



CYBER BULLYING IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS ON YOUTHS' PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has transformed the life style of youths across the world. One outcome of the increasing use of ICT is bullying someone via electronic devices, termed cyber bullying. Although the prevalence of this situation is on the increase, but the phenomenon has not been researched extensively in Nigeria. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of cyber bullying and highlight its implication for the psychological well-being of Nigerian youths. The paper shed more light in understanding the concept of cyber bullying, and reviews existing literature; its related factors and the outcomes of the behaviour. Existing government policies on the problem were also analyzed. Based on the available literature, cyber bullying is a global problem and very prevalent in Nigeria with a long lasting negative impacts on the psychological well-being of youths. Many of the victims of cyber bullying may experience a technical knock-out effect throughout their life span. They may also have depression, sadness, anxiety, and difficulty with relationships, substance abuse, self-inflicted suicide and school dropout. The experience can result to low self-esteem, anomie, isolation, psychosomatic symptoms and school failure. The paper concluded that there is need for urgent attention of researchers and policy makers to address the issue and recommended some strategic interventions to solve the problem. For instance, individualised interventions for youths affected by cyber bullying, either as victims or as bullies, need to be developed to resolve conflict and mitigate negative consequences that may result.

Keywords: *Cyber bullying. Nigeria. Psychological wellbeing. Public policy. Youth.*

Introduction

The emergence of modern technologies especially that of information and communication technology (ICT) is changing the way we live our lives. The availability and easy access to these technologies such as mobile phones and computers have in many ways redirected human social interactions especially among youths. Lenhar



(2007) reported over 80% of young people in the United States owned at least one form of electronic media technology, such as cell phones, personal data assistant and computer for internet access. Although this is good for cross-border linkages and networking, it is also subject to abuse with dire consequences (Odora & Matoti, 2015). One of the consequences is cyber bullying, a situation whereby youths bully one another via electronic devices; and is currently being observed among students in schools including Nigeria (Ayas & Horzum, 2010; Olumide, Adams & Amodu, 2015).

Cyber bullying is defined as a form of aggression that involves the use of information and communication technologies such as mobile phones, video cameras, email, and web pages to post or send harassing or embarrassing messages to another person (Ybara & Mitchel, 2004). Willard (2007) describes it as sending threatening messages to a victim, or using digital technologies in a way that will lead to psychological and social problems for him/her. According to Willard (2014) and Bergman & Baier (2018) cyber bullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the internet or digital technologies.

Sharif and Gouin (2005) sees cyber bullying as a type of psychological bullying by means of such electronic devices as mobile phones, blogs, websites and chat rooms. Although cyberbullying is a relatively new concept and the definition is still evolving (Li, Smith, & Gross, 2012), most researchers agree that cyberbullying is the use of electronic communication technologies to bully others (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattaner, 2014). It is recognised as a growing problem in many developed (David-ferdon, & Feldman, 2007; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattaner, 2014); and developing countries like Nigeria (Fareo, 2015; Olumide, & Amodu, 2015, Odora & Matoti, 2015).

Relationship between cyberbullying and traditional bullying

Researchers (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012) have also noted that cyber bullying is an extension of traditional bullying in schools, but it differs in some important and worrying some ways from traditional bullying. For instance, cyber bullying is largely anonymous (Belsey, 2007; Slonge & Smith, 2008; Sharff & Gouin, 2005; Meter &



Bauman, 2018). The anonymity of this phenomenon (cyber bullying) is the most harmful aspect of it because the bully lacks the fear of being discovered which helps in controlling behaviour; and when this is the case, the cyber bully may behave in ways that they may not do in a face – to face interaction. Unlike in traditional bullying, the bully knows who the victim is, but the victim most of the time has no idea who is doing the bullying.

Some other researchers (e.g., Kowalski, Limber & Agatson, 2008) asserted that in traditional bullying, third party observers know who is doing the bullying. In cyber space, however the cyber bully can maintain his or her anonymity, both to the victim, and to outside observers. Within a short time in cyber bullying, the bullies can reach a very wide audience with their hurtful messages or nude pictures and with a remarkable speed which may not be easy to be deleted from the cyber space (Belsey, 2007). But traditional bullying is often limited to a small group of people. The highest regrettable characteristic of cyber bullying is that it is extremely difficult to control or deal with. It is not only limited to the school day, but can be experienced at any time and can occur at any time of the day or night and this heightens people's vulnerability to it. Since this kind of bullying can happen beyond schools, it means there is no safe place for people not even in their homes (Wilard, 2007).

Several recent studies (Notar & Padget, 2013; Hertz & Wright, 2013) have discovered that cyber bullying has detrimental effects on psychological well-being of youths. Ryff (1989) conceptualized psychological well-being as the optimal functioning and experiences of an individual. Similarly, Dzuka and Dalbert (2000) define psychological well-being as the overall satisfaction and happiness or subjective report of one's mental state of being healthy, satisfied or prosperous and broadly to reflect quality of life and mood states. Mesch (2009) posits that cyber bullying jeopardizes the mental, emotional and physical well-being of youths and puts society at the risk of ethical and moral deterioration. However, regardless of the proliferation of ICTs which makes cyber bullying very common, only limited researches have been conducted on it in developing nations including Nigeria (Ada, Okoli & Akere, 2016). The theoretical framework of this

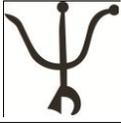


study is based on the point of view of general strain theory which argues that people who experience significant strain will eventually develop anger and frustration in response, which then places them at risk for engaging in deviant behaviour (Agnew, 1992). Relating it to cyber bullying, shows that youths who have experienced victimization in life might engage in cyber bullying perpetration to release their anger and frustration (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), thereby making the act (cyber bullying) very common. This implies that cyberbullying victimization can be a potent source of emotional and psychological strain among youths that can in turn lead to deviant coping responses that has implications on their psychological well being.

Therefore, this paper tries to bridge the gap and contribute to the understanding of cyber bullying as a social phenomenon by attending to the following objectives: (a)describing what constitute the act, (b) reviewing the existing literature and its related factors and the outcomes of the behaviour; more especially the impacts on psychological wellbeing of Nigerian youths. (c) reasons for not reporting cyber bullying in Nigeria (d) It x-rays the government policies on ground and also recommended some strategic interventions that may help to solve the problem. The rationale behind studying this age group is because in Nigeria most of the previous studies in the area studied younger children (adolescents). There is a need to study older ones (youths) because previous researchers (e.g., Odora & Matoti, 2015; Okoiye, Nwoga & Onah, 2015; Smith et al., 2008; Walrave & Heriman, 2011) reported that the perpetration of cyberbullying increases with age. The findings discovered from studying this age group will help to design appropriate intervention strategies that will be targeted to this age group and that will help to reduce the incidence of it to its barest minimum.

Prevalence of cyberbullying in some countries of the world

Cyber bullying is quite a common problem in schools and the society at large. Bauman (2013) is of the view that cyber bullying is prevalent because of the wide availability of digital technologies and the proliferation of technological innovations, which will eventually lead to different results. Generally, the reported rate of cyber bullying ranges from approximately 40% (Lenhart & Madden, 2008) to 70% (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).



Research findings on the prevalence of cyber bullying differ from one study to another. The reason may be because of the different ways that the behaviour is defined probably because it is a relatively new concept and the definitions are still evolving.

A high prevalence rate have been reported in developed countries ranging from about 4% to as high as 35% (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Williams & Guena, 2007; Yabara, West, & Leaf, 2007; Herman & Walrave, 2012; Roberto, Eden, Savage, Ramos-Salazar, & Deiss, 2014). For instance, in Europe, Herman and Walrave (2012) reported that 12% of 12-18 years old in Belgium had cyber bullied someone in the last 3 months. A similar study conducted by Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) discovered that 49% of the students ranging in age from 13 to 18 were electronic victims while 21% of them were actual bullies. In another study by Wolak, Mitchel and Finkelhor (2007), it was reported that 9% of youngsters were exposed to cyber bullying; and that 57% and 43% respectively of these victims were exposed to bullying online by their fellows or by other people they did not know. Yabara, West and Leaf (2007) reported that 64% of youngsters fell victims to online bullying. Some other similar studies have reported a high prevalence rate of cyber bullying. For example, studies conducted in the United States have shown that about 10% to as high as 37% of youngsters have bullied others electronically (Gan, Zhong, Das, Gan, & Willis, 2014). In the same vein, Gan et al (2014) and Robert et al (2014) reported a prevalence rate of 18%, while Lenhar, Malden, Smith and Macgill (2014) reported a prevalence rate of 80%.

The nature and prevalence of cyber bullying in Nigeria

In Nigeria, bullying behaviour has moved from physical face to face confrontation in school yard to a more psychologically damaging experience. According to Ada et al. (2016) this kind of bullying is a great monster in the Nigeria tertiary institutions, as it takes place indirectly via electronic media (Smith, 2014). George, & Odgers (2015) noted that the use of swear words (indicating rage), insults, jokes, mobility and fake names are techniques commonly used by cyber bullies.



Cyberbullying can occur in various forms, but Wilard's (2007) differentiation of the types of cyberbullying is the most comprehensive and widely accepted. According to him the eight categories of cyber bullying includes: harassment, flaming, denigration, impersonation or identity theft, outing, exclusion, cyber stalking and trolling. In Nigerian context, cyber bullying can take many forms which includes: sending mean messages or threat to a person's email account or cell phone, spreading rumours online through texts, posting hurtful or threatening messages on social networking sites or web pages, stealing a person's account information to break into their account and send damaging messages, pretending to be someone else online to hurt another person, taking unflattering pictures of a person and spreading them through cell phones or the internet.

Another significant point addressed in the research on cyber bullying is the gender differences in the perpetration of the act. For instance, Barlett et al. (2014), reported that female students practice cyber bullying mostly by disclosing the secrets which they have been told, gossiping about individuals in the virtual environment, attacking the personality or sexual identity of the individual or labelling people as unreliable. Keith and Martins (2005) reported that females engage in a type of cyber bullying which is more of relational than the males. The reason for this may be as a result of culture and gender role expectations. For instance in Nigeria, girls are not expected to have an open confrontation with people. They are brought up under close supervision, and are taught to be more self-conscious and more emphatic; unlike boys who behave in an aggressive manner to gain popularity among their peers. One can easily suggest that the supremacy of masculinity in Nigerian culture may require more overt aggression in order to attain greater social acceptance and higher self-esteem among young males.

In developing countries or sub-Saharan countries like Nigeria, the literature on the prevalence of cyber bullying is very scarce, although there is evidence of increasing use of electronic media (<http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/publications/worldinformationsociety/2007>). In South Africa, approximately 20 - 40% of all participants have been victimized by a cyber-bully



(Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009). In Nigeria, cyber bullying is endemic though it is under reported due to the nature of it and scarcity of research in the area which made many come to conclude that such kind of bullying is not in existence. See Table 1 for the summary of existing literature on cyberbullying.

However with the upsurge of ICTs in the society which makes the proliferation of cyber bullying very common, it is possible that youths in Nigeria are involved in cyber harassment and some Nigerian researchers have reported that. For instance Olumide, Adams and Amodu (2015) using a total number of 653 students via multistage sampling showed that 39.8% of the respondents have been bullied electronically and 21.0% were both victims and perpetrators. Common modes of harassment were via phone calls (63.5%), chat rooms (44.9%) and text messages (38.5%). Majority of the students were perpetrators of cyber bullying and the correlates of perpetration were history of cyber victimization and daily internet use. In a similar study, Ada, Okoli, Obeten and Akeke (2016) reported a high prevalence rate of cyber bullying in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Some other researchers like Okoye, Nwoye and Onah (2015); Oyewusi and Orolade (2014); Akor (2012) all reported a high prevalence of cyber bullying in Nigeria.

Summary of previous empirical researches on cyber bullying

S/N	Author(s)	Type	Participants	%	Country
1	Mishna et al. (2010)	Quantitative	Students	37%	USA
2	Robert et al. (2014)	Quantitative	Students	35%	USA
3	Heiman et al. (2012)	Quantitative	Students	12%	Belgium, Europe
4	Popovictic et al. (2011)	Quantitative	Students	10%	Serbia
5	Hinduja et al. (2009)	Quantitative	Students	17.3%	USA
6	Tustin et al. (2012)	Quantitative	Students	37%	Gauteng province
7	De large et al. (2011)	Quantitative	Students	90%	South Africa



Factors associated with cyberbullying

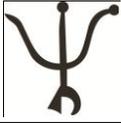
A lot of factors have been implicated in cyber bullying, such as age, gender, educational level, duration of time spent online, proficiency of ICT use and family characteristics. As regards perpetrators, studies (Okoiye, Nwoga, Onah & Thompson, 2015; Akpan & Notar, 2016) point to a variety of reasons such as: seeking revenge as the most perpetrators who engage in cyber bullying and many cyber bullies were themselves victims of bullying and/or cyber bullying at some point. Some perpetrators cyber bullied others as a joke. It is easier to engage in cyber bullying online because the fear of getting caught is lower than in traditional bullying. Some engage in it because they felt angry about something.

McDougall (1999) identified several reasons that favour bullying in the higher institutions. One major reason is that there is less direct authority, that is, students once admitted in the university may be the first he/she is alone and without direct interference by parents and guardians. To worsen the situation, school management or administration pay less attention in interpersonal relationships of students, and also less attention to classroom dynamics as opposed to the attention the school administration might have provided when he or she was in secondary school, and this conditions may warrants the individual to overcome their diversities on their own thereby choosing cyber bullying as an option.

From the review of literature, cyberbullying is a global problem and the nature of it shows that there is no hiding place for these youths as this form of bullying is the most difficult to escape (Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009).

Implication of cyber bullying on the psychological well-being of youths

No type of bullying is harmless as cyber bullying has the same insidious effects just like any other kind of bullying. Although it does not involve personal contact between an offender and victim, it is psychologically and emotionally damaging to youths (Okoye, Nwoga & Onah, 2015). Many of those who are bullied experience technical knock-out effect throughout their life span. They are prone to depression (Dilmac, 2009; Aricak,



2009; Ybara, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007; Ponford, 2007; Finkelhor, 2006); difficulty with relationships, substance abuse, self-inflicted suicide and school dropout as a result (Padget & Notar, 2013). In addition, Juvonen and Gross (2008) reported that victims of cyber bullying often experience symptoms such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, social exclusion, poor academic performance and some in extreme cases experience suicidal thoughts and attempts (Hindiya & Patchin, 2014). The symptoms are determined by the level of self- efficacy a person has (Bandura, 1997). Victims with a low self-efficacy believe that the potential threats associated with online victimization are unbearable (Bandura, 1997).

Cyber bullying has been implicated in the development of general psychological distress and poor psychological adjustment such as the development of low self- concept (Raskauskas & Stolz, 2007). In a study involving victims of cyber bullying, 31% of students victimized reported being very or extremely upset, 19% were very or extremely afraid, and 18% were very embarrassed by online harassment (Raskuaskas et al., 2007). A similar study by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) reported that the youths who experienced cyber bullying feel frustrated. Almost 40% were angry and over a quarter (27%) felt sad. Not only that, if a cyber-bully posts something embarrassing or defaming about the victim on any social networking website, everyone sees it. So the victim will not only battle with the embarrassment of being victimized, but also with the knowledge that everyone who has access to the internet is able to witness this humiliation. Insults and negative comments via ICTs can be preserved and spread several times which exacerbate its harmful consequences.

It has also been found that repeated acts of cyber bullying threaten healthy development of self-esteem in youths and contribute to school failure and dropout and increase psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Raskauskas & Lynch, 2007). Cyber bullying can cause significant emotional and psychological harm that can results to youths developing low self-esteem, and become less efficacious in their relationship with their environment (Sourander, Brunsten-Klonek, Helnius, Ikonen, Lindroos, Lutamo & Koskelainen, 2010). According to Belnap (2011), cyber bullying is



more pernicious than traditional bullying since it allows for “gradual amplification” of cruel and sadistic behaviour and may cause an extreme emotional response, for instance a victim taking his/her own life (suicide); and that female victims of cyber bullying are more likely to have emotional symptoms than male victims (Novano, 2011). However, females tend to ask for help more than males.

Hinduja and Patchin (2011) reported that victims of cyber bullying may be at risk of other negative developmental and behavioural consequences, such as school violence and delinquency; and or criminal behaviour. Other negative effects of cyber bullying on emotional outcomes of youths include poor academic performance and school withdrawal, frustration, embarrassment or fear, aggression and fighting, drug use, carrying of weapon to school (Ybara & Mitchel, 2007; Rigby, 2013); and development of somatic complaints such as headache, stomach ache and loss of sleep (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatson, 2005). In addition, Hay, Meldrum, and Mann (2010) reported that these emotions can also have lasting impact such that even after one and half years the victim still avoid the perpetrator at any time and any where once sighted.

Reasons for Not Reporting Cyber bullying

Information obtained from oral interview shows that majority of victims of this kind of bullying do not report what they are experiencing. The barriers for not reporting includes: they are uncertain about who to go to when encountering cyber bullying; impression that the victim will not be protected when the problem is reported; embarrassment on being seen as weak and not in control and a complainer; fear of being dismissed from school and fear of losing friendship due to low evaluation; belief that dealing with the issue would take too much time and that even when the problem is being reported nothing could be done.

Are there government policies on ground in Nigeria?

Codes of conduct and policies that address cyber bullying need to be stated clearly and communicated to all members of the nation. They need to be in place that is not only



implemented but consistently enforced, and there need to be appropriate consequences relating to cyber bullying. This will show the members of the nation that the issue is taken seriously and will not be tolerated, and each citizen of the nation will be held accountable for their behaviour. Previously, there are no basic laws and policies enacted on bullying, especially for the traditional bullying, rather what obtains are indirect legislations, embedded on children rights, women's right and abuses in general in schools and public domains. If that is the case, consequently, one is left with the task of attempting to sieve through these laws so as to locate how they may be relevant to addressing the problem of bullying in public schools. Due to lack of direct laws and policies on bullying, less attention has been given to the field of study of the problem in the country and this has led to the absence of government initiative both at the federal and state levels to enact direct laws and policies of bullying. The lack of attention may also be because many Nigerians regard bullying as a process of growing up that many children will outgrow with time.

Recently, the already formed impression has changed a little since bullying is no longer restricted to school yard, and can still occur to the victim at any time and at any place. This made parents, teachers and significant others to begin to call on government and stakeholders to urgently address the issue and save the lives of its citizens. In Nigeria, the available laws and policies on cyber bullying are stated on cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention and Enforcement) Act, 2015 which ensures the protection of critical national information infrastructure, and promotes cyber security and protection of computer systems and networks, electronic communication, data and computer programs, intellectual property and privacy rights. One of the offences prohibited under the act is "cyber stalking" which can be found under the section 24 of the Act. It provides that: (1) any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter by means of computer systems or network that is:

(a)Grossly offensive, pornographic or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character or causes any such message or matter to be so sent; or



(b)He knows to be false, for the purpose of causing annoyance inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent commits an offence under this Act and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of not more than ₦7,000,000.00 or imprisonment for a term of not more than 3 years or to both such fine and imprisonment. The Act further states that in sub section 2 that –any person who intentionally transmits any communication through a computer system to bully or threaten or harass another person, where such communication places another person in fear of death, violence or bodily harm or to another person; commits an offence under the Act and shall be liable on conviction to a 10 years and for a minimum fine of ₦25,000,000.00 (Onibokun, 2015).

The information above is clearly stated but the problem is that: these policies are not implemented and many people are not aware of it. These laws which seem to address the problem are not specifically designed for the school environment where the problem (cyber bullying) occurs largely. The laws are directed to general public where many do not recognise the harm it does to our youths. Government departments at provincial and national level have important role to play in monitoring schools and their implementation of the various policies. Communication between school members results in active collaboration and a coordinated approach to problems. All hope is not lost. All hands should be on deck to make sure that this problem will not get out of hand day by day.

Prevention and intervention

There are many strategies that can be employed in helping a victim of cyber bullying or identifying a perpetrator and each one can play an important an important part in preventing or tackling cyber bullying as quickly as possible. It has been discovered that majority of those who experience cyber bullying do not report it. So if we are to succeed in preventing bullying, we need to break the silence in which it thrives by empowering children and young people to speak out and seek help. The first step to be adopted in



cyber bullying prevention is by carrying out awareness campaign and education because in Nigeria today some people do not know what is called cyber bullying. Through awareness campaign, people need to understand the problem and understand the technology. If awareness of this issue is raised to such a level among people, people especially the youth will be able to speak up before it is too late, and the problem will come out of mobile phone inboxes, out of computers and into the open.

Secondly, government should monitor the activities of online service providers and also make sure those policies are fully implemented. Online service providers should be advised to periodically review the design and features of online services in order to identify potential misuse and address if possible.

Thirdly, government should set up clear and simple reporting mechanism and made available easy access to resources, and help for victims of cyber bullying. In addition they should try and establish and fund non-governmental organisation that helps in dealing with cyber bullying with their services such as hotlines and help lines. Unfortunately, no NGOs deal with cyber bullying in Nigeria. A workplace policy specifically addressing cyber-bullying what it looks like and how to address it and educating employees through training. Finally, organizations should try and enforce policy and investigate every complaint.

Individualised interventions for youths affected by cyber bullying, either as victims or as bullies, need to be developed to resolve conflict and mitigate negative consequences that may result. Employing a whole school approach is appropriate as it provides as it provides a framework of action that can be drawn on when incidents are reported .It further creates a systematic intervention that involves the cooperation of all relevant role players and raises the awareness about the importance placed on addressing this issue. By intervening in all areas of the school community, one is able to change beliefs, behaviours and social norms. Appropriate interventions should start as early as possible and parents need to be involved and put interest in what their children do online. This means asking several questions and discusses the activities of their



children. They should make sure that their child feels safe and secure and convey unconditional support.

Conclusion

The present study sought to establish that cyber bullying is a worrisome issue in the present day Nigeria with negative implication on psychological well-being of youths. Though there are some established laws and policies to help reduce cyber bullying the greatest challenge is the problem of implementation and yet people are dying silently every day because they felt there is no need reporting the problem and even when they do nothing could be done. Empirically-based prevention and intervention strategies that will help to address online violence in Nigeria are missing. Subsequent researchers should try and do so.

There is a need to educate the general public on what constitute cyber bullying and the risk of electronic media and the importance of supervision. Since schools are the largest place where cyber bullying can occur, a comprehensive methodology is needed that will create a coordinated and collaborative approach between different members of the school. An example of such is called a whole-school approach to cyber bullying which has two basic parts. One is educating learners, parents and school staff, as well as help to create a change in the tolerance and acceptance of this form of bullying. Second, the issue of cyber bullying should be incorporated in the school curriculum which will equip the at-risk learners to handle cyber bullying and inform them on the available supports. It will outline clear consequences for bullies and hold each individual accountable for their role in cyber bullying.

The present study is not without limitations. First, it is merely descriptive in nature, though with evidence of some empirical studies. The second limitation is that no standardized psychological instruments were used during data collection but only based on previous literature and information from oral interview. Researchers in Nigeria should carry out a quantitative or qualitative empirical study on cyber bullying.



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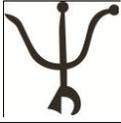
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