

ASSESSMENT OF CYBERBULLYING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study assessed the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students in Southeast Nigeria. Specifically, it ascertained the level of prevalence of cyberbullying, examined the nature of cyberbullying, and investigated the causes of cyberbullying among university students. The study was anchored on the tenets of Social Influence Theory. A survey research design was adopted, and a structured questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The sample size consisted of 400 university students selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The major findings revealed that 92.0% of the students reported having experienced cyberbullying, while 94.0% indicated that they knew a friend who had experienced cyberbullying. Regarding the nature of cyberbullying, 95% of the students affirmed awareness of its various forms. The results further showed that exclusion (94.0%), cyberstalking (96.0%), dissing (77.0%), and trolling (95.0%) were the major forms of cyberbullying experienced by the students. The study also found that the major causes of cyberbullying included hatred for others (94.0%), the desire for power and control (94.0%), revenge, deficient digital communication skills (94.0%), and lack of empathy for others (91.0%). The study concluded that there is a high level of cyberbullying prevalence among university students in Southeast Nigeria. It recommended that cyberbullying can be curtailed through awareness campaigns, seminars, workshops, and the enforcement of laws to punish offenders, as these measures will go a long way in reducing cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Prevalence, University Students.

Introduction

Cyberbullying is real in Nigeria as in other countries of the world. It is a problem that has emerged as a byproduct of modern-day technologies. This form of aggression occurs when one or more individuals use a technological medium for the purpose of intimidating or harming others. According to Bolanle (2023), cyberbullying is a rapidly evolving and growing public health problem with increasing prevalence in developed countries and spreading into developing countries due to increased access to online facilities. Unlike traditional bullying, which has been known to be in person involving face-to-face or person-to-person interaction, cyberbullying occurs even without face-to-face interaction or contact or in an anonymous state (Owoade, Adeomi, Akinyemi and Owoade 2023). Udemé (2023) described cyber-bullying implies an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself. Ayodeji (2024) opined that cyberbullying is a new method of bullying using technology such as social websites (MySpace, Facebook, etc.), email, chat rooms, mobile phone texting and cameras, picture messages (including sexting), instant messages, and/or blogs. Victims of cyber-bullying may not know the identity of their bully, or why the bullying is targeted at them. The harassment can have wide-reaching effects on the victim than traditional bullying. This is because the content used to harass the victim can be spread and shared easily among many people. It is often accessible to many for a long time after the initial incident. The victim is also sometimes exposed to the harassment whenever they use technology (Vella, 2014).

In this study, cyberbullying implies any interpersonal, aggressive, repeated behaviour whose purpose is to harm a victim through information and communication technologies. It can take many forms (flaming, cyberstalking, online harassment, ousting and exclusion) and be delivered through almost any means of electronic communication like digital devices on social media, online forums, chats or gaming rooms (Gohal et al., 2023). According to Ngbar (2019), there are a wide variety of cyber-bullying, including cyberharassment, cyber-denigration, cyber-trolling, flaming, exclusion, outing, trickery, cyberstalking and cyber-impersonation, to name a few.

These incidences could come from disguised friends, loved ones or well-known enemies for reasons which may not be easily narrated or explained by them. Thus, many people could also be victims of depression, frustration, confusion, deprivation and rejection due to some denigrating things such as broadcasted, written, shared or sent messages against them through electronic channels. These online broadcasts, write-ups, or shared negative messages could put both the life of the doer and the person the message was used against under pressure and threat thereby affecting their mental reasoning or stability. Ogundele (2021), highlight the most significant elements of

cyberbullying: 1) it can happen at any time, anywhere, with the consequent difficulty of disconnecting from the context, 2) the aggression can be observed by a large number of people in indefinite number of times, and 3) it is possible that the victims never get to know their aggressors due to the anonymity allowed by the means being used.

With the rapid increase of information and communication technologies in recent decades, as well as easy access to electronic devices such as computers, mobile phones and tablets at younger ages by children and young adults, the incorporation of the internet into daily life is a fact, as nowadays it is used by groups of all ages for different purposes. From children who use it for research or to submit their school homework, to adults who use it to make purchases or perform their work. The speed with which the Internet and Social Networks have been installed in people's daily lives has created a space from which, with relative anonymity and impunity, harmful behaviours can be carried out towards others, transcending geographical barriers and involving a large number of people especially the youth (Adeleke 2021 and Okon., 2021).

Cyberbullying can be perpetrated by sharing harsh or intimidating texts, fake profiles, e-mails, embarrassing or scandalous personal pictures or videos of a person, and rumors, through social media. Online ill-treatment and domination can happen in a few minutes and go for hours, days, weeks, months, or years. With the ever-growing age of technology and its constant advancements, youths are finding new ways to bully their victims. Modern technology has however enabled would-be bullies to extend the reach of their aggression and threats beyond physical settings through cyberbullying, where technologically-inclined students are able to pester and stalk others students by using technological devices such as computer systems and the internet. Like bullying, cyberbullying acts are also intentional, repetitive, and meant to drive victims into isolation. Extant literature shows that generally, very little has been done in Nigeria on cyberbullying research and documentation, much worth noting is that there is a paucity of studies on prevalence of cyberbullying among university students in Southeast Nigeria. Thus, the crux of this study is to assess the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students in Southeast Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives were to:

- i. ascertain the level of prevalence of cyberbullying among university students;
- ii. ascertain the nature of cyberbullying among university students; and
- iii. examine the causes of cyberbullying among university students;

2.0 Methodology

This institutional-based survey study took place in Federal Universities in Southeast Nigeria. The research design adopted was the survey design. Survey design is a design where the researcher describes the status of affairs as they exist (Udeme, 2023). This is a method of collecting information by means of interviews and administering questionnaires. The rationale for using this design is that it allows in-depth study of the subject matter and it is suitable to describe attitudes, views or opinions and behaviour patterns of people. Therefore, the researchers described affairs as they were factual.

The population of this study included 142078 students according to the statistical records of all the federal tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria (2024). The federal universities were purposively selected in the midst of other federal universities in the South-East, Nigeria because of their coverage and wider background.

The researchers adopted a multistage sampling technique for the study. First, the population was grouped as clusters of the federal Universities in the South East States, namely: Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, University of Nigeria Nsukka and Federal University of Technology Owerri. Then, the sample elements were proportionately allocated according to the population of the federal universities. Secondly, the researcher adopted cluster and simple random sampling in order to group all the federal universities in the South-East into faculties, which include; Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Faculty of Business, Faculty of Agriculture and Faculty of Health Sciences, respectively. Thus, the Faculties were proportionately selected to form clusters. Finally, the available sampling techniques were used to select the sample units along the faculties.

At this stage, the researchers adopted convenience (available) sampling technique in order to group all the students into Departments which include, Theatre Arts and Advertising and Public Relations, from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Again, Computer Science and Computer Engineering Departments were selected from the Engineering Faculty. Furthermore, Banking and Finance and Marketing Departments were picked from the Faculty of Business. In addition, Departments of Urban and Regional Planning and Architecture were selected

from the Faculty of Environmental Sciences, while Medicine and Surgery and Nursing Sciences were selected from the Faculty of Health Sciences.

The size of this study was determined using the Australian online calculator as shown below:

Confidence level	99%
Population size	142078
Proportion	0.8
Confidence Interval	0.05
Upper	0.85000
Lower	0.75000
Standard Error	0.01941
Relative Standard Error	2.43
Sample Size	400
$n = (Z^2 \times P \times (1-P)) / d^2$	

The instrument that was used for data collection a researcher developed structured questionnaire. It was constructed to use close-ended and dichotomous questions. It also included questions with rating scales. The rating questions were used to ascertain the degree of agreement or disagreement to statements on a 5-point Likert scale. A combination of all these approaches to question construction complemented each other because it offered opportunity to get responses from variety of ways. This study adopted statistical package for social science, (version 29) in analyzing the data obtained in the study. Descriptive statistical methods were adopted in analyzing the study using tables, frequencies and simple percentages.

3.0 Results and Discussions

3.1 Prevalence of cyberbullying among university students

The analysis of data in Table 1 showed high levels of the manifestation of cyberbullying among university students in South- East Nigeria. Based on the above results, with the mean score of 4.71 (94%) indicates that most respondents recognize cyberbullying as a frequent issue within their universities. This high score reflects a widespread perception among students that cyberbullying incidents are a common and persistent problem. Such awareness may stem from personal experiences, peer discussions, or observed incidents online, emphasizing the importance of addressing the prevalence of cyberbullying within the student population This result is affirmed the respondents were between 15-26 years of age and belong to the category of people who are students and those who promote cyberbullying in universities, (Olaniyan, 2020)..

The findings about the prevalence of cyberbullying manifestation had earlier been highlighted by Adedeji (2018) which in his opinion revealed that the manifestations or consequences of cyberbullying among university students in Southeast Nigeria, include the following: changes in behaviour, avoidance of technology, changes in social interactions, physical symptoms, increased absenteeism. Ogundele (2021) revealed research on the relationship between “emerging adults” including university students using information communication technology as a means of cyberbullying their fellow students both friends and their enemies. It was also unveiled that gender differences exist in cyberbullying activity. It appears that young female students are more involved than young male students in emailing, social networking, and texting.

Table 1: Prevalence of cyberbullying

S/n	Index	Ratings	Score (x)	Frequency (F)	%	Fx
1	As a student, I have suffered cyberbullying.	SA	5	310	78	1550
		A	4	50	12	200
		FA	3	15	4	45
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	$\Sigma f = 395$	100	$\Sigma fx = 1825$
		Mean score =	4.62 (significant) = 92%			
	As a student, I know a friend that has suffered cyberbullying.	SA	5	305	77	1525
		A	4	55	14	220
		FA	3	20	4	80
		D	2	10	3	30
		SD	1	5	2	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1865
		Mean score =	4.72 (significant) = 94%			

Field Survey, 2025. Data generated from SPSS 26.

3.2 Nature of cyberbullying among university students

The analysis of the data in Table 4.4 provided insightful findings (Table 4.4) on the nature of cyberbullying among university students in South-East Nigeria, highlighting a high level of awareness across several dimensions of cyberbullying. The result revealed a high mean score of 4.74, with 95% significance, indicates that respondents have a strong understanding of the various types of cyberbullying behaviours. This suggests that students are not only aware of the existence of cyberbullying but can also identify specific behaviours that constitute cyberbullying.

Such behaviours include verbal attacks, harassment, online shaming, and spreading malicious rumors, which are often prevalent in digital spaces frequented by students. Similarly, for **Characteristics of Cyberbullies and Victims** mean score of 4.72 and a significance level of 94% was obtained, there is an equally high awareness of the typical characteristics associated with cyberbullies and their victims. This awareness may include understanding that cyberbullies often exhibit aggressive tendencies and use the anonymity of the internet to exert control or inflict harm. Meanwhile, victims of cyberbullying may exhibit traits such as social vulnerability, low self-esteem, or fear of reporting incidents. The data indicate that students are able to distinguish these characteristics, which could potentially aid in identifying at-risk individuals or those likely to perpetrate such acts. Again, (Udeme, 2023) revealed that **relationship dynamics between bullies and victims** are at a very high level, which showed that university students have substantial insights into the relationship dynamics between bullies and victims. This finding highlights the importance of understanding that cyberbullying can occur within different relational contexts whether among classmates, acquaintances, or strangers. The recognition of these dynamics is crucial because it affects the approach to intervention and prevention strategies. Bullying by acquaintances or classmates may require different approaches compared to bullying by strangers, as the social consequences and emotional impacts might vary. Furthermore, for **Common Tactics or Methods**, the significant mean score of 4.72 and 94% awareness level around the common tactics used in cyberbullying suggests that students are highly knowledgeable about the specific strategies employed by cyberbullies. This includes spreading derogatory messages, sharing manipulated media (photos, videos), sending threats, and creating fake profiles. The high awareness indicates that students can recognize these harmful behaviours, which is essential for both self-protection and supporting peers who may be victims of these tactics.

Table 2: Nature of cyberbullying among university students

S/n	Index	Ratings	Score (x)	Frequency (F)	%	Fx
3	As a student, I have experienced these forms of cyberbullying.	SA	5	350	89	1175
		A	4	15	4	60
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	30
		SD	1	10	3	30
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1325
	Mean score =	3.35 (significant) = 95%				
A	Exclusion: Here the cyberbully deliberately leaves out the target where he/she should have been part of. It entails excluding the victim from online networks or activities such as games, chatrooms or discussion boards.	SA	5	340	86	1700
		A	4	20	5	140
		FA	3	15	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1910
	Mean score =	4.72 (significant) = 94%				
B	Cyberstalking : The cyberbullies track or monitor their victims' online activity including their websites,blogs, social media accounts in order to gain access to the private information of their targets/ victims.	SA	5	352	89	1760
		A	4	18	5	72
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1892
	Mean score =	4.79 (significant) = 96%				
C	Dissing: The cyberbullies spread cruel information about their target through public posts or private messages to either ruin the reputation of the victim or his/her relationship with others. Often bullies who involve in this act are the friend or acquaintance of the victim.	SA	5	345	87	1380
		A	4	20	5	80
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1520
	Mean score =	3.85 (significant) = 77%				

D	Trolling : Here, the bully intentionally goes all out to upset others by posting comments about their targets online. This act is usually done by persons who do not have personal relationship with the target.	SA	5	351	88	1755
		A	4	14	4	56
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1871
Mean score =		4.73 (significant) = 95%				
4	I know a friend who has experienced	SA	5	347	89	1735
A	Exclusion : Here the cyberbully deliberately leaves out the target where he/she should have been part of. It entails excluding the victim from online networks or activities such as games, chatrooms or discussion boards.	A	4	30	7	120
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	5	2	10
		SD	1	3	1	3
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1898
		Mean score =		4.81 (Significant) = 96%		
B	Cyberstalking: The cyberbullies track or monitor their victims' online activity including their websites,blogs, social media accounts in order to gain access to the private information of their targets/ victims.	SA	5	335	85	1675
		A	4	25	6	100
		FA	3	15	4	45
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1850
Mean score =		4.68 (Significant) = 94%				
C	Dissing : The cyberbullies spread cruel information about their target through public posts or private messages to either ruin the reputation of the victim or his/her relationship with others. Often bullies who involve in this act are the friend or acquaintance of the victim.	SA	5	340	86	1700
		A	4	25	6	100
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1860
Mean score =		4.71 (significant) = 94%				
D	Trolling : Here, the bully intentionally goes all out to upset others by posting comments about their targets online. This act is usually done by persons who do not have personal relationship with the target.	SA	5	330		1650
		A	4	25		100
		FA	3	20		60
		D	2	10		20
		SD	1	10		10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1810
Mean score =		4.58 (significant) = 92%				

Field Survey, 2025. Data generated from SPSS 26.

3.3 Causes of cyberbullying among university students

From the result in Table 3, each factor showed a high level of significance, with mean scores of 4.72 and a 94% confidence level, suggesting that respondents are highly aware of the various underlying causes of cyberbullying. Here is an in-depth discussion of each factor: Young (2017), revealed that for **personal factors of perpetrators**, the high mean score for personal factors indicates that students recognize individual traits and personal motivations as significant causes of cyberbullying. Again, Valiant (2017), noted that the factors or causes may include a desire for control, a need to assert power, a lack of empathy, or personal insecurities. Additionally, perpetrators might use cyberbullying as a means of dealing with frustration or seeking revenge. This awareness suggests that students understand the role that individual characteristics and motives play in the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying, which is essential for crafting interventions that address these personal risk factors. Similarly, for **family and home environment**, the significant mean score here points to a strong acknowledgment of the role that family dynamics and home environments have on cyberbullying behaviours. Bolanle (2023) revealed that unstable family relationships, lack of parental supervision, or exposure to domestic conflict and aggressive communication patterns can influence youths to replicate similar behaviours online. Additionally, Gohal et al., (2023) stated that young people when they see family members or caregivers modeling aggression or bullying behaviours, they may be more likely to emulate these actions in their social interactions. This understanding is crucial, as it highlights the need for family-centered interventions to mitigate cyberbullying risks.

Again, for **psychological factors**, the high score for psychological factors indicates an awareness of mental health and emotional challenges that may contribute to cyberbullying. Ajayi et al (2025) found factors such as stress, low self-esteem, depression, or past trauma can increase the likelihood of someone becoming a cyberbully or a victim. Those who experience psychological distress may turn to cyberbullying as a way to cope or project their own insecurities onto others. Recognizing these psychological dimensions suggests that there is an awareness of

the need for mental health support and counseling services in addressing the root causes of cyberbullying. Finally, for **academic environment and institutional factors**, this score reflects an understanding that the academic environment and institutional policies (or lack thereof) can contribute to cyberbullying. In universities, factors such as competitive pressures, peer dynamics, and inadequate policies against cyberbullying can create an atmosphere where cyberbullying is more likely to occur. For example, the absence of strict anti-bullying policies or reporting mechanisms may give perpetrators a sense.

Table 3: Causes of cyberbullying among university students

S/n	Index	Ratings	Score (x)	Frequency (f)	%	Fx
5	As a student, I believe that the main causes of cyberbullying are.					
A	Lack of empathy for others	SA	5	300	76	1500
		A	4	43	11	172
		FA	3	20	5	60
		D	2	17	4	34
		SD	1	15	3	15
		Total	N = 5	$\Sigma f = 395$	100	1791
		Mean score =	4.53 (significant) = 91%			
B	Desire for power and control	SA	5	343	87	1715
		A	4	22	6	88
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1863
		Mean score =	4.72 (Significant) = 94%			
C	Revenge and deficient digital communication skill	SA	5	342	87	1710
		A	4	23	6	92
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1862
		Mean score =	4.71 (Significant) = 94%			
D	Hatred for others	SA	5	345	87	1725
		A	4	20	6	80
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1865
		Mean score =	4.72 (Significant) = 94%			

Field Survey, 2025. Data generated from SPSS 26.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study assessed the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students in Southeast Nigeria. It concluded that there is a high level of cyberbullying among university students, as the majority of the respondents reported being victims of cyberbullying. The prevalent forms of cyberbullying experienced by the students include exclusion, cyberstalking, dissing, and trolling. The study further revealed that the major causes of cyberbullying are hatred for others, the desire for power and control, revenge, deficient digital communication skills, and lack of empathy for others.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. University students in Southeast Nigeria should desist from engaging in cyberbullying, as it stigmatizes victims and has negative psychological effects.
2. University students should be educated on the various forms of cyberbullying in order to recognize and avoid engaging in such behaviors.
3. Students should avoid negative behaviors such as envy, wickedness, denigration, and malice toward their peers, as these attitudes contribute to cyberbullying.

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