

CYBERBULLYING SYNDROME (PHENOMENON): A STUDY OF OWERRI METROPOLIS RESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper explored the phenomenon of cyberbullying among residents in Owerri Metropolis. This study relied on Albert Bandura's social learning theory and general aggression model (GAM) by Anderson and Bushman for the theoretical underpinning. The researcher relied on the survey research design with a population of 560,700 from which a sample size of 384 was derived using Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator. Multistage sampling technique was employed while questionnaire served as the instrument for data collection. Results showed that the respondents' level of awareness of cyberbullying phenomenon is high at a mean of 3.4, as a majority of them have come across cyberbullying on social media. The knowledge level of the respondents about cyberbullying phenomenon is high at an average mean of 3.2. Also, social media troll, harsh

Introduction

The rise of digital communication platforms necessitated by technological revolution has paved the way for cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is one of the well-known risks of technological evolution and consists of voluntary and repeated actions against one or more individuals, through the use of computers and electronic devices (Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic & Salame, 2015). Cyberbullying is the act of intentionally and consistently mistreating or harassing someone through the use of electronic devices or other forms of electronic communication

comments on posts, sexual harassment, forceful removal from an online group, and cyberstalking were the nature of cyberbullying the respondents are commonly exposed to at mean of 3.4. It was further found that cyberbullying has a negative impact as it can lead to depression, loneliness, isolation and anxiety, emotional trauma and results to suicide at a mean score of 3.4. The paper concluded that, cyberbullying has a monumental dire consequences to the individual victim, family and the society at large. The paper recommended amongst others, the need for the creation of public awareness through conferences, seminars, and workshops on the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Also, the government and relevant authorities, must take proactive measures by enacting extant laws and policies that are well implemented as a drastic measure against cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Syndrome, Phenomenon

(Like social media platforms) (Alhajji, Bass & Dai, 2019). Cyberbullying occurs over electronic communication channels like cell phones, computers, social media, and other online platforms. While anyone can be subject to cyberbullying, it is most likely to occur between the ages of 12 and 18 (Buttaro, 2024).

The silent epidemic of cyberbullying has left an indelible mark on the digital landscape, wreaking havoc on the mental well-being of countless individuals who find themselves trapped in a virtual nightmare. As our lives become increasingly intertwined with technology, the dark underbelly of online interactions has reared its ugly head, leaving many to grapple with the devastating consequences of digital torment (Neuro Launch Editorial Team, 2024). Zhu, Huang, Evans and Zhang (2021) observed that cyberbullying is well-recognized as a severe public health issue which affects both adult and children. Cyberbullying could present symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder, which can lead to suicide (Liu, Liu & Yuan, 2020).

As viewed by Neuro Launch Editorial Team (2024), cyberbullying is the use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature. The phenomenon is like traditional bullying on steroids, amplified by the vast reach and anonymity of the internet. This why Buttaro (2024) argues that cyberbullying can have dire mental and emotional consequences if left unaddressed. Cyberbullying can be severe and lead to serious health issues, such as new or worsened mental health disorders, sleep issues, or thoughts of suicide or self-harm (Buttaro, 2024).

Statistics from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), evidences that 90% of young people around the world have experienced some form of bullying, either psycho-

logical or physical (Al-Qaddouri & Abdelkader, 2020). Scientific research also suggests that 7 out of 10 young people have been exposed to online abuse at some point for psychological and social reasons against others with certain characteristics such as race, religion, people with special needs, etc., (Abu, 2018). According to Saladino, et al (2020), a cyber-bully might circulate images or send offensive messages or e-mails against a person or a group of people in order to deconstruct the perception of security of the victims, humiliating and isolating them. The persecutor who engages in online violence has a lower perception of responsibility for the suffering caused by one's behaviour, underestimating the seriousness of the consequences for the victim, who feels not able to defend oneself from virtual harassment.

Therefore, cyberbullying is seemingly a growing problem associated with digital media platforms (social media most especially) that is becoming a serious public health concern with the tendencies of resulting in mental, emotional, behavioural health issues and an increased suicidal thoughts to the victims. Hence, this necessitated this study to explore the phenomenon among residents in Owerri Metropolis, Imo State, Nigeria, with the aim of ascertaining their knowledge and attitudes towards the act.

Statement of Problem

According to recent studies, it showed that cyberbullied victims tend to be more hyperactive and have conduct-related issues; demonstrate an increased risk for anti-social personality disorder (described as a lack of empathy, lying, and criminal behaviour); have more problems in adulthood such as holding down jobs, maintaining positive relationships, as well as avoiding drugs, alcohol, and criminal activity (American Society for the Positive Care of Children, 2025). A plethora of correlational studies have demonstrated a cogent relationship between adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying and negative health indices. For instance, Nixon (2014) indicated that adolescents who are targeted via cyberbullying report increased depressive effect, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal behaviour, and somatic symptoms. Perpetrators of cyberbullying are more likely to report increased substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviours.

Nevertheless, chronic depression and anxiety disorders often take up permanent residence in the minds of cyberbullying victims. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are imminent as an aftermath effect. Cyberbullying victims can develop symptoms that are similar to those who have experienced physical trauma. Flashbacks, nightmares, hyper-vigilance etc. It is as if the digital assault has left invisible battle scars on the psyche of the victim (Neuro Launch Editorial Team, 2024). To the society at large, cyberbullying also leads to an increase in social problems such as the problems facing security and educational institutions such as academic delay, escaping from school, drug addiction and deviating from social values and norms, regulations and laws through

delinquency, crime, and suicide, which require allocating a budget to address and prevent (Zaidi & Banai, 2022)

However, it is against the backdrop of the dire consequences and aftermath of cyberbullying on both the individual and the society that the study was carried out so as to provide an empirical evidence on the phenomenon among Owerri Metropolis residents.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to explore the phenomenon of cyberbullying among residents in Owerri Metropolis, Imo State, Nigeria, Specifically, the objectives were to:

1. Determine the awareness level of residents of Owerri Metropolis about cyberbullying.
2. Ascertain the knowledge level of residents of Owerri Metropolis about the phenomenon of cyberbullying.
3. Identify the nature of cyberbullying that residents of Owerri Metropolis are commonly exposed to.
4. Find out the impact of cyberbullying on the behaviours of the victims among Owerri Metropolis residents.

Research Questions

1. What is the awareness level of residents of Owerri Metropolis about cyberbullying?
2. What is the knowledge level of residents of Owerri Metropolis about the phenomenon of cyberbullying?
3. What is the nature of cyberbullying that residents of Owerri Metropolis are commonly exposed to?
4. What is the impact of cyberbullying on the behaviours of the victims among Owerri Metropolis residents?

Cyberbullying Phenomenon: An Overview

Cyberbullying occurs when someone uses technology to demean, inflict harm, or cause pain to another person. It is “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” Perpetrators bully victims in any online setting, including social media, video or computer games, discussion boards, or text messaging on mobile devices. Cyberbullying may involve name calling, threats, sharing private or embarrassing photos, or excluding others (Abrahmson, 2022). Corroborating this definition, Akbari (2023) avers that cyberbullying is using digital devices such as computers, smartphones, and tablets to harass, threaten, or target

individuals or groups. It can occur on social media platforms, chat rooms, online gaming environments, and other online spaces. It's a modern and increasingly prevalent form of bullying that can seriously affect an individual's mental, emotional, and physical health. According to UNICEF (2025), cyberbullying is bullying with the use of digital technologies. It can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones. It is repeated behaviour, aimed at scaring, angering or shaming those who are targeted. Examples include: spreading lies about or posting embarrassing photos or videos of someone on social media, sending hurtful, abusive or threatening messages, images or videos via messaging platforms, impersonating someone and sending mean messages to others on their behalf or through fake accounts, engaging in sexual harassment or bullying using generative AI tools etc.

Research based on cyberbullying, as Myers and Cowie (2019) reported, essentially indicates effects on the target with potentially harmful long-term impacts on psychological development, self-esteem, and academic behaviours (an unpleasant and disturbing experience in the short term) and a heightened risk of mental health disorder in the long term. Lenhart, Ybarra and Price-Feeney (2016) also stressed that cyberbullying (online harassment and abuse) can affect many aspects of digital lives, especially its tendency to suppress the voices of many citizens.

Cyberbullying Phenomenon in Nigeria

Recent studies have shown that cyberbullying phenomenon is prevalent across different countries and regions of the world. For instance, studies in Sweden (Slonje & Frisen, 2012), Finland (Salmivalli & Pöyhönen, 2012), America (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014), and a cross-national study in Italy, England, and Spain (Genta, Smith, Ortega, Brighi, Guarini, Thompson, Trippet, Mora-Merchan & Calmaestra, 2012), provide evidence-based suggestions that cyberbullying is a developing problem across nations. Furthermore, in 2011, reports from a news published in *The Telegraph* about issues involving Sean Duffy who was tried and jailed for mocking dead teenagers on Facebook and YouTube (Internet troll), and Shane Webber who performed an elaborate online stalking operation against his own girlfriend (Barnett, 2011), are evidences that cyberbullying occurs in societies where anti-bullying policies exist.

In Nigeria, although indicators showing that cyberbullying exist are available based on shared experiences, the availability of data in validating the prevalence, and degree of the act poses a challenge because of scantiness. According to Friday and Soroaye (2024), cyberbullying in Nigeria, much like in other parts of the world, is a significant concern that poses threats to the mental well-being and safety of individuals, especially minors. To comprehend the nuances of cyberbullying within the Nigerian context, it is essential to start with a clear definition that reflects the specific manifestations and cultural

aspects of this phenomenon. In the Nigerian context, cyberbullying can be defined as the use of digital technologies, such as social media platforms, messaging applications, emails, and online forums, to deliberately intimidate, harass, or humiliate individuals. These behaviours, when directed at minors, can have profound and lasting effects on their psychological well-being. The impact of cyberbullying in Nigeria is not just limited to the virtual realm; it extends into the real world and can affect victims' social lives, academic performance, and overall mental health (Friday & Soroaye, 2024).

Moreso, cyberbullying in Nigeria often intersects with cultural and societal norms, adding layers of complexity to its definition. Cultural factors such as respect for authority figures and fear of speaking out against peers can influence how cyberbullying is perceived and addressed. Additionally, the rapid adoption of digital technologies in Nigeria has led to an increased prevalence of cyberbullying incidents, further highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing this issue. It is crucial to recognize that cyberbullying in Nigeria is not a standalone problem but rather a reflection of broader societal issues such as inequality, discrimination, and lack of awareness about online safety. By defining cyberbullying within the Nigerian context, we can better grasp the specific challenges faced by individuals, particularly minors, and develop targeted interventions and policies to address this pressing issue (Friday & Soroaye, 2024).

Adediran (2020) stated that cyberbullying happens in Nigeria like in other country, but it is difficult to express the situation of cyberbullying in Nigeria with accurate data because most of the cyberbullying cases in Nigeria are unreported in situations where it is practiced outside the confines of a close environment, for instance, a school. Although dearth of decided cases by the courts in Nigeria on cyberbullying exists, Adediran believes cyberbullying occurrence is not in any way negated as on other sources such as empirical research can be relied upon for its prevalence. One of such empirical research, Nwosu, Ementa, and Ejikeme (2018), in a study measuring awareness and incidence of cyberbullying among 140 undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikwe University (a Nigerian University), reported that 50% of the study population were aware of the cyberbullying incidents within and outside their circle. In another report, Adomi, Eriki, Tiemo and Akpojofo (2016), in a survey of 80 Library and Information Science students of Delta State University, Abraka (Nigeria), found that 80% of the respondents had either witnessed or had been victimized through cyberbullying from different social media platforms. Beyond the statistics, Okoiye, Nwoga and Onah (2015), while assessing the moderating effect of cyberbullying on the psychological well-being of in-school adolescents in Benin, Edo State (Nigeria), found that the consequences of cyberbullying has impact on in-school adolescent's self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy.

In a developing country like Nigeria, the remedial campaign against cyberbullying has followed the trending adoption of legal frameworks with the enactment of the Nigerian Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015, addressing issues of child pornography (Section 23), cybersquatting, (Section 25), cyber stalking (Section 24), racists and xenophobic offenses (Section 26), and cyber terrorism (Section 18) among other acts classified as online criminal acts (Olonode, 2022). More recently, the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, on November 5, 2019, introduced the Protection from Internet Falsehoods, Manipulations, and Other Related Matters Bill, 2019 (codenamed the Hate Speech Bill) to criminalize the use of social media in promoting false or malicious information in the country. However, the Bill has been received with wide denunciation by citizens and advocacy groups like the Amnesty International, based on arguments that it threatens the citizens' freedom of speech (Olonode, 2022).

Social Media and Cyberbullying Phenomenon

With the increased utilization of the internet and social media platforms, it is not surprising that people are using these tools to inflict harm upon each other. According to Siddhartha et al (2020), the convenience of social media nowadays has given birth to some adverse effects including cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is no longer an uncommon matter seen in social networks, in fact, it has become a common phenomenon which could be experienced by anyone at least once in a lifetime. Regarding a research by Siddhartha et al (2020) on undergraduates' cyberbullying experiences in public universities in Malaysia, out of 400 students, 244 (61%) students have experienced cyberbullying. This has confirmed that cyberbullying behaviour is rampant among the university students. Besides, in another research by done by a private university in Malaysia, few types of cyberbullying options have been given to be chosen, including denigration, outing, exclusion, harassment, flaming and stalking. Out of 30 university students, 19 (63%) of them experienced denigration, 15 (50%) of them experienced outing, 17 (57%) of them experienced exclusion, 8 (27%) of them experienced harassment, 26 (87%) of them experienced and 24 (80%) of them experienced stalking. Flaming refers to rude and unpleasant comments/messages, which was rated highest (87%). These statistics have clearly shown that social media playing a main role contributing to cyberbullying, which is a serious condition as it may further lead to depression, anxiety or even suicide (Hazlyna, 2021).

Forms/types of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can take many forms or types as it varies, However, Akbari (2023) identified the following types or forms of cyberbullying to include:

- a) **Harassment:** Harassment is when someone continually sends another person cruel, abusive, or threatening messages, pictures, or videos. This can cause the individual to feel fear, anxiety, anger, or sadness.
- b) **Trolling & Flaming:** Trolling and flaming is when someone deliberately provokes, taunts, or annoys others online to cause a negative reaction or conflict. This can make one feel annoyed, angry, or frustrated.
- c) **Exclusion:** Exclusion is when someone deliberately excludes an individual from an online conversation, activity, or game. They ignore the person's messages or comments or withdraw the person from friends or groups. This can make the individual feel lonely, isolated, and depressed.
- d) **Outing/Doxing & Trickery:** This is when someone lies or tricks one into getting their personal or compromising information and then uses it against the person or publishes it online. This can be **quite a traumatic experience** that can damage the person's reputation, self-esteem, trust, or relationships with others.
- e) **Masquerading:** Masquerading is when someone creates a false or anonymous online profile and uses it to deceive, insult, or taunt other people. This can cause the victim confusion, frustration, or anger.
- f) **Catfishing:** Individuals engaged in catfishing often use others' photos and create fictitious profiles to deceive, exploit, or manipulate their victims, causing emotional distress and psychological trauma.
- g) **Cyberstalking:** Cyberstalking occurs when someone obsessively follows, spies on, controls, or threatens another person online.
- h) **Fraping:** Fraping is when someone logs into another person's social media account and impersonates him/her by posting and sharing inappropriate content on behalf of the person. This can damage the person's image, compromise privacy, or affect relationships with others.
- i) **Account Hijacking:** Account Hijacking occurs when offenders use another person's account to commit fraudulent activities, such as scams or spam distribution. It's different from fraping, which might be done by friends or acquaintances as a prank and isn't meant to hurt anyone. On the other hand, account hijacking is done with the intent to profit or cause harm.
- j) **Swatting:** Swatting is a dangerous form of cyberbullying in which the offender makes a false call to the security services to report an imaginary threat or crime at another person's address, which can lead to an unexpected visit from special police units with weapons. This not only creates a risk to the physical safety of the victim and others but can also have **serious legal and emotional consequences**.

Al-Turif and Al-Sanad (2023) assert that cyberbullying has multiple negative consequences for victims, as it may lead to psycho-logical, emotional, and behavioural problems in the long term, such as depression, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, addiction and self-harm. The victim becomes ostracized and un-wanted, in addition to low academic achievement due to dropping out of school or frequent absenteeism or escaping from school out of fear or distress. Furthermore, poor social relations and lack of trust in others make them more susceptible to exploitation and lacking self-assertion skills. They may also experience several psychosomatic symptoms such as headache and abdominal pain. Some may resort to suicide as a way to escape from their suffering. Repeated bullying has long-term adverse effects on victims that last for years. Victims of bullying in their early years are more prone to depression and low self-esteem compared to their peers who have not been bullied (Penis, 2020). The victim may also adopt aggressive behaviour and bullying as a result of their exposure to it. The victim's withdrawal from social activities in their social environment may increase until they become silent and isolated. They may resort to suicide, as studies have shown that suicide victims are constantly increasing due to bullying (Mohammad, 2020).

Societal Consequences of Cyberbullying

The aftermath effects of cyberbullying are not just limited to the victims and their families alone, but extend to society as well. It may cause a disruption in social relations, the spread of hatred and animosity among members of society, and difficulty in social adaptation in school, work, or social environment in general. It also leads to an increase in social problems such as the problems facing security and educational institutions such as academic delay, escaping from school, drug addiction and deviating from social values and norms, regulations and laws through delinquency, crime, and suicide, which require allocating a budget to address and prevent (Zaidi & Banai, 2022). The practice of aggression towards public property has clear economic effects as well as social ones. It leads to the waste of public money and delays the development plans that the state is pursuing to develop society and its facilities in various economic and developmental fields. But when these plans meet obstacles that hinder progress, the economic impact becomes evident. The delay of plans financially and temporally is followed by the delay of services that benefit members of society, due to the tendency to repair the damage caused by aggressive behaviour on public facilities such as roads, schools, entertainment places etc., which requires harnessing budgets and efforts to address the negative effects that have been reflected on society (Abu, 2018).

The Nigerian Experience: Instances of Notable Cases of Cyberbullying in Nigeria

Olamide Badejo: Olamide Badejo, a 17-year-old student from Lagos, Nigeria, took her life after enduring relentless cyberbullying. She was targeted on social media platforms with hurtful comments and malicious messages, criticizing her appearance and academic performance. Despite her family's efforts to intervene and seek help, the cyberbullying persisted, ultimately leading Olamide to feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Her tragic death shed light on the devastating consequences of cyberbullying and the urgent need for better support systems for victims (Sahara Reporters, 2020 in Friday & Soroaye, 2024).

Sharon Adeleke: Sharon Adeleke, a well-known public figure and sister to popular Nigerian musician Davido, faced cyberbullying on social media. She became a target of online trolls who criticized her lifestyle, appearance, and family. The cyberbullying escalated to the point where Sharon spoke out about the negative impact it had on her mental health and well-being. Despite her status, she highlighted how cyberbullying affects individuals regardless of their public image and called for more awareness and action to combat online harassment (Pulse Nigeria, 2019 in Friday & Soroaye, 2024).

Joy Akabuike: Joy Akabuike, a young entrepreneur from Abuja, Nigeria, was subjected to cyberbullying after launching her fashion business online. Trolls attacked her business pages with false reviews, derogatory comments, and attempts to tarnish her reputation. Determined to fight back, Joy documented the cyberbullying incidents and sought legal assistance. With the support of her legal team, she was able to identify the perpetrators and take legal action against them. Joy's case highlighted the importance of documenting cyberbullying incidents and seeking legal recourse to hold perpetrators accountable (The Guardian Nigeria, 2021 in Friday & Soroaye, 2024).

Emeka Okonkwo: Emeka Okonkwo, a member of the LGBTQ+ community in Nigeria, faced severe cyberbullying and threats after publicly advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. He received hateful messages, death threats, and calls for violence against him because of his sexual orientation. The cyberbullying not only targeted Emeka personally but also aimed to silence his activism for LGBTQ+ rights in Nigeria. Despite the risks, Emeka continued to speak out against cyberbullying and discrimination faced by the LGBTQ+ community, emphasizing the need for greater protection and acceptance (BBC News, 2020 in Friday & Soroaye, 2024).

These case studies highlight the diverse ways cyberbullying manifests in Nigeria, affecting individuals from various backgrounds and communities. They underscore the urgent need for enhanced awareness, support systems for victims, and effective enforcement of cyberbullying laws to prevent such tragic outcomes.

Empirical Review

Nwosu (2018) in his study "Cyberbullying among undergraduate students in a Nigerian university: Awareness and incidence" found that over 50% of the students were aware of incidents of cyberbullying within their cycles in and outside the school environment. The commonest forms of cyberbullying they were aware of in the past couple of months were text message, phone calls and chat room bullying. Also, a range of 48%-57% undergraduates have been bullied through the various cyber media listed and 28.6%-40.0% have bullied others through these devices in the past couple of months.

Al-Turif and Al-Sanad (2023) in repercussions of digital bullying on social media users revealed that most of the respondents agree that digital bullying has negative consequences for all the stakeholders involved. The results also indicated that female students are more aware of the repercussions of digital bullying than male students.

Similarly, Hazlyna (2021) explored the awareness about cyber bullying on social media among female students in a Malaysian Public University and found that female students are exposed to cyberbullying on social media, namely Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and others. This is because the female students use social media daily and are more insecure and sensitive on the words hurled in social media. The result also indicated that a high number of students were found to be victims of cyberbullying.

Furthermore, Pandey and Shalini (2022) explored the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media. Result showed that cyberbullying is rampant on social media sites. Cyber bullying is less prevalent among teenagers and young people who have excellent family and peer support and are active in the real world. It was found loss of self-esteem, anxiety, fear, sadness, shame, melancholy, rage, anxiety, lack of concentration, social phobia, and even suicide are some of the emotional, psychological, and behavioural repercussions are the consequences of cyber bullying. The study concluded that, with the spread of smartphones and laptops, cyber bullying is becoming more common on social media platforms.

Corroborating further, Abaido (2019) in the study entitled "Cyberbullying on social media platforms among university students in the United Arab Emirates" found that 91% of the study sample confirmed the existence of acts of cyberbullying on social media with Instagram (55.5%) and Facebook (38%) in the lead.

In further agreement, Nwosu et al (2018) in "Cyberbullying among undergraduate students in a Nigerian university: Awareness and incidence" showed that a majority of the respondents 94 (67.1%) have heard of bullying through text messages in their school or circle of friends in past couple of months; 91(65.0%) have heard of bullying through chat rooms in their school or circle of friends in past couple of months. The commonest forms of cyberbullying they were aware of in the past couple of months were text message, phone calls and chat room bullying. Also, a range of 48%-57% undergraduates

have been bullied through the various cyber media listed and 28.6%-40.0% have bullied others through these devices in the past couple of months.

In another related result, Akeusol (2023) analysed "Social media and the incidence of cyberbullying in Nigeria: Implications for creating a safer online environment" revealed that cyberbullying is prevalent in Nigeria and exists in various forms such as outing, trickery, trolling, and verbal and visual/sexual cyberbullying. Meanwhile, the phenomenon has negative emotional and psychological consequences.

Moreso, Chukwuere, Chukwuere and Adom (2021) x-rayed the psychosocial effects of social media cyberbullying on students in selected African countries and found that cyberbullying on social media has psychosocial implications for the student. Furthermore, the study revealed ways and strategies to mitigate the spread and act of cyberbullying of students on social media platforms.

Theoretical Framework

This study relies upon Albert Bandura's social learning theory and general aggression model (GAM) by Anderson and Bushman for the theoretical underpinning.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, introduced by psychologist, Albert Bandura in 1977, proposed that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modelling and is influenced by factors such as attention, motivation, attitudes, and emotions. The theory accounts for the interaction of environmental and cognitive elements that affect how people learn (Hammer, 2011). According to Kendra (2024), the theory suggests that learning occurs because people observe the consequences of other people's behaviours. Bandura's theory moves beyond behavioural theories, which suggest that all behaviours are learned through conditioning, and cognitive theories, which consider psychological influences such as attention and memory. According to Bandura, people observe behaviour either directly through social interactions with others or indirectly by observing behaviours through media. Actions that are rewarded are more likely to be imitated, while those that are punished are avoided.

According to Overskeid (2018), behaviourists proposed that all learning was a result of direct experience with the environment through the processes of association and reinforcement. Bandura's theory believed that direct reinforcement could not account for all types of learning. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory (SLT) is often described as an intermediate between behaviourism (traditional learning theory) and cognitive theory. Behaviourism focuses on one particular view of learning: a change in external behaviour

achieved through the use of reinforcement and repetition to shape behaviour which relates to rote learning. Cognitive learning theory advocates that the different processes concerning learning can be explained by analysing the mental processes. Thus, SLT is a bridge between behaviourism and cognitive approach (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

From the perspective of Explore Psychology (2024), social learning theory, also known today as social cognitive theory, is a theory proposed by psychologist Albert Bandura that explains how people learn through observation, imitation, and modelling. This model of learning suggests that both environmental and cognitive factors play a critical role in the acquisition of knowledge. In summary, there are three core concepts at the heart of social learning theory. First is the idea that people can learn through observation. Next is the notion that internal mental states are an essential part of this process. Finally, this theory recognizes that just because something has been learned, it does not mean that it will result in a change in behaviour (Kendra, 2024).

In relation to the phenomenon of cyberbullying, individual may learn aggressive behaviours and attitudes by observing others engage in the act of cyberbullying. This may be learned from exposure to the media or one's immediate environment, and as a result of their newly learned behaviour, they play out on others without thinking of the aftermath. Thus, social learning theory is very apt for this study.

The General Aggression Model (GAM)

The general aggression model (GAM) by C.A. Anderson and B.J. Bushman, 2002 is a comprehensive, integrative, framework for understanding aggression. It considers the role of social, cognitive, personality, developmental, and biological factors on aggression. Proximate processes of GAM detail how person and situation factors influence cognitions, feelings, and arousal, which in turn affect appraisal and decision processes, which in turn influence aggressive or nonaggressive behavioural outcomes. Each cycle of the proximate processes serves as a learning trial that affects the development and accessibility of aggressive knowledge structures. Distal processes of GAM detail how biological and persistent environmental factors can influence personality through changes in knowledge structures (Allen, Anderson & Bushman, 2018).

Many theories have been proposed to explain human aggression-defined as any behaviour intended to harm a target who is motivated to avoid that harm. The General Aggression Model (GAM) is one of the most comprehensive and widely used theories for understanding aggression (Allen et al., 2018).

Angers (2024) opine that according to GAM, human aggression is hugely influenced by knowledge structures that ultimately affect an individual's perceptions, decisions, interpretations of their environment, and behaviours. GAM breaks these knowledge structures into the following categories:

- i. Beliefs and attitudes (People believe aggression is normal and evaluates the behaviour as positive).
- ii. Perceptual Schemata (the perception that certain events are hostile).
- iii. Expectation Schemata (expecting to receive aggressive behaviours from others)
- iv. Behavioural Scripts (the belief that conflicts should be resolved using aggression).

The idea is that these knowledge structures develop through experience and can influence an individual's perception on various levels. In the context of cyberbullying, GAM suggests that individual differences such as personality traits; situational factors (online anonymity); and affective states, i.e. anger contribute to the probability of engaging in the act of cyberbullying.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The researcher relied on the survey research design which is seemingly the most effective way to elicit opinions of the given population. The survey according to Ohaja (2015), is a study of the characteristics of a sample through questioning, which enables a researcher to make generalizations concerning his population of interest.

Population and Sample Size

The target population for this study was the residents of Owerri Metropolis in Imo State. According to National Population Commission of Nigeria (web), National Bureau of Statistics (web), (2022), Owerri Metropolis has a projected population of 560,700 with the 2.1% annual increase rate; and consist of three Local Government Areas which include, Owerri North, Owerri West and Owerri Municipal. The Wimmer and Dominick online sample size calculator was used at a threshold of 95% confidence interval and 5% error limit to arrive at a sample size of the study given the study population. Thus, 384 was arrived at as the sample size for the study.

Sampling Technique and Instrument for Data Collection

The sampling technique used for this study was the multi-stage cluster random sampling technique and the purposive sampling technique. At stage one, the purposive sampling technique was used to divide the Owerri metropolis into three local government clusters: Owerri North LGA, Owerri West LGA and Owerri Municipal. At stage two: With the random sampling technique, two communities from each local government area were randomly selected. These communities were Amakohia and Orji (Owerri North LGA), Nekede and Obinze (Owerri West LGA), Umuoyima, Umuororonjo (Owerri Municipal). In

stage three, the researchers using simple random technique, chose six villages and distributed the questionnaire proportionately to each community ($384/6 = 64$). As a result, the researchers applied the purposive sampling technique and distributed 64 copies of the questionnaire to respondents in these communities.

Questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The questions were structured in a closed ended format using the 4-point likert scale. The questionnaire contained questions like yes "no" "can't say; and Likert scale questions such as "very high" "high" "moderate" "low" "strongly agree", agree, "disagree" and "strongly disagree". Simple percentages and mean analysis were used to analyse the data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data generated from the field was presented in tables using numbers, frequency and mean analysis. 384 copies of the instrument were distributed in the course of the field work according to the study sample size. Out of the distributed copies, 372 (96.9%) copies were retrieved and found valid. While 12 (3.1%) were inappropriately filled by the respondents and thus, found invalid for the analysis. This means that the return response rate was 96.9%.

Research Question One: What is the awareness level of residents of Owerri Metropolis about cyberbullying?

The cluster table format was used to provide answers to the question.

Table 1: Responses of respondents on their awareness level about cyberbullying

Option	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
I am aware of cyberbullying	198	174	0	0	3.5	Accepted
I have come across cyberbullying on social media	180	182	6	4	3.4	Accepted
I have experienced cyberbullying before	124	110	81	57	2.8	Accepted
I am aware that cyberbullying always take place on social media	177	157	25	13	3.3	Accepted
I have seen cases of cyberbullying	164	187	13	8	3.3	Accepted
Average Mean					3.3	Accepted

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted.

However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected. Let 1.0-1.5 (Very Low), 1.6-2.2 (Low), 2.3-2.9 (Moderate), 3.0-3.5 (High) and 3.6-4.0 (Very High). Result of the mean analysis indicates that, at a mean of 3.4, the respondents are aware of cyberbullying. Their level of awareness of cyberbullying phenomenon is high.

Research Question Two: What is the knowledge level of residents of Owerri Metropolis about the phenomenon of cyberbullying?

The cluster table format was used to provide answers to the question.

Table 2: Responses of respondents to their knowledge level about the phenomenon of cyberbullying

Option	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
I agree that sending hurtful messages to someone is a form of cyberbullying	155	136	48	33	3.1	Accepted
I agree that sending abusive or threatening messages is cyberbullying	141	150	53	29	3.1	Accepted
Engaging in sexual chats and sharing of nude videos with someone against the person's wish/consent is cyberbullying	167	177	17	11	3.3	Accepted
Harsh comments on social media is cyberbullying	153	156	39	24	3.2	Accepted
Spreading of rumours and false information about someone on social media is cyberbullying	188	176	6	2	3.5	Accepted
Trolling someone on social media is an act of cyberbullying	137	140	58	37	3.0	Accepted
Rude removal of someone from a group chat is cyberbullying	148	119	49	56	3.0	Accepted
Average Mean					3.2	Accepted

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted.

However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected. Let 1.0-1.5 (Very Low), 1.6-2.2 (Low), 2.3-2.9 (Moderate), 3.0-3.5 (High) and 3.6-4.0 (Very High). Result of the mean analysis on the knowledge level of the respondents about the phenomenon of cyberbullying showed that the respondents are quite knowledgeable about cyberbullying at an average mean of 3.2. They understand what cyberbullying entails. Their knowledge level about cyberbullying phenomenon is high.

Research Question Three: What is the nature of cyberbullying that residents of Owerri Metropolis are commonly exposed to?

The cluster table format was used to provide answers to the question.

Table 3: Responses of respondents on the nature of cyberbullying they are commonly exposed to

Option	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Social media troll	172	174	12	14	3.4	Accepted
Harsh comments on posts	170	182	11	9	3.4	Accepted
Sexual harassment (sending of nude videos/pictures/sex chats)	204	145	16	7	3.5	Accepted
Forceful removal from an online group	167	177	15	13	3.3	Accepted
Cyberstalking (obsessively following someone online)	194	157	10	11	3.4	Accepted
Average Mean					3.4	Accepted

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected.

Result of the mean analysis on the nature of cyberbullying that Owerri Metropolis residents are commonly exposed to revealed that at mean of 3.4, social media troll, harsh comments on posts, sexual harassment (sending of nude videos/pictures/sex chats), forceful removal from an online group, and cyberstalking (obsessively following someone online) were the nature of cyberbullying the respondents are commonly exposed to.

Research Question Four: What is the impact of cyberbullying on the behaviours of the victims among Owerri Metropolis residents?

The cluster table format was used to provide answers to the question.

Table 4: Responses of respondents on the impact of cyberbullying on the behaviours of the victims

Option	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Decision
Cyberbullying triggers aggressive and unfriendly behaviours	149	172	31	20	3.2	Accepted
Cyberbullying can lead to depression, loneliness, isolation and anxiety	211	159	2	0	3.6	Accepted
Cyberbullying can lead to emotional trauma	188	164	11	9	3.4	Accepted
Cyberbullying can cause poor social relations and lack of trust in others	139	161	48	24	3.2	Accepted
Cyberbullying can result to suicide	201	171	1	0	3.5	Accepted
Average Mean					3.4	Accepted

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Decision rule: Given that the benchmark of a 4-point Likert scale for decision is 2.5, it means that if the calculated mean is 2.5-4.0, then the item in question is accepted. However, if the calculated mean is 1-2.4, then the item in question is rejected.

Result of the analysis indicates that cyberbullying has a negative impact; it can trigger aggressive and unfriendly behaviours; it can lead to depression, loneliness, isolation and anxiety; it can lead to emotional trauma; it can cause poor social relations and lack of trust in others; and can result to suicide at a mean score of 3.4.

Discussion of Findings

Awareness Level of Residents of Owerri Metropolis About Cyberbullying

Result of the mean analysis indicates that, at a mean of 3.4, the respondents are aware of cyberbullying. The respondents indicated that they have come across cyberbullying on social media; the majority of them have experienced cyberbullying before; they are aware that cyberbullying always take place on social media; and they have seen cases of cyberbullying. This means that the respondents' level of awareness of cyberbullying phenomenon is high. This result aligns with previous findings. For instance, Nwosu (2018) found that over 50% of the students were aware of incidents of cyberbullying within their cycles in and outside the school environment. Corroborating this also,

Abaido (2019) showed that 91% of the study sample confirmed the existence of acts of cyberbullying on social media with Instagram (55.5%) and Facebook (38%) in the lead. The commonest forms of cyberbullying they were aware of in the past couple of months were text message, phone calls and chat room bullying. In another supporting result, Nwosu et al (2018) showed that a majority of the respondents 94 (67.1%) have heard of bullying through text messages in their school or circle of friends in past couple of months. 91(65.0%) have heard of bullying through chat rooms in their school or circle of friends in past couple of months. The commonest forms of cyberbullying they were aware of in the past couple of months were text message, phone calls and chat room bullying.

Also, Hazlyna (2021) found that female students are exposed to cyberbullying on social media, namely Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and others. This is because the female students use social media daily and are more insecure and sensitive on the words hurled in social media. The result also indicated that a high number of students were found to be victims of cyberbullying. Pandey and Shalini (2022) showed that cyberbullying is rampant on social media sites.

Knowledge Level of Residents of Owerri Metropolis about the Phenomenon of Cyberbullying

Result of the mean analysis on the knowledge level of the respondents about the phenomenon of cyberbullying showed that the respondents are quite knowledgeable about cyberbullying at an average mean of 3.2. They understand what cyberbullying entails. Their knowledge level about cyberbullying phenomenon is high. This result is anchored on the general aggression model as Angers (2024) opine that according to GAM, human aggression is hugely influenced by knowledge structures that ultimately affect an individual's perceptions, decisions, interpretations of their environment, and behaviours. GAM suggests that individual differences such as personality traits; situational factors (online anonymity); and affective states, i.e. anger contribute to the probability of engaging in the act of cyberbullying. Also, the social learning theory of Albert Bandura explains how people learn through observation, imitation, and modelling. This model of learning suggests that both environmental and cognitive factors play a critical role in the acquisition of knowledge. Individual may learn aggressive behaviours and attitudes by observing others engage in the act of cyberbullying. This may be learned from exposure to the media or one's immediate environment, and as a result of their newly learned behaviour, they play out on others without thinking of the aftermath.

Nature of Cyberbullying that Residents of Owerri Metropolis are Commonly Exposed to

Result of the mean analysis on the nature of cyberbullying that Owerri Metropolis residents are commonly exposed to revealed that at mean of 3.4, social media troll, harsh comments on posts, sexual harassment (sending of nude videos/pictures/sex chats), forceful removal from an online group, and cyberstalking (obsessively following someone online) were the nature of cyberbullying the respondents are commonly exposed to. This is in line with the result of Akeusol (2023) revealed that cyberbullying is prevalent in Nigeria and exists in various forms such as outing, trickery, trolling, and verbal and visual/sexual cyberbullying. Also, Qaisar et al (2022) revealed that social media bullying is creating a political divide among supporters of different political parties. Bullying contents creating hatred, enmity, hostility, aggression and anger against supporters of other parties. It was found that users are of the view that offensive language, photo shopped images, impersonation, spoofing, misleading facts are faced by users in political contents. Results also revealed that male users face more offensive language as compared to female users of social media due to wider friendship circle.

Impact of Cyberbullying on the Behaviours of the Victims among Owerri Metropolis Residents

Result of the analysis indicates that cyberbullying has a negative impact; it can trigger aggressive and unfriendly behaviours; it can lead to depression, loneliness, isolation and anxiety; it can lead to emotional trauma; it can cause poor social relations and lack of trust in others; and can result to suicide at a mean score of 3.4. This result agrees with the findings of Al-Turif and Al-Sanad (2023) which revealed that most of the respondents agree that digital bullying has negative consequences for all the stakeholders involved. The results also indicated that female students are more aware of the repercussions of digital bullying than male students. In another supporting study, Pandey and Shalini (2022) found that loss of self-esteem, anxiety, fear, sadness, shame, melancholy, rage, anxiety, lack of concentration, social phobia, and even suicide are some of the emotional, psychological, and behavioural repercussions and consequences of cyber bullying. Akeusol (2023) indicated that, cyberbullying as a phenomenon, has negative emotional and psychological consequences.

Buttressing this result further, Chukwuere (2021) found that cyberbullying on social media has psychosocial implications for the student. Similarly, Pandey and Shalini (2021) found that loss of self-esteem, anxiety, fear, sadness, shame, melancholy, rage, anxiety, lack of concentration, social phobia, and even suicide are some of the emotional, psychological, and behavioural repercussions are the consequences of cyber bullying. The study concluded that, with the spread of smartphones and laptops, cyber bullying is becoming more common on social media platforms.

Theoretically, this corroborates the general aggression model (GAM). Proximate processes of GAM detail how person and situation factors influence cognitions, feelings, and arousal, which in turn affect appraisal and decision processes, which in turn influence aggressive or nonaggressive behavioural outcomes.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying as a phenomenon is like traditional bullying on steroids that is accelerated by the vast reach and anonymity of the internet. This act occurs when someone uses technology to demean, inflict harm, or cause pain to another person. It can occur on social media platforms, chat rooms, online gaming environments, and other online spaces. It's a modern and increasingly prevalent form of bullying that can seriously affect an individual's mental, emotional, and physical health. This phenomenon is seemingly a growing problem associated with digital media that is posing a health concern with the tendencies of resulting in mental, emotional, behavioural health issues and an increased suicidal thoughts to the victims. This paper therefore, concludes that cyberbullying has a monumental dire consequences to the individual victim, family and the society at large.

Recommendations

On the strength of the findings of the study, the following recommendations were put forward:

1. People should always reach out for help without any form of insecurity and intimidation as a way of campaigning against cyberbullying.
2. There is need for the creation of public awareness through conferences, seminars, and workshops on the phenomenon of cyberbullying.
3. The government and relevant authorities, must take proactive measures by enacting extant laws and policies that are well implemented as a drastic measure against cyberbullying.
4. There is also, a need for the implementation and enforcement of extant laws and penalties that punishes the perpetrators.

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