

From Participation to Withdrawal: Cyberbullying and Social Media Engagement among Undergraduates in a Nigerian Private University

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media has become an indispensable platform for undergraduate communication, self-expression, and socialisation; however, it has simultaneously facilitated the emergence of cyberbullying as a significant threat to students' digital well-being and social media engagement.

Objectives: This study investigated the perceived influence of cyberbullying on the social media engagement of undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. Specifically, the study determined the current patterns of social media engagement, identified the common forms of cyberbullying experienced, examined the prevalence of cyberbullying, and examined self-reported behavioural responses to cyberbullying among the students.

Methods: This study employed a quantitative survey research design, with a questionnaire administered to 265 respondents selected across all nine faculties of Lead City University through stratified, purposive, and convenience sampling techniques.

Results: Findings revealed that WhatsApp (96.2%) and Instagram (78.5%) were the most frequently used platforms, with 45.7% of respondents spending three to four hours daily on social media. Cyberbullying victimisation had a prevalence of 70.2%, with harassment (70.6%) and trolling (63.4%) being the most common forms, predominantly occurring on WhatsApp. Respondents broadly reported that cyberbullying negatively influenced their social media engagement behaviours (grand mean = 3.80), with many indicating that they had withdrawn from online activity, restricted their accounts, or adopted more cautious posting practices following cyberbullying experiences.

Conclusion: Cyberbullying is perceived by undergraduates as a substantial inhibitor of healthy social media engagement in the Nigerian university context. Comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policies and digital literacy programmes should be implemented at the University and similar institutions.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Digital harassment, Social media engagement, Undergraduates, Social media platforms

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary modes of communication predominantly rely on digital technology, a platform susceptible to cultivating detrimental behaviours, notably exemplified by cyberbullying. Social media may play an important

role in adolescent socialisation, offering opportunities for social support and identity exploration (Zhou & Cheng, 2022; Avci *et al.*, 2004). An understanding of the digital context and how students navigate it is vital for modern communication studies (Patchin & Hinduja, 2022).

The term social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue (Baruah, 2022). Social media takes on many different forms, including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating, and social bookmarking. With the world in the midst of a social media revolution, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, Myspace, and Skype are used extensively for the purpose of communication. Scholars observe that people use social media mostly to communicate with other people, usually to maintain interpersonal relationships (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Howard, Rainie & Jones, 2001; Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Increasingly, a computer with an Internet connection is the locus of a range of interactions in a variety of media and a gateway to an array of social spaces for conversation, work, and play. According to Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2007), Facebook is the most used medium among other social media to establish and maintain relationships. Sites like YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, and Twitter represent another forum for online communication that is centred on sharing, preference, and popular culture.

Social media platforms offer different affordances, such as posting (sharing content), liking, and commenting. These affordances enable adolescents to engage in various behaviours, including sharing content and self-presentation, such as publicness and visualness (Nesi *et al.*, 2018), and providing social feedback to others. Subsequently, different platforms influence not only what users are exposed to and how they experience social interactions (Orben *et al.*, 2024), but also the varying levels of permanence, publicness, and availability that shape how online behaviours are enacted (Nesi *et al.*, 2018). Associated with both higher well-being and ill-being (Valkenburg *et al.*, 2022), social media use benefits many adolescents while also putting them at risk of online aggression, such as cyberbullying.

Existing scholarship suggests a shift from conventional bullying modalities to online manifestations facilitated by social media platforms (Li, 2007). The pervasive utilisation of online technologies, while convenient, concurrently exposes individuals to digital connections that may jeopardise their safety and psychological well-being. Cyberbullying is thus recognised as a consequential risk inherent in the reliance on digital platforms (Olowu & Seri, 2023).

Cyberbullying refers to bullying through electronic means in a digital space where a perpetrator employs aggressive behaviours or threats, such as verbal abuse and humiliation, against victims (Smith *et al.*, 2008). From 2007 to 2023, the rate of cyberbullying victimisation over the past 30 days among U.S. adolescents increased from approximately 10% to 26%, while the lifelong rate increased from 20% to 54% (Patchin & Hinduja, 2023). Cyberbullying victimisation most commonly occurs on social media (Kowalski *et al.*, 2019; Seitz, 2024), and two meta-analyses (Fisher *et al.*, 2016; Marciano *et al.*, 2020) found that cyberbullying victimisation is associated with a range of internalising and externalising problems.

Recent investigations underscore the prevalence of cyberbullying and online harassment, particularly among adolescents engaging with social media platforms (Patchin & Hinduja, 2022). Findings from the Cyberbullying Research Centre in 2016 revealed that 33.8% of middle and high school students aged 13 to 17 experience cyberbullying victimisation. Across various studies conducted over the past decade, the incidence rates of cyberbullying fluctuate between 10% and 40% (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014; Lenhart *et al.*, 2010).

The ramifications of cyberbullying extend beyond individual distress, impacting academic performance and mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Mitchell *et al.*, 2007; Ybarra *et al.*, 2007; Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Beran & Li, 2005). Moreover, the emergence of “bullycide,” where victims of bullying resort to suicide, underscores the severity of these behaviours. Hence, focusing on the undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan, this current study investigates the effect of cyberbullying on the social media engagement of the students.

Statement of the Problem

Some studies on the use of one or several social media platforms (mainly Facebook or Instagram) primarily focused on the frequency of use or problematic use, excessive use, or addiction (Barragan, Batista, Hall & Silva, 2024; Peprah, Oduro, Atta-Osei, Addo, Morgan, & Gyasi, 2024). Some other studies, which focused on the effect of the use of social media among the youth, only focused on the effect on interpersonal communication or physical friendship/relationship, entirely neglecting cyberbullying (Drussell, 2022; Al-Khaddam, 2023; Baym, Zhang, Lin & Mei-Chen, 2024).

Given the high prevalence of cyberbullying and emotional problems recorded among the youth population, past research has identified various correlations and repercussions associated with cyberbullying, encompassing physical and psychological well-being and academic achievement (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Tayeh (2023; 2025) conducted studies on the existence of cyberbullying at higher education institutions in Jordan and the United Kingdom. The studies show that nearly one-third of college students have experienced some form of cyberbullying. Interestingly, most victims choose to keep records of events while not sharing their experiences with others.

As far as this researcher knows, there is a paucity of research that focuses on the Nigerian context. None of the existing studies examined the direct and indirect effects of cyberbullying on social media engagement specifically among Nigerian undergraduate populations. That is the gap that this study intends to fill.

Given the considerable impact of cyberbullying, there is an imperative for further exploration, particularly in the Nigerian context, where cultural and societal constraints often result in silent suffering among youth subjected to various forms of bullying. Thus, this study investigates the effect of cyberbullying on the social media engagement of undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan.

Research Questions

Based on the identified problem, gap, and objectives, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the current pattern of social media engagement among undergraduates of Lead City University?
2. What are the common forms of cyberbullying encountered by undergraduates of Lead City University on social media?
3. What is the extent of cyberbullying prevalence among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan?
4. How do undergraduates at Lead City University, Ibadan perceive cyberbullying to have influenced their social media engagement patterns?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying: Concept and Forms

One important question to consider when studying cyberbullying is how much our knowledge of conventional bullying and this modern phenomenon coincide. Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is characterised by aggression, power imbalances in relationships, and often repetitive behaviour (Agatston, Kowalski & Limber, 2022; Smith, Del Barrio & Tokunaga, 2013).

According to Willard (2004), cyberbullying manifests in several distinct forms, including flaming, the transmission of angry or vulgar messages directed at an individual or group; harassment, involving the recurrent dispatch of offensive messages to cause distress; and cyberstalking, characterised by digital threats of harm or severe intimidation. Further forms include denigration, which involves disseminating harmful or false

statements about an individual; impersonation, where a perpetrator assumes another's identity to disparage or endanger them; and outing and trickery, involving the disclosure of sensitive or embarrassing private information. Additionally, exclusion refers to the deliberate removal of an individual from an online group to cause social ostracism; sexting involves distributing nude or sexual images without consent; and trolling entails the deliberate posting of provocative or inflammatory content to elicit emotional or argumentative reactions from other users.

Beyond age and gender, cyberbullying can involve physical, cultural, ethnic, and religious biases. Because of its capacity to spread damaging content rapidly and widely, its psychological effects are frequently considered more severe than those of traditional bullying.

Cyberbullying and Technology

Cyberbullying stands out as a prominent hazard associated with dependence on online platforms, emerging as a conspicuous exemplar of technological misuse over the past decade, owing to its deleterious and occasionally fatal repercussions. The ramifications of cyberbullying extend beyond the individual sphere to impact both individuals and organisations, manifesting in an array of adverse outcomes including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and academic underachievement (Beran & Li, 2007).

Initial inquiries into cyberbullying mirrored the framework employed in traditional bullying studies, conceptualising cyberbullying as a variant of indirect bullying and predominantly focusing on the technological aspects of its perpetration. However, cyberbullying transcends mere technological aggression, encapsulating a social problem characterised by harassment, intimidation, and unwarranted hostility enacted through digital means by an individual or group upon a victim, with the repercussions of such harassment reverberating and amplifying exponentially (Grigg, 2020).

Social Media: Concepts and Platforms

Social media is broadly conceptualised as an umbrella term for internet-based platforms that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content through Web 2.0 technologies (Kapoor *et al.*, 2018). Mayfield (2018:2) defines them as “online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation, and connectedness,” enabling real-time and asynchronous communication across diverse content formats. Beyond communication, these platforms have evolved into digital ecosystems that shape the social realities of 21st-century undergraduates (Kapoor *et al.*, 2018). In the Nigerian context, social media serves as a third space bridging formal academic life and informal peer interaction (Subair, 2019), yet simultaneously creates environments conducive to networked harassment, cyberbullying, and attendant psychological consequences (Olowu & Seri, 2023; Salari *et al.*, 2025).

Among the key platforms, Facebook supports offline-rooted relationships and ‘social searching’ behaviour among university students (Joinson, 2008), while X (formerly Twitter) drives real-time public and academic discourse. Instagram exposes users to social comparison and appearance-based cyberbullying, including unauthorised sharing of manipulated images (Geng *et al.*, 2021; Tabares *et al.*, 2024). WhatsApp, near-universally adopted among Nigerian undergraduates, facilitates peer communication, but its closed-group structure limits accountability for harassment. TikTok, driven by algorithmic short-form video, has equally become a site of denigration, flaming, and trolling behaviour (Fredrick *et al.*, 2025).

Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement is a multidimensional construct comprising behavioural, emotional, and cognitive components (Rasheed *et al.*, 2020; Alalwan, 2022). Behavioural engagement encompasses visible actions such as likes, comments, shares, and posts, spanning both active participation and passive consumption like scrolling and lurking (Patchin & Hinduja, 2022). Emotional engagement reflects a user's sense of belonging to a digital community, including the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) that keeps undergraduates tethered to their feeds, a dynamic that heightens susceptibility to cyberbullying-related psychological trauma (Tabares *et al.*, 2024). Cognitive engagement, by contrast, involves the mental effort expended in curating one's online persona or participating in academic discourse within digital groups.

For university students, social media engagement functions as a double-edged sword. While high engagement can foster academic collaboration, problematic social media use, characterised by an unmanageable urge to remain online, is associated with academic procrastination and increased vulnerability to cyberbullying (Tabares *et al.*, 2024; Xia *et al.*, 2023). In the Nigerian context, undergraduates spend an average of two to four hours daily on these platforms, driven primarily by socialisation and information-seeking (SEAHI Publications, 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Originally proposed by Albert Bandura, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) posits that behaviour is learned through observing others within social interactions, experiences, and media influences (Bandura, 1986; Bargh *et al.*, 2022). Central to the theory is “triadic reciprocal determinism,” the dynamic interaction between the person, their behaviour, and their environment, which shapes how individuals interpret and internalise observed actions.

In this study, SCT explains how undergraduates who observe frequent, unpunished cyberbullying may perceive the digital space as hostile, triggering self-regulation that reduces their social media engagement. This framework directly informs the research question investigating how cyberbullying affects the engagement patterns of undergraduates at Lead City University.

The Online Disinhibition Effect

Proposed by John Suler (2004), the Online Disinhibition Effect explains why individuals behave more intensely online than offline, attributing this to the anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronicity of digital communication, a condition termed “toxic disinhibition.” In the context of cyberbullying, this toxic variant is most relevant, empowering perpetrators to harass peers they would otherwise respect in physical settings.

For this study, the theory explains why cyberbullying is pervasive on platforms affording anonymity, and why victims may retreat into digital withdrawal as a defence mechanism. It directly informs the research questions investigating the prevalence and common forms of cyberbullying encountered by undergraduates on social media.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative research design. This involved a survey method.

Population of the Study

The population for this study comprises the undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan, across nine faculties and 53 departments spanning medicine, social sciences, management sciences, law, engineering, arts, environmental design, and public health. Undergraduates constitute the ideal target population for this study for two primary reasons: (1) they are the demographic group that most extensively uses social media platforms in Nigeria; and (2) they represent a digitally active population whose social media engagement patterns are susceptible to influence by cyberbullying experiences.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Given the large undergraduate population at Lead City University, a multi-stage sampling technique was adopted, combining stratified, purposive, and convenience sampling. The university was first stratified into its nine faculties and 53 departments to ensure proportional representation across all academic units. Purposive and convenience sampling were then applied to select only actively enrolled undergraduates willing to participate. Five students were drawn from each of the 53 departments, yielding a total sample size of 265

respondents. It is important to note that the application of purposive and convenience selection at the final sampling stage renders the resulting sample non-probabilistic. Accordingly, prevalence figures reported in this study reflect estimates derived from the achieved sample and should not be construed as generalisable population-level prevalence rates for all undergraduates of Lead City University.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire organised into five sections. Section A captured demographic information, while Section B assessed social media engagement patterns, including platforms used, daily time spent, and type of engagement. Section C comprised nine dichotomous Yes/No items identifying specific forms of cyberbullying experienced, and Section D examined prevalence and circumstances of victimisation, including frequency, platform, and reporting behaviour. Section E contained ten items measured on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1), capturing respondents' self-reported behavioural, emotional, and perceptual responses to cyberbullying encounters, with a decision rule set at a mean score of 2.50, above which items were considered "Agreed." It should be noted that Item 6 of Section E assesses emotional and psychological well-being rather than social media engagement per se, and Item 8 asks respondents about the effect of witnessing (rather than personally experiencing) cyberbullying; both items are retained as they capture important intermediate outcomes and vicarious learning dimensions, respectively, but are acknowledged as not measuring social media engagement directly.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instrument

The questionnaire was subjected to face and content validity tests by four senior academics in the Mass Communication Departments of the University of Ibadan, Bowen University, Iwo, Precious Cornerstone University, Ibadan, and Lead City University, Ibadan, who reviewed each item for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha via SPSS version 27, based on a pilot test of 30 respondents. The overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.87, exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), with individual section alphas ranging from 0.79 (Section D) to 0.91 (Section E), confirming a high level of internal consistency across the Likert-scale sections. It should be noted, however, that Section C of the questionnaire, which comprises nine dichotomous (Yes/No) items identifying distinct forms of cyberbullying experienced, constitutes a checklist rather than a reflective psychometric scale. Cronbach's alpha is not an appropriate reliability indicator for such a checklist, as its items are not assumed to measure a single underlying latent construct; accordingly, the alpha coefficient should not be interpreted as applying to Section C in the same manner as to Sections D and E.

RESULTS

Research Question One: What is the current pattern of social media engagement among undergraduates of Lead City University?

Table 1: Respondents' Pattern of Social Media Engagement

Pattern	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Social media used <i>(Note: Multiple responses allowed; percentages are based on N = 265 respondents and do not sum to 100%.)</i>	WhatsApp	255	96.2
	Instagram	208	78.5
	TikTok	189	71.3
	YouTube	178	67.2
	Facebook	152	57.4
	X (Twitter)	134	50.6
	Snapchat	87	32.8
	Less than 1 hour	18	6.8

Duration (Time spent Daily)	1 – 2 hours	51	19.2
	3 – 4 hours	121	45.7
	5 hours and above	75	28.3
Total		265	100
Purpose of engagement	Socialisation (connecting with friends and peers)	155	58.5
	Information-seeking	56	21.1
	Entertainment	38	14.3
	Academic purposes	16	6
Total		265	100
Type of engagement	Active (posting, commenting, sharing)	148	55.8
	Passive (scrolling, viewing, lurking)	117	44.2
Total		265	100

Table 1 shows WhatsApp as the most used platform (96.2%), followed by Instagram (78.5%), TikTok (71.3%), YouTube (67.2%), Facebook (57.4%), X (50.6%), and Snapchat (32.8%). Socialisation was the dominant purpose of use (58.5%), ahead of information-seeking (21.1%), entertainment (14.3%), and academic purposes (6.0%), confirming social media's primarily relational rather than academic function among respondents.

Research Question Two: What are the common forms of cyberbullying encountered by undergraduates of Lead City University on social media?

Table 2: Forms of Cyberbullying Experienced by Respondents

Form of Cyberbullying	Yes (Freq.)	Yes (%)	No (Freq.)	No (%)
Harassment (repeated offensive messages)	187	70.6	78	29.4
Trolling (provocative/offensive comments)	168	63.4	97	36.6
Denigration (false/harmful statements posted)	162	61.1	103	38.9
Flaming (angry/rude/vulgar messages)	143	54.0	122	46.0
Exclusion (deliberately left out of groups)	134	50.6	131	49.4
Impersonation (someone pretended to be you)	96	36.2	169	63.8
Cyberstalking (persistent monitoring)	89	33.6	176	66.4
Outing/Trickery (private info shared)	87	32.8	178	67.2
Unsolicited sexual content (sexting)	72	27.2	193	72.8

Table 2 presents the forms of cyberbullying experienced by respondents. The most common forms of cyberbullying experienced by undergraduates of Lead City University on social media are harassment (70.6%), trolling (63.4%), denigration (61.1%), flaming (54.0%), and exclusion (50.6%). Less prevalent, though still notable, were impersonation (36.2%), cyberstalking (33.6%), outing/trickery (32.8%), and unsolicited sexual content or sexting (27.2%).

Research Question Three: What is the extent of cyberbullying prevalence among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan?

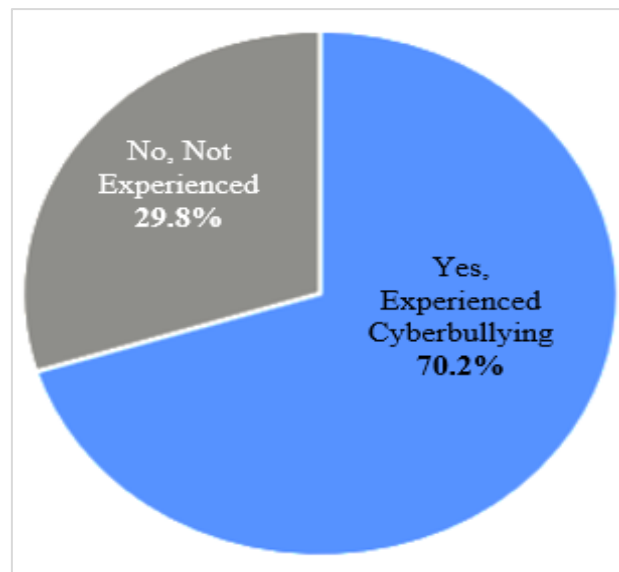


Figure 1: Prevalence of Cyberbullying among Respondents

Figure 1 reveals a high prevalence of cyberbullying victimisation among undergraduates of Lead City University. A substantial majority, 186 respondents (70.2%), reported having experienced cyberbullying on at least one social media platform, while 79 respondents (29.8%) had not. The overall victimisation rate of 70.2% ($n = 186$) was operationalised via a global self-report item in Section D that directly asked respondents whether they had personally experienced any form of cyberbullying. This figure differs marginally from the 70.6% ($n = 187$) who endorsed the harassment item in Table 2. The one-respondent discrepancy reflects a difference in self-labelling: one respondent selected “Yes” to the specific harassment item but responded “No” to the global cyberbullying victimisation question, indicating they did not personally categorise their experience as cyberbullying. This is consistent with evidence that some individuals who experience behaviours meeting definitional criteria for cyberbullying do not self-identify as victims (Kowalski et al., 2014). The 70.2% figure, derived from the direct global victimisation item, is used as the primary prevalence indicator throughout this study.

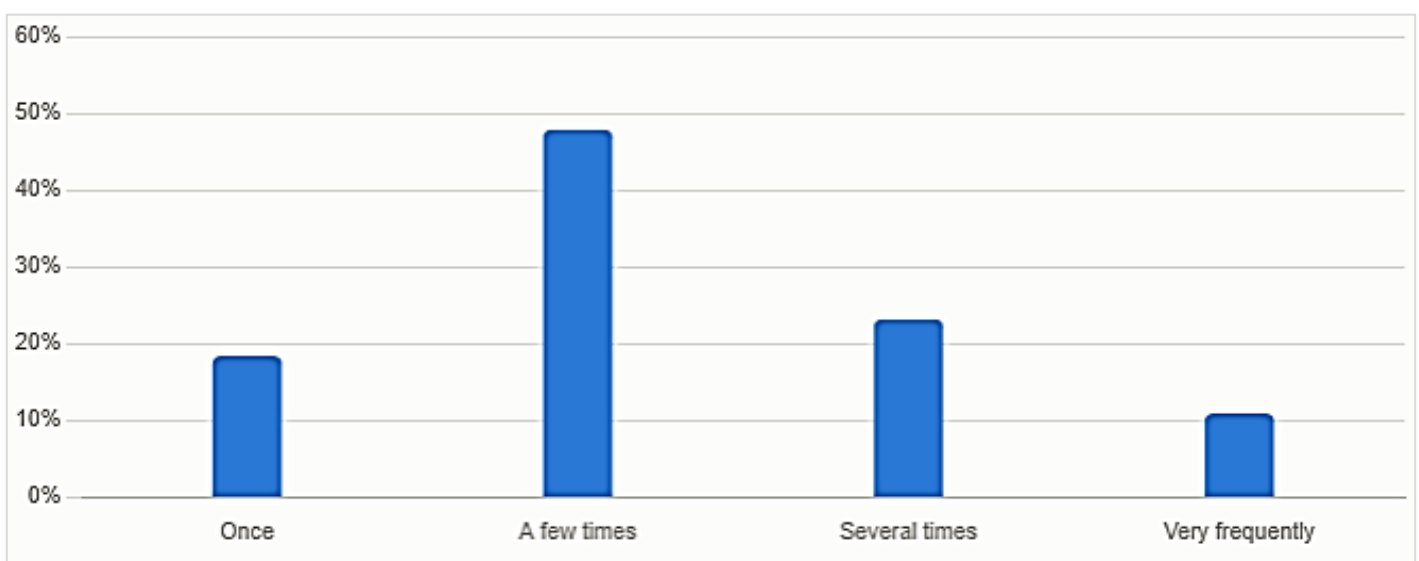


Figure 2: Frequency of Cyberbullying Victimisation

Among the 186 respondents who had experienced cyberbullying, the majority (47.8%) reported experiencing it a few times, while 23.1% reported experiencing it several times and 10.8% very frequently. Only 18.3% had experienced cyberbullying just once.

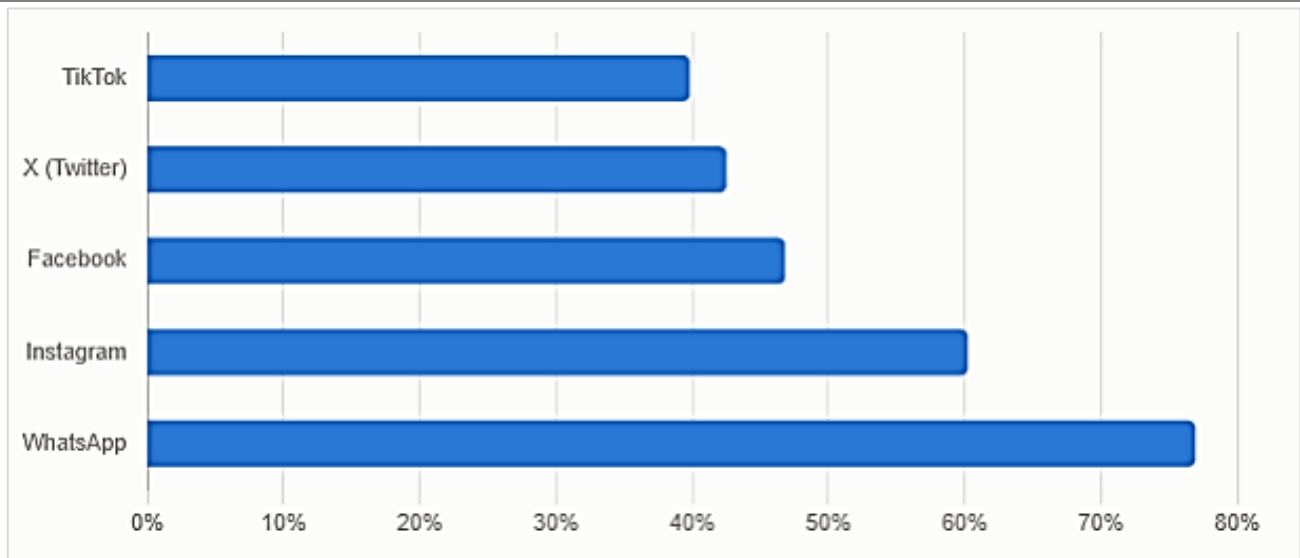


Figure 3: Platforms Most Associated with Cyberbullying (Multiple Responses)

Figure 3 presents the social media platforms where cyberbullying is most prevalent. It was found that WhatsApp was the platform most frequently associated with cyberbullying victimisation (76.9%), followed by Instagram (60.2%), Facebook (46.8%), X formerly Twitter (42.5%), and TikTok (39.8%).

Table 3: Reporting of Cyberbullying Incidents

Reporting Behaviour	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes, reported to friends or family	52	27.9
Yes, reported to university management	14	7.5
No, kept it to myself	120	64.5
Total	186	100.0

Table 3 reveals a pattern of significant underreporting of cyberbullying incidents. The majority of victims (64.5%) chose not to report the experience to any authority, keeping it to themselves. Only 27.9% reported to friends or family, and a mere 7.5% reported to university management.

The overall findings reveal that the prevalence of cyberbullying among undergraduates of Lead City University is high, with 70.2% of respondents having experienced cyberbullying at least once. The experience is recurring for most victims, occurring predominantly on WhatsApp and Instagram. A large majority (64.5%) of victims do not report their experiences to any authority.

Research Question Four: How do undergraduates at Lead City University, Ibadan perceive cyberbullying to have influenced their social media engagement patterns?

Table 4: Effect of Cyberbullying on Social Media Engagement, Likert Scale Analysis

S/N	Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	After experiencing/witnessing cyberbullying, I reduced my time on social media	89	97	31	29	19	3.78	Agreed
2	Cyberbullying made me afraid to share my opinions or post freely online	102	108	22	24	9	4.02	Agreed
3	I switched my social media accounts to private/restricted settings due to cyberbullying	78	94	31	42	20	3.63	Agreed

4	Cyberbullying made me more careful and selective about what I post online	127	93	18	15	12	4.16	Agreed
5	I deactivated or deleted at least one social media account due to cyberbullying	48	72	41	63	41	3.09	Agreed
6	Cyberbullying negatively affected my emotional and psychological well-being	118	109	19	12	7	4.20	Agreed
7	I avoid engaging in online discussions to prevent being targeted by cyberbullies	87	104	31	29	14	3.83	Agreed
8	Witnessing others being cyberbullied has made me less willing to engage actively on social media	93	112	27	22	11	3.96	Agreed
9	I report or block cyberbullies as a coping strategy for continued social media use	67	89	48	41	20	3.54	Agreed
10	Despite experiencing cyberbullying, I continue to use social media but with increased caution	84	102	38	28	13	3.82	Agreed
						Grand Mean	3.80	Agreed

Key: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.
Decision rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Agreed; Mean < 2.50 = Disagreed.

Table 4 presents the Likert scale analysis of cyberbullying's effect on undergraduates' social media engagement at Lead City University. All ten items exceeded the decision rule threshold of 2.50, indicating general agreement across the scale. The highest-scoring item was Item 6, "Cyberbullying negatively affected my emotional and psychological well-being" (Mean = 4.20), followed by Item 4, "Cyberbullying made me more careful and selective about what I post online" (Mean = 4.16), and Item 2, "Cyberbullying made me afraid to share my opinions or post freely online" (Mean = 4.02), collectively underscoring the chilling effect of cyberbullying on self-expression. The lowest mean was recorded for Item 5, "I deactivated or deleted at least one social media account due to cyberbullying" (Mean = 3.09), indicating that account deletion, while the least common response, remains a notable coping behaviour. The grand mean of 3.80 indicates that respondents generally agreed that cyberbullying influenced their social media engagement behaviours. It is important to note, however, that this mean score reflects the average level of self-reported agreement with perception-based statements; it does not constitute an inferential test of association, a measure of effect size, or evidence of causation. The findings are appropriately characterised as descriptive of self-reported behavioural and perceptual responses to cyberbullying.

DISCUSSION

Patterns of Social Media Engagement

The findings of this study reveal that undergraduates at Lead City University are intensive and multidimensional social media users. WhatsApp was the most dominant platform (96.2%), followed by Instagram (78.5%) and TikTok (71.3%), with a plurality of respondents (45.7%) spending three to four hours daily on these platforms. These findings are consistent with Oyero's (2013) observation of the proliferation of social media use among Nigerian undergraduates driven by the widespread adoption of smartphones and mobile internet. They are also consistent with the report by SEAH Publications (2025), which estimated that Nigerian undergraduates spend an average of two to four hours daily on social media platforms.

The finding that socialisation (58.5%) is the primary purpose of social media use, far ahead of academic purposes (6.0%), confirms the positioning of social media as primarily a social-relational tool for students. This has important implications for the cyberbullying phenomenon: if social media is the primary arena for students' social identity, peer validation, and interpersonal relationships, then acts of online aggression on these platforms carry a heightened potential for psychological harm and social disruption.

Furthermore, the finding that 55.8% of respondents identify as active users, posting, commenting, and sharing, while 44.2% are passive users, primarily scrolling and lurking, aligns with the conceptual distinction between active and passive engagement in the literature (Rasheed *et al.*, 2020; Alalwan, 2022). The significant proportion of passive users is particularly notable: as discussed in Chapter 2, passive engagement can itself be a consequence of prior cyberbullying exposure, with victims retreating to lurking as a protective strategy.

Forms of Cyberbullying

The study found that harassment (70.6%), trolling (63.4%), and denigration (61.1%) are the most common forms of cyberbullying experienced by undergraduates at Lead City University. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on cyberbullying forms. Willard (2004) identified harassment as one of the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying due to the ease with which digital communication enables repeated offensive messaging. Fredrick *et al.* (2025) similarly identified trolling as an increasingly dominant form of cyberbullying, particularly among young adults who use social media for public discourse.

The relatively lower prevalence of sexting (27.2%) and outing (32.8%) compared to harassment and trolling may reflect the more personal and stigmatised nature of these forms of cyberbullying, as victims may be less willing to disclose such experiences even anonymously. It may also reflect the greater effort and deliberation required to perpetrate such forms compared to the spontaneous aggression involved in harassment or flaming. Nonetheless, even a prevalence rate of 27.2% for sexting is cause for significant concern, particularly given the documented psychological consequences of non-consensual intimate image sharing (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014).

Prevalence of Cyberbullying

The study recorded a cyberbullying prevalence rate of 70.2% among undergraduates of Lead City University, a rate that is substantially higher than most international estimates, which typically range from 10% to 40% (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014; Lenhart *et al.*, 2010). This elevated prevalence rate may reflect several contextual factors unique to the Nigerian university environment. First, the near-universal adoption of WhatsApp, a platform with limited content moderation, creates conditions in which acts of harassment and denigration can occur with minimal accountability. Second, the large, densely connected social networks typical of Nigerian university students mean that cyberbullying content can spread rapidly across multiple peer groups.

The finding that 47.8% of victims experienced cyberbullying a few times and 23.1% experienced it several times confirms that cyberbullying is often a repetitive rather than isolated phenomenon, consistent with the definitional criteria of bullying more broadly (Olweus, 2013). The high rate of non-reporting (64.5%) mirrors the pattern observed by Tayeh (2023), who found that most cyberbullying victims in university settings choose to keep their experiences private. This silence is potentially explained by the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004): the same anonymity that empowers perpetrators may make victims feel powerless and disinclined to seek institutional redress.

Effect of Cyberbullying on Social Media Engagement

The most notable finding of this study is that respondents broadly reported that cyberbullying was associated with multidimensional changes in their social media engagement behaviours, as reflected in a grand mean score of 3.80 across ten self-reported items. This finding is consistent with the theoretical predictions of both Social Cognitive Theory and the Online Disinhibition Effect, lending descriptive support to the conceptual framework developed in the literature review. Given the descriptive, cross-sectional, and self-report nature of the study, however, no causal inference is warranted.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) predicts that when students observe or experience cyberbullying, an aggressive and harmful behaviour enacted without apparent consequences, they engage in self-regulation by reducing their own visibility on the platforms associated with such aggression. The study's findings are broadly consistent with this mechanism: Item 1 (Mean = 3.78) and Item 7 (Mean = 3.83) both indicate that respondents reduced their time on social media and avoided online discussions after encountering cyberbullying. This behavioural modification is a manifestation of the triadic reciprocal determinism: the person (student), the

behaviour (social media engagement), and the environment (cyberbullying-laden digital space) interact to produce a net reduction in engagement.

The Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) provides a complementary explanation by accounting for why cyberbullying has such a potent silencing effect on victims. The same anonymity that emboldens perpetrators to engage in harmful disinhibited behaviour also intensifies the fear and anxiety experienced by victims, who cannot always identify or predict the source of aggression. Item 2 (Mean = 4.02), “Cyberbullying made me afraid to share my opinions or post freely online”, captures this chilling effect precisely.

The finding that cyberbullying negatively affected the emotional and psychological well-being of respondents (Item 6, Mean = 4.20) is consistent with the extensive evidence in the literature linking cyberbullying victimisation to anxiety, depression, and reduced psychological well-being (Beran & Li, 2005; Mitchell *et al.*, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2023). The study thus extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that this psychological harm also translates into measurable changes in social media behaviour, specifically, the restriction of accounts (Item 3, Mean = 3.63), the adoption of more cautious posting practices (Item 4, Mean = 4.16), and, in some cases, the deactivation or deletion of accounts altogether (Item 5, Mean = 3.09).

Notably, Item 10 (Mean = 3.82) reveals that despite these negative effects, many students continue to use social media, but with heightened caution. This finding suggests that cyberbullying does not simply drive students off social media altogether; rather, it transforms the quality and character of their engagement, shifting them from open, active participation to a more guarded, defensive mode of interaction. This has significant implications for the developmental benefits that social media affords young adults, including peer connection, identity exploration, and access to information, benefits that are diminished when engagement is driven by fear rather than genuine social motivation.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduates at Lead City University engage intensively with social media, predominantly through WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, driven primarily by socialisation. Their largely active engagement pattern elevates digital visibility and, consequently, exposure to cyberbullying, a phenomenon that is both multifaceted and alarmingly prevalent, with seven in ten students reporting victimisation. The most common forms, harassment, trolling, and denigration, are enabled by the anonymity and perceived impunity of online communication, while persistently high rates of underreporting indicate that existing institutional mechanisms for addressing cyberbullying remain critically inadequate.

Cyberbullying is perceived by a substantial proportion of undergraduates as a deterrent to active social media engagement, with self-reported impacts spanning behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The reported consequences, including self-censorship, reduced online activity, account restriction, and psychological distress, collectively suggest that cyberbullying may undermine the social, educational, and communicative benefits that social media can provide, though longitudinal and inferential research is needed to establish these relationships more rigorously. These findings underscore the urgent need for structured institutional responses to cyberbullying in Nigerian university environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Lead City University should develop and formally implement a comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policy defining offences, specifying consequences, and establishing accessible reporting mechanisms publicised through orientation programmes and institutional channels. Digital literacy and responsible online citizenship should be integrated into the general studies curriculum, with attention to the Nigerian Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, and the Like) Act, 2015. The Guidance and Counselling unit should be adequately resourced to identify and support vulnerable students, while trained peer educators and digital ambassadors should promote responsible social media use and foster a culture of reporting over silence.

Since most victims confide in family rather than institutional authorities, awareness campaigns targeting parents should equip them to recognise signs of cyberbullying victimisation, provide emotional support, and direct affected students toward appropriate professional resources. Families should maintain open, non-

judgmental communication with students about their digital experiences, reducing the stigma that deters disclosure.

Undergraduates should exercise deliberate caution in online interactions, apply privacy settings proactively, and refrain from amplifying harmful content. Victims are encouraged to document incidents, utilise platform reporting tools, and seek institutional or personal support rather than withdrawing silently. Responsible digital citizenship should be understood as integral to students' broader academic and social conduct.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes several significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge in mass communication, digital communication, and Nigerian media studies. First, it advances the application of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) to the specific context of cyberbullying and social media engagement among Nigerian undergraduates. By applying both theories simultaneously, the study demonstrates their complementary descriptive utility in accounting for the self-reported behavioural responses of cyberbullying victims in a Nigerian university context.

Also, it provides an institutionally specific, quantitative descriptive study of cyberbullying and self-reported associations with social media engagement among undergraduates of Lead City University, Ibadan. This fills a significant gap in the Nigerian-contextual literature on cyberbullying in higher education. Furthermore, the study provides specific, disaggregated data on cyberbullying prevalence rates, forms, and platforms that can serve as a baseline for future longitudinal studies tracking changes in cyberbullying dynamics as new social media platforms emerge and evolve.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are some limitations in this study that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, its cross-sectional design means that data were collected at a single point in time, preventing any establishment of temporal ordering between cyberbullying experiences and changes in social media engagement. Consequently, causality cannot be inferred from the findings, and the language of this paper is deliberately framed in terms of perceived associations and self-reported responses rather than causal effects. Also, the sampling strategy, which combined stratified, purposive, and convenience approaches, yields a non-probability sample. The selection of an equal number of students ($n = 5$) from each of the 53 departments does not constitute proportional representation unless all departments have equal undergraduate populations. Accordingly, the study's prevalence estimates should not be generalised as population-level figures for Lead City University or for Nigerian undergraduates more broadly. Third, exclusive reliance on a self-administered questionnaire introduces common-method variance and self-report bias. Respondents may underreport sensitive experiences such as cyberbullying victimisation due to social stigma or embarrassment, and their retrospective assessments of how cyberbullying changed their social media behaviour may be subject to recall bias and post hoc rationalisation. The absence of objective behavioural data (e.g., platform-level engagement metrics) means the study measures perceived rather than actual changes in engagement.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should consider a comparative investigation of cyberbullying prevalence and its effects across public, private, and faith-based Nigerian universities, to identify institutional variables that may mediate or moderate cyberbullying outcomes beyond what a single-institution study can establish. Also, a qualitative study employing in-depth interviews or focus group discussions with cyberbullying victims would complement the quantitative findings of this study by providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of cyberbullying and its specific consequences for students' digital lives.

Further research should also examine gender as a moderating variable in the relationship between cyberbullying and social media engagement, given the mixed evidence in the literature on gender differences in victimisation and coping responses. Related to this, a study assessing the effectiveness of institutional anti-cyberbullying policies in Nigerian universities, comparing outcomes across institutions with and without formal intervention frameworks, would yield practically significant findings for university administrations.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Although the study did not undergo formal institutional ethics committee review, all procedures were consistent with the ethical standards applicable to low-risk survey research. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose before participation, and their involvement was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. No personally identifiable information was collected; anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. The integrity of the data was upheld; data were not manipulated, and findings are reported truthfully.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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