

INFLUENCE OF CYBERBULLYING ON MENTAL HEALTH AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between cyberbullying and the mental health of university students in Southeast Nigeria. Specifically, it assessed the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students, identified the mental health issues experienced by victims, and explored ways students believe cyberbullying can be curtailed. 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 both descriptive and inferential statistics. The major findings revealed that 95% of the students were aware of the different forms of cyberbullying, including exclusion (94.0%), cyberstalking (96.0%), dissing (77.0%), and trolling (95.0%). The results also showed that victims experienced mental health issues such as panic disorders (94.0%), social phobia (93.0%), mood disorders (92.0%), and personality disorders (91.0%). Furthermore, the findings indicated that students believed that awareness campaigns (98.0%), seminars and workshops (94.0%), and the enforcement of laws (93.0%) are effective strategies for curbing cyberbullying. The correlation analysis yielded a coefficient (r) of 0.72, indicating a strong positive relationship between cyberbullying and mental health challenges among university students in Southeast Nigeria. The study concluded that cyberbullying has a significant positive relationship with mental health problems among university students. It recommended that university management should consistently educate students on the effects of cyberbullying, particularly its impact on mental health, in order to reduce its occurrence and associated risks.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Mental Health, University Students.

1.0 Introduction

Youth represents a transition period in the life of an individual between childhood and adulthood and they constitute the largest proportion of university students in Nigeria. Youth are individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years old (Sonko et al, 2022). Youth are known to possess regenerative energies intelligence and capabilities for sustainable development (Eze, 2020). The desirable potential of youth constitute inherent characteristics which endear them towards sustainable development programmers' worldwide. They use the internet more and consider it a vital aspect of their daily lives and functionality (communication, entertainment and work tools) (Bolanle). Over the years, technological advancement (the use of the internet, digital devices and social media) has created a digital space which tremendously increased social interaction and relations. Youth have increased the use of cyberspace with its attendant benefits and problems (Odora and Matoti 2015).

The mass availability of youngsters' personal information throughout cyberspace such as email addresses, mobile phone numbers and instant messaging IDs, have caused alarm that kids are now in danger of being harassed on the web than in the playground in tertiary institutions. Cyberbullying is unique to other traditional forms of bullying because of the perpetrator's anonymity and ability to harass their victims 24 hours in a day. Anonymity inherited in many electronic communications modes not only fosters playful disinhibition but reduces social accountability, making it easier for users to engage in hostile and aggressive acts (Agbaje, and Adeyemi, 2020). This new technology also allows victims to be attacked at anytime and in any place. The invisibility and anonymity of cyberbullies makes it difficult to manage within a school system and opens the door for more youths to take part in this type of behavior.

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).

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is a well-established public health issue that affects the youth; its prevalence has increased over the years (Sivabalan, Ahmad and Choo, 2020). Globally, there is massive variation in the prevalence of cyberbullying across the different countries of the world (based on different definitions, target populations and measurements) (Bolanle, 2023, Gohal et al., 2023 and Sivabalan, Ahmad and Choo 2020). The prevalence of cyberbullying victimisation and cyberbullying perpetration in Nigeria ranges from 14.6% to 52.2% and 6.3% to 32%, respectively (Bolanle 2023). In another study cyber victimisation fell within a wide range of 5% to 72% while for cyber perpetration, they range from 4% to 33% (Sivabalan, Ahmad and Choo 2020).

It is a widely known fact that face-to-face bullying can result in long-term psychological harm to targets. This harm includes low-self esteem, depression, anger, school failure and avoidance. However, the harm caused by cyberbullying may be greater than that caused by traditional bullying because online communications can be extremely viscous. There is also no escape for those who are cyberbullied. Cyberbullying material can be distributed worldwide and is often irretrievable. Cyberbullies are mostly anonymous and can solicit the involvement of unknown friends. Most times, bullied youths may be reluctant to tell adults what is happening to them online or through their cell phones because they are emotionally traumatized or they would not want to be barred from using cell phones or the Internet. Granted the above scenario, it is increasingly becoming clear that the prevalence of these harassments have some effect on mental health of university students in Southeast Nigeria. There arises the need to empirically investigate the relationship between cyberbullying and mental health of students Universities in Southeast Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives were to:

- i. ascertain the level of prevalence of cyberbullying among university students;
- ii. determine mental health issues experienced by victims of cyberbullying; and
- iii. identify ways which university students think that cyberbullying can be curtailed among university students in South East Nigeria.

Hypothesis

H₀: There is no relationship between the prevalence of cyberbullying and experience of mental health problems among university students in South-east Nigeria.

H₁: There is a relationship between the prevalence of cyberbullying and experience of mental health problems among university students in South-east Nigeria.

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 researcher 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 researcher 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 was adopted in analyzing the study using tables, frequencies and simple percentages while the hypothesis was also analyzed using the same Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Model.

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 Mental health issues experienced by victims of cyberbullying

For the **impact of cyberbullying on self-esteem, confidence, and self-image**, the mean score of 4.70, with a 94% significance level, pointed to the significant impact cyberbullying has on an individual's self-esteem, confidence, and self-image. In tandem with the findings, Johoda (2020) opined that when youths are subjected to online harassment, they often internalize the negative messages and criticisms, leading to a decrease in self-worth and an overall negative self-perception. This can manifest as feelings of inadequacy, shame, or hopelessness, especially if the bullying involves personal attacks, insults, or body-shaming. Over time, these effects can erode a young person's confidence, making them less likely to engage in social or academic activities. The long-term consequences of diminished self-esteem can lead to mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression.

This finding underscored the need for interventions that focus not only on stopping cyberbullying behaviours, but also on rebuilding and boosting the self-esteem and self-worth of victims. The finding is in tandem with Gohal et al (2023) which suggested that programmes that promote positive self-image, resilience, and empowerment could help mitigate the harmful effects of cyberbullying. Similarly, Adediran (2020) posited that victims of cyberbullying often experience sleep disturbances such as insomnia, nightmares, or difficulty falling asleep due to anxiety or stress. These disruptions can result from the emotional toll of being harassed online, particularly if the bullying continues over time or escalates. Lack of sleep and poor sleep quality can, in turn, affect physical health, leading to increased fatigue, weakened immunity, headaches, or even digestive issues. (Olaniyan, 2020).

Table 2: Mental health issues experienced by victims of cyberbullying

S/n	Index	Ratings	Score (x)	Frequency (F)	%	Fx
8	During the period I was a victim of cyberbullying, I experienced the following symptoms of mental ill health.					
A	Anxiety Disorders	SA	5	344	87	1720
		A	4	21	5	84
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	$\Sigma f = 395$	100	$\Sigma fx = 1864$
		Mean score =	4.72 (significant) = 94%			
B	Panic Disorders	SA	5	346	88	1730
		A	4	19	4	76
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1916
		Mean score =	4.73 (significant) = 95%			
C	Social Phobia	SA	5	333	84	1665
		A	4	22	6	88
		FA	3	20	5	60
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1843
		Mean score =	4.67 (significant) = 93%			
D	Mood Disorders	SA	5	323	82	1615
		A	4	27	7	108
		FA	3	20	5	60
		D	2	15	4	30
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1823
		Mean score =	4.62 (Significant) = 92%			
E	Personality Disorders	SA	5	310	78	1550
		A	4	32	8	128
		FA	3	27	7	81
		D	2	16	4	32
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1801
		Mean score =	4.56 (Significant) = 91%			

9	During the period my friend was a victim of cyberbullying, I noticed that he/she manifested the following.					
A	Anxiety Disorders	SA	5	320	78	1600
		A	4	22	8	88
		FA	3	27	7	81
		D	2	16	4	32
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1811
		Mean score =	4.58 (Significant) = 92%			
B	Panic Disorders	SA	5	305	77	1520
		A	4	32	8	128
		FA	3	27	7	81
		D	2	21	4	32
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1771
		Mean score =	4.48 (Significant) = 90%			
C	Social Phobia	SA	5	310	78	1550
		A	4	27	8	108
		FA	3	22	6	66
		D	2	21	5	42
		SD	1	15	3	15
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1781
		Mean score =	4.51 (Significant) = 90%			
D	Mood Disorders	SA	5	320	78	1600
		A	4	22	8	88
		FA	3	27	7	81
		D	2	16	4	32
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1811
		Mean score =	4.58 (Significant) = 92%			
E	Personality Disorders	SA	5	323	82	1615
		A	4	27	7	108
		FA	3	20	5	60
		D	2	15	4	30
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1823
		Mean score =	4.62 (Significant) = 92%			

Field Survey, 2025. Data generated from SPSS 26.

3.3 Ways in which cyberbullying can be curtailed among university students

The respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of these impact which include, awareness and education on cyberbullying, community engagement and collaborative efforts, peer support and intervention programmes, role of parents and family engagement, policy advocacy and legal framework, social media and platform accountability, and digital literacy and responsible online behaviour training. The results aligned with the opinion of Monks (2016), which indicated that raising awareness and educating students about cyberbullying is considered a crucial step in curbing the problem. Adediran (2020) argued that education can help individuals recognize what constitutes cyberbullying, understand its emotional and psychological impacts, and learn how to identify and report such behaviour. The data suggests that respondents believe that a well-informed community is less likely to tolerate or perpetuate cyberbullying. Educational campaigns and workshops within tertiary institutions can equip students with the knowledge needed to prevent and respond to cyberbullying, creating a safer environment online and offline. Again, for **Community Engagement and Collaborative Efforts**, a score of 4.72 with 94% significance highlights the importance of community engagement and collective action in addressing cyberbullying. This could involve partnerships between students, faculty, administrative bodies, and even local communities to foster a united front against cyberbullying.

Collaborative efforts can help to create a more supportive and responsive environment, where everyone plays a role in preventing bullying. Ayodeji (2020) and Razak (2020) were of the view that community-based initiatives might include peer-led programmes, student organizations that promote kindness and respect, and partnerships with local organizations to provide resources and support. Such collaborations could amplify the message and create a culture of zero tolerance for cyberbullying. Similarly, for **peer support and intervention programmes**,

the mean score of 4.72 suggests that peer support and intervention programmes are seen as effective ways to address cyberbullying. Students themselves can often be the first to notice and intervene in cyberbullying situations. Bolanle (2023) also asserted that peer support programmes, where students are trained to identify signs of cyberbullying and provide support to victims, can be highly effective.

Table 3: Ways in which cyberbullying can be curtailed among university students

S/n	Index	Ratings	Score (x)	Frequency (F)	%	Fx
10	In what ways could the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying be curtailed among students?					
A	Punishing the offenders can help in curtailing cyberbullying.	SA	5	329		1645
		A	4	30		120
		FA	3	13		39
		D	2	12		24
		SD	1	11		11
		Total	N = 5	$\Sigma f = 395$	100	$\Sigma fx = 1839$
	Mean score =	4.66 (significant) = 93%				
B	Making laws against cyberbullying can also help.	SA	5	343	87	1715
		A	4	22	5	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	Campaigning against cyberbullying is another remedy.	SA	5	339	86	1695
		A	4	26	7	182
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	395	100	1937
	Mean Score	4.90 (significant) = 98%				
D	Seminars and workshops on the negative effects of cyberbullying will also go a long way in curtailing it.	SA	5	344	87	1720
		A	4	21	5	84
		FA	3	10	3	30
		D	2	10	3	20
		SD	1	10	3	10
		Total	N = 5	$\Sigma f = 395$	100	$\Sigma fx = 1864$
	Mean score =	4.72 (Significant) = 94%				

Field Survey, 2025. Data generated from SPSS 26.

3.4 Test of Hypothesis

The result of analysis on Table 4 showed a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.72 which is positive and within the coefficient limit of ± 0.70 and 1.00 and a coefficient of determination (R^2) 0.5169 which indicated that about 52.0% of the variations observed in mental health experience were attributed to prevalence of cyberbullying. This implies that prevalence of cyberbullying relates positively to mental health experiences among university students in Southeast Nigeria to a high extent. The Table also shows a p-value of 0.00 which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. Therefore, the hypothesis which stated that there is no relationship between the prevalence of cyberbullying and mental health experience among university students in South-East Nigeria was rejected at 5% alpha level and concluded otherwise.

Table 4: Correlation between prevalence of cyberbullying and experience of mental health problems among university students in South-East Nigeria

		Prevalence of Cyberbullying	Mental health
Prevalence of cyberbullying	Pearson Correlation	1	0.72*
	P-value		0.00
	N	394	394
Mental health	Pearson Correlation	0.72*	1
	P-value	0.00	
	N	394	394
	R^2	0.5169 (52.0%)	

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study investigated the relationship between cyberbullying and the mental health of university students in Southeast Nigeria. It concluded that the menace of cyberbullying significantly impacts students' mental health, as victims experience panic disorders, social phobia, mood disorders, and personality disorders. The study further found that awareness campaigns, seminars and workshops, and the enactment and enforcement of laws against cyberbullying could go a long way in curbing its prevalence among university students.

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

1. University management in Southeast Nigeria should create awareness of the implications of cyberbullying on students in order to reduce its occurrence and negative effects.
2. University management should consistently educate students on the effects of cyberbullying, particularly its impact on mental health, in order to minimize associated risks.
3. Governments and university authorities should enact and enforce laws that punish offenders, as this will significantly reduce the incidence of cyberbullying.

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