

UTILIZING COUNSELLING APPROACHES TO MITIGATE CYBERBULLYING ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper offered a descriptive account of the role of effective counselling strategies in curbing cyberbullying on social media in Nigeria. Social media have become an integral part of communication and information sharing worldwide. Despite their benefits, however, social media platforms also pose risks, with cyberbullying emerging as a prevalent and concerning issue. The paper critically reviewed literature from secondary data on cyberbullying on social media; it examined cyberbullying, its prevalence, forms, and its effects or consequences. The article revealed that cyberbullying was prevalent in Nigeria and existed in various forms such as cyberstalking, denigration, outing, sexting, trickery, trolling, and verbal as well as visual/sexual cyberbullying. Furthermore, cyberbullying has negative emotional and psychological consequences. While the existing legislation addresses certain aspects of cyberbullying, the paper emphasized the need for a dedicated policy to tackle the problem. The paper proposed proactive solutions grounded in effective counselling strategies that could be effectively used to curb cyberbullying on social media. Recommendations made included the federal government enforcing different laws that have been passed to curb cybercrimes and cyberbullying in Nigeria. These also involve educating society on cyberbullying, implementing reporting mechanisms, and providing adequate support systems.

Keywords: Counseling, strategy, cyberbullying, social media

Introduction

The last few decades have seen significant growth in Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the widespread use of social media platforms. The rapid increase in internet usage has transformed Nigerians into active participants in cyberspace. Social media has become an essential tool for everyday life especially among the young to build and enhance social connections and to learn technical skills. In today's technologically advanced world, social media has infiltrated almost every aspect of human life. Studies have emphasized the relevance

of social media to political efficacy and political participation and youth participation and activism (Akinyetun, 2022).

Social media is a veritable tool for enhancing communication and has increased the chances and ability of young people to aggregate their interests, articulate their thoughts, and demand for social and political change. Despite the advantages that social media brings, there have been serious concerns that have been raised about its susceptibility to manipulation to promote cyberbullying, fake news, violence, hate speech, misinformation, and undermine democracy. According to (Adebayo & Ningga, 2021), recent pessimism associated with the proliferation of social media includes its potential to exacerbate the incidence of cyberbullying, which poses emotional and psychological distress to users. In some cases, anguish experienced on social media platforms has led to irrational and potentially harmful decisions, including contemplating suicide. While advancements in social media offer convenience and freedom in online communication, it also gives rise to substantial challenges such as cyberbullying, which negatively affects individuals (Xu & Trzaskawka, 2021).

Cyberbullying is a growing issue in Nigeria, although enough data on its extent are difficult to obtain due to underreporting, especially when it occurs outside controlled environments such as schools. It is a truism that social media usage is growing exponentially in Nigeria. In 2019, Nigeria had 98.39 million internet users, with 54 per cent accessing the internet daily and 12 per cent having active social media accounts. WhatsApp is the most used social platform, followed by Facebook, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, YouTube, and Twitter. With the increasing use of computers and the internet in Nigeria and the minimal inhibitions on social media, online spaces have become breeding grounds for cyberbullying. The widespread use of digital technology has made many users experience cyberbullying either as victims or perpetrators (Adediran, 2021). Cyberbullying poses a significant challenge to the ideals of free-flowing information and discourse on social media. This involves the use of digital means to intimidate, annoy, frighten, or create a hostile environment for the victim. This unwarranted contact disrupts the free exchange of ideas and undermines the online environment's intention (Olonode, 2021). During the global COVID-19 pandemic, the incidence of cyberbullying has increased significantly due to increase in screen time for children and young people. With school closures and containment measures, families have relied on technology for online classes and socialization. This heightened virtual presence exposes children to risks, such as online sexual exploitation, grooming, exposure to harmful content, and cyberbullying (UNICEF, 2020).

Cyberbullying is a pervasive form of bullying that takes place through virtual mediums including computers, cell phones, through texting, computers applications, and social media forums in which people can participate, view, comment, and share information. Cyberbullying occurs when harmful, intentionally cruel, or negative information is posted about a person regarding their physical appearance, behaviors, choices that is intended to hurt or cause humiliation to someone

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

(United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Cyberbullying takes place via text messaging, email, instant messaging, spreading rumors online, posing mean messages on one's own or another's social media account, breaking into someone's account and spreading mean messages, pretending to be someone else online with the intent of hurting that person, or sexting or sending explicit pictures about a person on social media sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2016). One very devastating aspect of cyberbullying via social media is that posts can be viewed by anyone who has access to a person's site.

Social media platforms enable users to create and share content while engaging in social interaction with large or small communities. Common examples of cyberbullying include sending abusive messages and posting inappropriate information. Victims of cyberbullying repeatedly experience intentional aggression, often due to a power imbalance with the aggressor on social media (Agustiniingsih & Ahsan, 2023). To address this growing concern of cyberbullying and cybercrimes, Nigeria has introduced cyber laws, dubbed the Cybercrimes Act, aimed at combating these unlawful activities (Uba, 2021). The enactment of the Nigerian Cybercrime Act of 2015 addresses various online criminal acts, including child pornography, cyberstalking, and cyberterrorism. Additionally, the introduction of protection from Internet falsehoods, manipulations, and other related matters bills aims to criminalize the promotion of false information on social media (Olonode, 2021).

Conceptualization of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon with varying definitions. It is commonly described as an aggressive and intentional act carried out through electronic means, targeting a victim repeatedly over time. The use of the internet, cell phones, or other devices to send text or images with the intention of hurting or embarrassing someone is also recognized as cyberbullying. In Nigeria, cyberbullying is defined as the use of technology to send harmful or embarrassing content (Xu & Trzaskawka, 2021).

Cyberbullying is sometimes used interchangeably with cyber stalking, referring to conduct directed at causing fear in a specific person. While there are shared elements such as intent and repetition, there have not been a consensus on a definite property of cyberbullying by scholars. Additional features include power imbalance, direct and indirect forms of cyberbullying, the victim's perception, and harm inflicted. Cyberbullying, a detrimental consequence of technological advancement, takes place primarily on online platforms, particularly social media. The absence of inhibitions in the online environment allows for rapid and widespread victimization (Adediran, 2021).

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

Anonymity allows perpetrators to act without fear of consequences and may impact the power dynamics between the bully and the victim. However, these definitions provide insights into the prevalence of cyberbullying using technological tools, including social media.

The study's rationale is grounded in the significance and urgency of addressing cyberbullying and promoting safer online environments in Nigeria. Cyberbullying can have severe consequences for individuals, affecting their mental well-being, self-esteem, and social interactions. Furthermore, cyberbullying incidents can escalate and result in offline harm, making it crucial to understand the specific consequences faced by Nigerian individuals. Existing literature primarily focuses on the challenges of cyberbullying without providing comprehensive solutions or evaluating policy implications. This study aimed to address these gaps by exploring the incidence and severity of cyberbullying, examining its emotional and psychological impacts, and proposing effective counseling strategies for promoting safer online environments in Nigeria. By examining the specific nuances of cyberbullying within the Nigerian context, this study contributes to the development of targeted interventions that effectively address cyberbullying and ensure safer online experiences among Nigerians. Additionally, this study adds to the existing literature by examining the incidence of cyberbullying behaviours in depth and informing policymakers, educators, and social media platform providers in designing interventions and policies.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundations guiding this study is the Humiliation Theory. Humiliation theory was propounded by Evelin Gerda Lindner (born May 13, 1954) who was a German-Norwegian medical doctor, psychologist, transdisciplinary scholar and author. The theory of humiliation centers on the concept of abasement of pride, dignity, and status, often resulting from a public display of a less powerful person's weaknesses or through intentional degrading treatment by others. This powerful emotion is linked to feelings of shame, reduced self-worth, and a strong desire for retaliation, and it can have significant psychological and social consequences, including potential links to psychopathology and violence. Humiliation theory also deals with the emotional reaction to psychological attacks by individuals with power and influence within a local community (Leask, 2013). This theory serves as a platform to view cyberbullying acts originating from social groups and from individuals who possess a high social status. McCauley (2017) defined humiliation as a combination of anger and shame, emotions associated with a lack of psychological preparation for intense emotional experiences or a missed opportunity to retaliate for humiliation. Reactions experienced by victims of bullying and cyberbullying include nausea, psychological confusion, withdrawal, social avoidance, devaluation, and dishonor (McCauley, 2017). This theory is relevant to this study as it describes key aspects of cyberbullying.

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

Overview of Cyberbullying in Developing Countries

A survey by the Pew Research Center (2022), revealed that nearly half of United States teens aged 13 to 17 have experienced at least one form of cyberbullying. The most common behaviour reported by the survey was name-calling, with offensive names directed towards 32% of the teens. Other prevalent cyberbullying behaviours found by survey include the spread of false rumors (22%), receiving unsolicited explicit images (17%), and constant monitoring by someone other than a parent (15%), physical threats (10%), and the sharing of explicit images without consent (7%). Furthermore, 28% of teens have experienced multiple types of cyberbullying. Gender differences emerge, with older teenage girls (15-17 years old) being more likely to face cyberbullying compared to younger girls and boys of all ages. In terms of motivation, physical appearance is the most commonly cited reason for targeting, followed by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and political views (Vogels, 2022).

In surveys conducted in various countries, including Canada, Russia, Japan and India, parental awareness of cyberbullying varies. While parents in Russia and Japan expressed high levels of confidence that their children were not experiencing cyberbullying, Indian parents reported increasing concern about their children being cyberbullied. In general, more parents are becoming aware of their children's negative experiences with cyberbullying both at school and online. A significant percentage of parents reported that their children were bullied, with the highest percentage among older age groups. Bullying has been reported in various settings, including schools, social media sites and apps, text messages, video games, and non-social media websites. Some parents have even witnessed cyberbullying (Cook, 2023).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2019), more than one in ten adolescents across the OECD countries have experienced cyberbullying. The highest rates were observed in Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, and the United Kingdom (Scotland), while Greece had the lowest rate. Cyberbullying, which involves offensive messages, rumors, exclusion, and harassment, is associated with negative outcomes, such as depressive symptoms, substance use, suicidal thoughts and attempts. Teenage girls are more likely than boys to be victims of cyberbullying, with notable gender differences between Ireland and the United Kingdom. Data on cyberbullying refer to responses from 11, 13, and 15-year-olds who reported experiencing cyberbullying through messages or pictures at least once (OECD, 2019).

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. 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

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

dearth of decided cases by the courts in Nigeria on cyberbullying exists, Adediran further contends that cyberbullying occurrence is not in any way negated as on other sources such as empirical research can be relied upon for its prevalence. Nwosu, Ementa, and Ejikeme (2018), in a study measuring awareness and incidence of cyberbullying among 140 undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikwe University reported that 50% of the study population were aware of the cyberbullying incidents within and outside their circle. In a similar report, Adomi, Eriki, Tiemo, and Akpojofofor (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.

Also, 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.

Forms of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying encompasses a range of behaviours such as blackmail, cyberstalking, hate speech, spreading rumors, trolling, making threats, engaging in sexual remarks, revealing personal information, and using derogatory labels. The evolving nature of cyberbullying, driven by new tools and methods for online attacks, adds to this complexity (Adediran, 2021). Cyberbullying can take various forms such as direct cyberbullying (insulting messages) or indirect cyberbullying (rumors and fake news) (Iqbal & Jami, 2022). Several forms of cyberbullying have been identified (Adediran, 2021; Ifeoma, 2022; Xu & Trzaskawka, 2021) which include:

1. **Visual/Sexual Cyberbullying:** This involves the misuse or editing of private photos to humiliate them. The act of sharing intimate or embarrassing visual content without consent falls under this category. It aims to degrade and shame victims by leveraging their personal photos.
2. **Verbal Cyberbullying:** This includes insulting messages, hate speeches, and derogatory labels. It encompasses behaviours such as spreading rumors, threatening, engaging in sexual remarks, and using offensive language online. Verbal attacks through comments posted on the Internet are a form of verbal cyberbullying often faced by victims.
3. **Trolling and Roasting:** Common forms of cyberbullying that involve disruptive behaviour and deliberate provocation online. Trolling is characterized by purposefully causing discord and annoyance, whereas roasting entails multiple individuals attacking a single victim to humiliate them. These forms of cyberbullying often blur the line between harmless comments and harmful intentions.

4. **Cyberstalking:** Involves the transmission of threatening or harassing communication through computers. It induces fear of death, violence, or bodily harm in the targeted individual, and can escalate from online threats to real-life situations.
5. **Trickery:** A form of cyberbullying in which the victim is deceived into revealing personal information that the cyberbully intends to share or use as a threat. In Nigeria, a common manifestation of trickery is revenge porn, which involves the leaking of sex tapes or nude pictures.
6. **Hate speech:** This is a prevalent form of cyberbullying, where offenders use derogatory language to offend their victims, based on characteristics such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. It involves public expressions of animosity or disparagement of individuals or groups.
7. **Impersonation:** The act of creating fake profiles or pretending to be someone else online. By assuming another person's identity, cyberbullies can engage in harmful activities such as posting content in the victim's name to deceive, damage reputation and cause harm.

Consequences of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is associated with negative emotional and psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, school absenteeism, substance abuse, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, anger, frustration, and other psycho-emotional related problems. Research indicates that cyberbullying is linked to various real-world issues, including problems at school, anti-social behaviour, substance use, and delinquency. (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

1. **Anxiety:** Victims of cyberbullying experience anxiety as a result of the bullying. In a study by Xu and Trzaskawka (2021), on the impacts of cyberbullying, several concerning consequences for victims were found. They report that 37 percent of the victims experienced social anxiety,
2. **Depression:** Depression is another consequence of cyberbullying. Xu and Trzaskawka reported in their study that 36 percent reported symptoms of depression. Ogunkuade and Kenku (2023) also pinned that victims of online attacks and cybercrime may experience emotional trauma, leading to symptoms of depression and Acute Stress Disorder (ASD).
3. **Suicidal Thoughts and Self-harm:** Victims of cyberbullying also reported having suicidal thoughts engaged in self-harm. These psychological effects highlight the severity of cyberbullying and its potential to harm individuals both mentally and emotionally.
4. **Eating Disorder:** Cyberbullying also have an effect on physical health as approximately 10 percent of the victims developed eating disorders, which can have long-term consequences for their well-being (Xu & Trzaskawka, 2021).
5. **Anger and Frustration:** identity theft can leave victims feeling violated, betrayed, vulnerable, or powerless which leads to anger and frustration. Victims may go through

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

stages of grief, anger, and self-blame, and experience a sense of shame. Extortion is an example of how the victimization process unfolds.

6. **School Absenteeism:** Cyberbullying can impact student attendance particularly when it occurs both online and in traditional school settings. Cyberbullying also manifests as negative behaviours among victims. Xu and Trzaskawka (2021) also found that victims of cyberbullying skipped classes, indicating the interference of cyberbullying in their education.
7. **Sleep Deprivation:** According to Cook (2023), studies have shown that cyberbullying can negatively impact sleep and mental health especially among teenagers who experienced cyberbullying. They were more likely to experience poor sleep and depression.

Effective Counseling Approaches for Mitigating Cyberbullying on Social Media

Counselling strategies are effective to inculcating the spirit of consciousness for the maintenance of sanity in the use of social media. This will help in protecting the psychological and emotional well-being of social media users. It is against this backdrop that effective counseling strategies are put forward as veritable tool for curbing cyberbullying on social media and inculcating positive value in using social media especially amongst the restive youths. They include:

1. **Assertiveness Training Skills:** Since social media has become a means by which people communicate and express themselves, there are instances where such self-expression can be detrimental to individuals, society and also pose a threat to national security. Assertiveness is the means used by individuals to express their positive and negative emotions without infringing the rights of others (Akinade, 2012). Assertive people are not afraid to express their feelings and emotion. Assertive people possess the skills for social influences. Assertive skills training is one of the self- efficacy tools that can be used to help youths to improve their interpersonal skills and sense of self-respect for themselves and others in the society. It is based on the principle that everyone has a right to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs to others in a respectful manner without been aggressive. Counselors can help cyberbullying victims acquire assertive skills in other to protect and stand up for themselves and others. Counselors can also integrate assertiveness training into their curricula via utilizing role playing, accountability, teaching verbal communication and non-verbal communication / body language (eye contact, posture, proximity). Counselors can use social media platforms to teach and create awareness in regards to assertive skills training.
2. **Community/Group Counselling:** This involves the counsellor in a counseling relationship/interaction with more than one person (client) who have similar problems. The aim of the relationship is to help members of the group to individually and severally resolve their problems. A community counselling is a form of culturally embedded

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

psychological and social support that is integral to community social responses and it includes a variety of roles and activities that engage with the different levels of the social system: individuals, families and groups, organizations and institutions, specific communities, and society (Akinade, 2012). As a derivative of community psychology, this approach addresses social factors that have impact on the well-being of individuals and communities (Akinade, 2012). Nigerian youths need to think more rationally and take wise decisions in such matters as moral and ethical concerns, especially when using social media. This calls for the necessity of community counseling at different strategic settings in the society. Community approach to counseling can be used to create awareness about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying to individual victims and society in general.

3. **Rational Emotive Therapy:** Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (REBT) often called ABC of psychotherapy is a counseling technique developed by a renowned psychologist “Allbert Ellis” in 1959. Ellis believed that it is by attending to such illogical thoughts that the belief system can be altered. Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy (RET) is based on the assumption that thought and emotions are not entirely different processes but that they significantly overlap in many respects. Therefore, disordered emotions can often, though not always be modified by changing one’s thinking. Ellis believed that a large part of what we call emotion is nothing more than a biased, prejudiced or strongly evaluative kind of thinking. Example of such demand is the “must” action in individuals. For instance, the stance that one “must” be loved by everybody is an illogical position that is unrealistically internalized by such a person which is causing him disaffection among his peers or that one “must” do well, or else he is worthless. REBT can be used to curb effect of cyberbullying on social media as it can be used to make individuals do away with their illogical thoughts especially the youths. Even though freedom of speech is a fundamental human right that does not mean one can express his or her opinion at the expense of other’s psychological and emotional well-being. REBT can help to fast-track sustainable development of the Nigerian society. By helping individuals on the way they use social media especially the restive youth to comprehend the dangers of their illogical and irrational ideas, re-straighten their thinking in a logical manner have on others; cure them of their unreason by reason; and teaching them ways to re-think, challenge and contradict faulty internalized thoughts, a lot of the negative activities like cyberbullying, post such as spreading fake news and propaganda, hate speech and cybercrimes that are detrimental to individuals and society at large can be curbed and controlled through this. Also, inappropriate, anti-social thinking and behaviours could be substituted with appropriate, altruistic and morally approved behaviours by helping individuals express their thoughts and feelings without hurting another person. (Adeoti, Moshood, & Rasheedat, 2019). Victims of cyberbullying can be healed to with REBT by making understand what others think of them doesn’t define them.

4. **Social Skill Building:** Social skills are essential for developing happy, healthy, and lasting relationships. Counselors can support this growth by facilitating social skill-building groups that focus on communication, conversation, friendship, non-verbal cues, emotional awareness, coping strategies, and self-control. To strengthen these areas, counselors may incorporate techniques such as role-playing, the empty chair exercise, charades, modeling, and collaborative or pair-share activities. These approaches can be especially helpful for victims of cyberbullying, as they not only enhance interpersonal skills but also foster confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging. Ultimately, building social skills equips individuals with the tools needed to navigate relationships effectively, resolve conflicts constructively, and create supportive social networks.

Suggestions

For counseling to be more proactive and effective in curbing cyberbullying on social media, the following suggestions should be given due consideration by all stakeholders in nation's building, preserving mental health of people and community development:

1. Counsellors should employ strategies such as anchoring programmes on radio and television, post on social media on the need to use social media for the good rather than ways that can endanger peace, emotional and psychological well-being of individuals in the society.
2. Counselors should also use these social media platforms to teach social skills such as assertive skills, self-esteem and REBT.
3. Counselling Centers should be established in the communities where youth can seek professional guidance to their concerns and frustrations.
4. The government should enforce laws that were passed governing the use of social media.
5. Governments at all levels, non-governmental agencies, religious bodies, community leaders, should work with counsellors in engaging the youths who are the most vulnerable.
6. Religious institutions should also organize programmes on the importance of counselling for holistic development and peace co-existence.

Conclusion

Social media was created as a means by which individuals, organization and cooperation communicate. It has made sharing information much easier in the past decade. Unfortunately. This has also become a problem as its role as a means of communication as some miscreants have taken advantage of it to pose threats to its users by engaging in evil practices such as cyberbullying and cybercrimes. This calls for counselling to be proactive and effective in curbing cyberbullying on social media.

Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

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Utilizing Counselling Approaches to Mitigate Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria

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