thematic analysis [40]-[41].

Ethical Consideration

After being explained the information to the participant, they clearly understood the information about the research as provided in the information sheet issued to them. The participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and their participation. Participants also understood that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. They were informed that they can withdraw at any time and will not be penalized for withdrawing nor will be questioned on why they withdrew. The procedures regarding confidentiality had clearly explained to the participants. The participants were also asked for the researcher to use audio, video, or other forms of data collection during interview. The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving had elaborated to the participant. They gained understanding that other researchers may have the access to this data. Agreement to preserve the confidentiality of the data had also tackled. The participant, along with the researchers, agreed to sign and date the informed consent form to strengthen the contract.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As participants shared significant feedbacks regarding their experiences on cyberbullying, the researchers came up with important insights. A

description of that domain or theme is followed by (a) representative quotation(s) to illustrate the domain or theme. The following discussion is designed to clarify and support the findings of this study.

1. Effects of Cyberbullying

The first objective is to determine the effects of cyberbullying to the victims. This is to investigate how cyberbullying starts and what are the different ways of bullying using internet. As cyberbullying occur, many aspects of life get affected and many things have change.

A. Cognitive

Most of the students who encountered cyberbullying experienced a remarkable effect to their way of thinking in their school performance. They admitted that even though they are attending school, they mostly had no focus to the lessons because they are distracted by the negative thoughts and messages that other people posted on social media. The first theme, 'cognitive', encompasses how cyberbullying affects the participants' academic performance at school. Based on the data gathered, majority of the participants' grades and urgency to comply with class requirements decreased. Other participants tend to skip classes because bullying continues in school. As participants expressed:

"Bumaba yung performance ko tapos pagdating ng exam wala akong maisagot."
("My performance dropped and when the examination arrived, I cannot perform well in exams.")

"Dumating sa point naayaw ko nang pumasok."
("There comes to the point that I am not motivated to go to school.")

Teachers should be observant with their students in school. Individuals under cyberbullying influence need enough attention to provide guidance and counseling services. This is because their absent-mindedness will reflect on their grades and performance at the end of the grading period or semester. Most of the time in the classroom, cyberbullying victims are not participating well out of their mind because of overthinking. This is the reason why they experience hardships even in answering quizzes and some tests. Another statement from one of the participants supports the above condition stating:

In general, cyberbullying is the use of technology to intentionally harm or harass others [42]. This phenomenon sees no boundaries. It can happen to people no matter what age they are and no matter what their status are [43]. Through advance information and

communication technologies, cyber bullies harm others [44]. As of date, cyberbullying is still considered similar to term “bullying” that is done in the cyber world. Researchers examine cyberbullying through gender, age, and culture similar to usual bullying [42]. Anonymity, online harassment, or cyberbullying are linked to students’ social dependency on the technology and overwhelming accessibility [45]. People with cyberbullying peers tend to bully others virtually through the use of internet rather than doing it face-to-face [46].

B. Social

When an individual is cyberbullied, most of the people act indifferently even their closest friends who always speak with them. The second theme, ‘social’, demonstrates the participants’ changes in social activity when they are in cyberbullying state. They tend to be ashamed by other netizens online. They acquired the feeling of not using the social media again. They feel of trusting no one/ indifferent after they have been bullied. They become wise in terms of choosing their friends or on whom will they interact and where do they give their trust with. Even their self-trust decreased. Participants’ reiterated that cyberbullying affects one’s social interaction stating:

“*Natatakot akong ipahayag ang opinion ko.*”
 (“I’m afraid to express my opinion.”)

“*Kahit nasaan ako magpunta parang may nagsasalita sa paligid ko.*”
 (“Wherever I go, it seems that there are judgmental eyes looking at me.”)

Participants feel that they are threatened in every step they are taking. Many people choose to easily judge someone simply by their looks and others opinion about them. Cybervictims are also aware that they are being bullied verbally online the reason they feel that every man or person in their way or in their surroundings are discriminating them. Most of them became afraid in facing people or walking through many people.

Synthesizing the findings, because of interaction with their peers, most of the adolescents enhance their cooperation, having different perspective, and it expands the social relationships outside the family [47]. In addition, relationship problems are the most commonly reasons of cyberbullying. Envy, prejudice and intolerance for disability, religion, gender, shame, pride, guilt, and anger are some of the reasons or causes of cyber bullying [48]. Mckenna[49], includes three main reasons of cyberbullying, such as frustration to someone or to seek revenge, taking advantage to others and superiority also trigger cyberbullying, and they want self-entertainment, that’s why they bully others online.

C. Emotional

Being cyberbullied is a serious issue. The third theme, ‘emotional’, describes the participants’ emotional state when facing cyberbullying. They often feel emotionally distorted when one is trying to bully them online. They also get the thoughts of committing suicide or to end their lives. Based on the data, *feeling of being depressed* is the most common effects of cyberbullying to the victims. Sometimes they think that depression can change on how they interact in their daily lives. Participants’ experiences reflect on this statement saying:

“*Parang nadadown pa lalo akong nadadown.*”
 (“I even felt like I was losing my self-esteem.”)

Choosing to be alone is the usual effects of cyberbullying to the victims. It makes them hard to trust others. They choose to be alone because they felt that they are not important and cannot do anything.

“*Ang daming questions sararili mo na hindi mo na tanong sa iba, yung hindi mo masagot, wala kang..wala kang sagot.*”
 (“I have a lot of questions about myself that led to depression.”)

This statement of the participant reflects the victim’s feeling of being ashamed on the people around them making them feel that they are accepted in the society. Due to the experiences of the victims, they mostly feel embarrass to other people. Because of that, they feel afraid and it creates a negative impact to the victim in terms of social and emotional aspects. When the victim is used to feel that emotion, it leads to permanent personal impact. This scenario is elaborated by the participant stating:

“*Tapos sa emotional talagang naggig malungkutin talaga ako ganon.*”
 (“And when it comes to emotional aspect, it really makes me feel so moody.”)

Because of being too focus on the problems regarding cyberbullying and social media interaction, cybervictims neglect their responsibility on their health status. This affects the cybervictim’s health consciousness and the way they treat their own health. They mostly think of what others will say than thinking of what will happen to them if they do not care for themselves.

“*Lagi kong naiisip ang suicide pero hanggang isip lang siya.*” (“I always thought of committing suicide.”)

Committing suicide is the worst effect of cyberbullying to the victims [42]. Depression signs may lead to an idea of committing suicide. They are thinking that this is the only way to escape the problem. In bird's eye view, cyberbullying experiences trigger emotional distortions from basic to complex forms. Findings imply that schools and community should have local regulations to control the cyberbullying instances. In addition, the public should have strong campaign to help people become aware of the serious impacts of cyberbullying activities. These implications reflect to the recommendations offered by different researches [26,32].

2. Defense Mechanism

It helps people to know and think that after the experience of cyberbullying they tend to become stronger than the people who bring them down. This study aims to help the cybervictims to overcome the challenges of facing and resolving cyberbullying. In many ways, the cybervictims can conquer the struggles by means of focusing on school, social, and personality development activities.

A. School Activities

The defense mechanism helps every cybervictim to overcome their struggles when it comes to their studies. The first theme to overcome cyberbullying 'school activities'. This theme manifests what participants should do to minimize the effects of cyberbullying while in school. Being focused on studies suggests that it is one step to prevent cyberbullying causes [20]. Turning participants' attention to schoolwork means that they will have no time to worry about being a cybervictim. This strategy is common to the participants' point of view saying:

"Pumapasok pa rin ako sa school." (I'm still attending school.)

Students who are experiencing cyberbullying turn their attention to academic activities. They do this to avoid too much thinking on their problems regarding cyberbullying. Most of the participants are focused to studies instead of thinking this problem. They have mindset that they are superior to the bullies. They prove that they are worth enough, that they are better in their studies. These accounts are justified through statement from the participants that is stated given by the participant status connected to the first theme is:

"Hindi na ako nagpopost pati wala na talaga akong oras dahil nga busy sa school, nagaaral ganon tapos ay nagsheshare na lang talaga ako ng meme"
(“I didn't post anything and I let myself to focus on my studies.”)

Cybervictims, when facing social internet dilemmas decided to minimize the use of gadget and social media. They only focus on their studies. They prioritize doing projects and assignments and having a lot of wasted time thinking of the criticism they get from other people. They feel that if they focus on their studies, they will feel relax and free to the stress on social media. This turns out to be a positive thinker rather than thinking their problems, they prioritize more on studies.

B. Social Activities

The second theme of the defense mechanism of students to control cyberbullying impacts is in terms of 'social activities'. This revolves from what participants' activity to reduce entertaining cyberbullies. Participants consider deactivating their social media accounts to avert their interaction to other users. Through the first step, they spend most of time to their own family, relatives and friends who can understand and support them. Participants also cited that they are spending less time on social media to ease the anxiety brought by cyberbullying. This practice is highlighted from the statement of participants saying:

"Through the help of my friends na chinicheer up nila ako, binibigyan nila ako ng advices." (“Through the help of my friends, they cheer me up and give me some advices.”)

Some of the participants seek help to their friends for them to cope with the consequences of cyberbullying. Participants' losses their trust to their peers or to those who they are interacting with every day. In contrast, their true friends serve as their support system that gives them advices to be positive in life. Their true friends are the one who give advices.

"Kumokunsulta ako sa mga magulang ko"

"Syempre komunsulta ako sa mga magulang ko katulad ng pag ako'y nasasaktan na ganun."

Statements expressed limited social media interaction. Thus, some of the participants found out that minimizing posting of information or expressing opinions online about certain topic specifically about their own self, and their daily living has maximized social interaction. The theme was more emphasized through statement.

"Limited nalang yung pinagkakatiwalaan ko."
(“I limit the persons who I trust.”)

Based on the findings, the victims consult to the people who know their strengths and weaknesses. In this manner, they are express their emotions and thoughts

about their problems. It is another way to communicate to the people they trust the most and being able to gain again their trust to others. They choose those people who can assist them to have a better life. This reduces the risk of having negative thoughts like committing suicide or having depression.

C. Personal Development

The third theme is *personal development* ‘that includes what participants are going to do to downscale cyberbullying personally. Data suggests that strong spirituality is the primary solution to have personal growth. Acceptance that others may and will hurt them adds to participants’ strategy to conquer it. Being self-reflective also helps them to recover. This way is mentioned by participant:

“Pinili ko nalangyung happiness kesa negativities.”

“nagtuloy tuloy na lang ako sa buhay ko. Pinili ko na lang yung happiness kesa yung sa negativities”

“(I choose to think my happiness, happy thoughts than negative thoughts.)”

Some of the participants take all the negative thought as a motivation to turn their success to an iron. They think that if they become successful someday, they will prove to the cyberbullies that they are wrong. Because of the victim’s experiences, they tend to show that they are not their old self but a new one that is a lot stronger compared to their past personality. Victims want to show that they can defend and stand on their own to avoid the criticism of others. They are using this experience as a tool for them to achieve success and for them to face the bullies confidently with their title and pride.

“Si God ang nagbigaysa akin ng motivations para ipagpatuloy ang buhay.” (God is the one who gives me motivation to continue my life.)

Some of the participants are using their experiences as a tool to enhance and to defend themselves [14,17]. They become self-reflective [21,25]. With their experiences, they came up with realizations and enhance themselves. Participants gain new knowledge and lessons in their lives that they use to create their new personality. Cyberbullying helps some of the participants to get out in the state of being child minded person and become matured with decisions.

There is strong link between the themes of the synthesized from the two objectives. The effects of the cyberbullying have a summary of three themes that states the possible feeling that every victim can feel and experience. On the other hand, defense mechanism is one of the things that can help us to overcome the struggles

and effect of cyberbullying in their lives. The defense mechanism shows what to do once the effect of cyberbullying happened to every people around the internet. It makes sense to the point that can use those strategies, either negative or positive, to overcome those effects.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Cyberbullying affects the individual’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. Cognitive shows the feeling of involving conscious mental activities. It causes stress that can make them to overthink about what happened and cannot focus on the things that they have to do. The thought of being emotional is one of the concepts that can leads to depression. It lessens the excitement of every student to socialize with other people. They feel so scared to interact with other and they loss their trust to other people. In facing cyberbullying, student developments can have strategies to cope with cyberbullying through school activities. They let their self-focus on the things that can make them happy, especially on their studies.

Another one is through social activities which they tend to minimize and stop their habits in interacting with other people around the internet. Lastly, through personality development activities. In this process, they get strong spirituality and let their faith stronger than anyone.

In the umbrella of the emerged themes on the effects of cyberbullying and the defense mechanisms a student has engaged with, it is recommended that the school may intensify in the curriculum the integration of personal values especially respect, self-worth and responsibility. Parents may have a personal activity of checking and monitoring their children’s activity in internet sites like social media. Future researchers may conduct case study to identify the peculiarity among the experiences of students who underwent serious cyberbullying. Furthermore, variables such as family orientation, peer pressure and local culture may also be investigated.

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