Reporting the Perpetrator as Coping Strategy against Cyberbullying among Undergraduates in Select Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is increasing daily on the Internet, especially through the social media. It has been described by experts as not only a social, but a mental health problem due to its devastating psychological outcomes which sometimes lead to the death of victims. One way of solving the problem is for a victim to report the perpetrator to law enforcement agencies for appropriate sanctions; among other coping and preventive strategies. The study investigated the issue by adopting the qualitative survey method to identify the persons and institutions that university undergraduates report cyberbullying attacks to, in Lagos State, the hub of Nigeria's Information and Communication Technology. Focus Group discussions were held at three selected universities. Findings show that 51.7 percent of discussants would report incidents of cyberbullying against them to a third person or relevant authorities. Also, 55.1 percent of discussants agreed that male undergraduates were guiltier than their female counterparts in perpetrating cyberbullying. It was recommended that, since few undergraduates seem to be reporting cyberbullying attacks to the campus authorities, the authorities should encourage more of them to come out and report. Reporting should be seen as the first step towards the right direction aimed at solving the problem. Authorities should also be carrying out constant enlightenment campaigns against cyberbullying on campus and directing such anti – bullying messages more, at male undergraduates since they are guiltier of the offence.

Key Words: Cyberbullying, Internet, perpetrator, reporting, victims, undergraduates

Introduction

Cyberbullying can be described as the use of electronic means like the Internet, audio and video, by a perpetrator or cyberbully to harass another person with the intention of hurting the victim repeatedly. Victims and perpetrators of this type of harassment can be children, the youth and adults; though studies have shown that the greatest level of prevalence exists among the youth globally. However, the perpetrator and the victim often switch roles, depending on which side of the coin the person chooses. Thus, a cyberbully today can become a victim tomorrow and vice versa.

In most cases, the next thing after suffering harassment online is for the victim to think of the things he can do to stop or prevent recurrence. These are the coping strategies. Coping strategies can be described as the ways individuals or groups apply behavioral, cognitive and emotional prescriptions to stressful situations or problems, subsequently preventing such from happening again. As cyberbullying happens online mostly, some coping strategies include blocking the bully, changing of victim's password, avoiding offensive websites, talking to the bully and reporting him to constituted authorities, friends, parents and other people. It is said that a problem shared is half solved, as such the tendency for victims of cyberbullying is to tell someone or authority at least, to share the problem, get support and find solution.

Identifying that someone or authority to whom a victim or potential victim may report perpetrator of online harassment, can subsequently bring succor to the reporter as the other party is expected to take action to end or nip the menace in the bud. If an online bully is reported to the website administrator, his account can be removed by the administrator thus bringing relief to the victim. Reporting the bully to the police can lead to his arrest and imprisonment. Reporting the perpetrator to the campus authorities can

lead to his rustication or expulsion. This study is thus expected to identify the individuals or institutions that undergraduates report perpetrators of cyberbullying to, and will equally guide potential victims on whom they can run to for help.

Ascertaining who is guiltier of cyberbullying between male and female undergraduates is also of great importance as it will guide campus authorities in designing customized anti-bullying and counselling messages to solve the problem. The type of messages to be designed for female perpetrators, victims, and potential victims will be different from those of males, as this goes a long way in ensuring that such communication is an effective one.

It is against the foregoing background that this study investigates the act of reporting the perpetrator as a coping strategy against cyberbullying, with the study objectives set in line with this backdrop.

Objectives of the study.

The study sought to:

1. Identify person or institution to whom undergraduates of the selected universities report incidents of cyberbullying,
2. Ascertain who is guiltier of cyberbullying between male and female undergraduates of the selected universities.

Review of Related Literature

1. Cyberbullying and gender.

There have been contradictions in the area of gender behavior with respect to studies on cyberbullying. Some studies demonstrated that boys were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying as perpetrators, while girls were more likely to be cybervictims (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansal, 2009; Li, 2006; Ortega et al., 2009; Wade & Beran, 2011). On the other hand, other studies showed that boys were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying as both bullies and victims (Nansel et al., 2001; Aricak et al., 2008). And just as Zhou et al (2013) and Li (2007) discovered that students with lower academic status were likely to become perpetrators, Ma (2001) claimed that such students were likely to become victims of cyberbullying. Looking at the foregoing, it is better to have a thorough understanding of the risk factors involved in cyberbullying so as to guide one in whatever intervention, prevention, or coping strategies one may want to put in place.

On the reporting of incidents of cyberbullying by victims, a study showed that up to 80 percent of regular bullying incidences were not reported to staff of educational institutions or schools (Rigby & Slee, 1999). The Li (2007) study showed that the vast majority of the students who were bullied online or who knew someone bullied online preferred to stay quiet rather than inform adults. The possible explanation in this regard might be that many students, over one-third of the students in the study sample, did not think that adults in schools would make effort to stop cyberbullying brought to their notice. Subsequently, because of this belief that adults in schools were helpless, many students, feeling either scared or powerless, would not report cyberbullying cases. This corroborates the literature that adolescents' perceptions of their school environments relate to their bullying related behaviors (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). It brings to the fore the importance of building, and further strengthening, a trusty relationship between students and school staff, made up of teachers, administrators and others.

Another explanation might be students' lack of appropriate strategies to deal with the problem. As the data indicated, most victims and bystanders did not report cyberbullying incidents. Female cyber victims, however, were more inclined to inform adults about the incidents than male cyber victims, according to the findings. This is a very interesting discovery and it likely has to do with the gender differences identified in conversational styles (Tannen, 1994). In her work, Tannen indicated that "men

are more likely to be aware that asking … for any kind of help, puts them in a one-down position" (p. 24). As a result, males tend not to ask for help or inform others about their troubles.

Some of the studies enumerated so far have demonstrated the importance of examining gender differences in aggressive behaviors with some finding that males were more physically aggressive (such as punching and kicking) and more likely than females to bully their peers. In spite of this, research has shown mixed and contrasting evidences regarding gender differences in cyberbullying across different age groups (Tokunaga, 2010). Mark and Ratliffe (2011) and Del Rey, Elipe, and Ortega-Ruiz (2012) discovered age differences to be significant only with regard to cyber victimization. In their analysis, Barlett and Coyne (2014) found that males engaged more in cyberbullying than females, but they reached comparable levels of cyberbullying frequency in early adolescence (at 11 years approximately) while prior to that, girls were more likely to cyberbully peers than males, whereas males were more likely to be bullied online in late adolescence and into college-aged years. The results also showed that the country of origin moderated gender effects, with gender differences found for North America, Europe, and Asia in the male direction, but not for Australia (Barlett & Coyne, 2014). Cultural differences also came up in the work of Balakrishnan (2015) who found among Malaysian young adults (aged 17 – 30) that females outnumbered males as cyberbullies and cyber victims while the frequency of Internet use significantly predicted cyber victimization and cyberbullying. There seems to be continuity between processes of social exclusion or rejection, inclusiveness, social acceptance, and aggressive behavior expressed by the individual offline and online, as dysfunctional relational dynamics could take place in real life as well as in a virtual environment (Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, & Casas, 2012).

2. Cyberbullying: male and female perpetrators.

Some studies have come out with the finding that males were more likely than females to be traditional bullies, although there were inconsistent findings regarding the gender of victims (Monks & Smith, 2000). Also, there were some gender differences in types of aggression, with studies reporting that boys were more likely than girls to use direct forms, but less pronounced gender differences have been reported for indirect aggression (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). According to Rivers et al. (2011), some studies have found that boys were more likely than girls to be cyber aggressors (Li, 2006; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012) whereas others have argued that given the more indirect nature of cyberbullying, girls might be more likely than boys to be involved in the act. When one looks at the findings in relation to traditional bullying, it might be said that girls and boys favor, and are exposed to different forms of cyberbullying.

3. Cyberbullying and coping strategies

A qualitative study on how high school students perceived coping with cyberbullying was undertaken by Parris, Varjas, Meyers and Cutts (2011). The researchers carried out in-depth interviews with 20 students from a suburban high school located in a south-eastern American public school district. It was asserted that an understanding of students' coping with cyberbullying could go a long way in helping researchers and professionals to determine ways to alleviate and/or prevent the negative effects of cyberbullying. The researchers sought to expand on previous research concerning cyberbullying through close examination of specific ways the students deployed in coping with incidents of cyberbullying. Two research questions: What coping strategies did high school students report using, following cyberbullying incidents? and, what coping mechanisms did high school students report as preventive strategies regarding cyberbullying? were addressed by the authors. Findings showed three primary coping themes. They are, Reactive Coping, Preventive Coping, and No Way to Prevent Cyberbullying.

Reactive coping strategies include avoiding the cyberbullying situation by deleting messages, deleting online accounts, blocking numbers, or ignoring the situation; accepting cyberbullying as a normal part of life that could not be stopped and letting it go. Others are, justifying the cyberbully's actions by focusing on his negative characteristics like cowardice and being immature, thus he should not

be a cause of worry; and reporting him to a person in authority to stop him. As for preventive coping strategies, they include talk in person and increased security and awareness. Prescriptions by respondents under this strategy include talking or confronting the bully personally, increasing security measures like password protection, limited identifying information and self-disclosure among others as well as overall awareness like knowing websites that might not be safe and staying away from them. Some of the respondents chose the third option by reporting that there is no way to reduce cyberbullying because the bully is anonymous, and will even bypass one technology and use another if he is blocked or banned.

4. Reporting the cyberbully

In a 2002 study of 339 undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire, it was discovered that approximately 10 percent of the participants received "repeated messages that threatened, insulted, or harassed" (Finn, 2004, p. 474) through e-mail or instant messages. More than half of the respondents sampled had received unwanted pornographic messages or pictures. The messages originated from strangers, acquaintances, and many others. However, only 6.8 percent of the respondents harassed online, reported the incidents. The reasons for not reporting the incidents were: the respondents did not consider the problem serious enough to report (37.5%), the respondents ignored the message (19.5%), didn't know who to report it to (12.5%), or handled the problem by themselves (19.5%) (Finn, 2004). Respondents who reported the harassment were more likely to have received the e-mail from strangers, and have received pornography (Finn, 2004).

Generally speaking, adults have been found to encourage student-victims to tell a teacher or parent if they were bullied. This had recorded some success in traditional bullying; although it was discovered that many victims were unwilling to tell adults about their victimization, especially older pupils and boys (Smith & Shu, 2000). Slonje and Smith (2008) discovered that this reluctance to tell was even more pronounced in cyberbullying, and in their Swedish sample, not a single cybervictim had told an adult at school about being a target of harassment from perpetrators. With respect to school-based intervention/prevention, there are many programs developed with traditional bullying in mind, which as Ttofi and Farrington (2011) observed, often had been reasonably successful. It has been suggested that these programs could be extended to embrace cyberbullying without major changes. In short, it is obvious that cyberbullying needs to be interwoven as components of these programs, in form of a whole-school anti-bullying policy, and awareness-raising and curriculum-based activities. A case in mind of a successful general anti-bullying program was the KiVa program in Finland, which included computer based classroom activities, and support for victims from high-status peers. Although the Finnish program was primarily designed with traditional bullying being the main focus, evaluations so far showed that KiVa was as effective in reducing cyberbullying as it was for a variety of traditional forms of bullying (Salmivalli, Kärna, & Poskiparta, 2011).

In another study, Cassidy, Jackson, and Brown (2009) asked some students in Canada to mention whom they would tell when they experienced cyberbullying. From the responses, 47 percent mentioned school staff, 74 percent of the respondents reported that they would tell a friend, while 57 percent mentioned a parent or guardian. The researchers discovered that within the sampled respondents, their readiness to tell either school staff or a parent decreased with their age. Although these numbers looked reasonably encouraging, they however went down drastically when the victims of cyberbully were asked about what they actually did.

5. Cyberbullying and the consoler.

In a study of Dutch adolescents, Dehue, Bollman, and Vollink (2008) asked victims what steps they took after experiencing attacks from cyberbullies. Results showed that 13 percent told a friend, 9 percent told their parents, 7 percent did not tell anyone while just 2 percent told a teacher. In the case of Smith et al. (2008), the researchers discovered that 16 percent of victimized respondents in their study sought help from parents and 9 percent from teachers. But, in another study, that of Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, and

Ólafsson (2011) which used as sample, children aged 9 to 16 years in 25 different countries, the researchers found that 77 percent of the cybervictims had talked to someone about their experience; 52 percent told a friend, 13 percent told a sibling, 42 percent talked to a parent, 8 percent told an adult they trusted and 7 percent told a teacher. According to Slonje et al. (2013), with respect to the students interviewed by them; reporting a cyberbullying incident seems to be the last course of action the respondents took, that is if they took any action at all following such incidents.

Slonje and Smith (2008) discovered that students saw adults as people who were unaware of the problem at hand. This could be interpreted to mean that they thought adults would not be able to handle the problem well if they were told. In short, students often talked about technical coping strategies such as blocking people online, changing one's password, username or mobile phone number, when they were asked about steps they adopted in coping with victimization. But, most studies found that only a few of the students sampled actually sought help from other people. However, a consistent finding was that if at all these students decided to tell somebody, their first choice was usually a friend, followed by a parent and lastly one of their teachers; all in their search for a consoler or adviser.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two theories of Mass Communication, the Uses and Gratification Theory and Technological Determinism Theory.

Uses and Gratification Theory is a theory concerned about how people use specific media to gratify their specific needs which may include need for education, entertainment, socialization and relaxation. It is often said that the Internet is full of positive information that could make life better as well as serve as an educational resource forum or data base for students and researchers. However, the cyberbully chooses to use it for something negative. The needs of the cyberbully seem malicious. His specific need is the feeling of contentment through hurting the feelings of others. And he uses different Internet forums and other electronic mediums like the mobile phones to gratify the unusual need.

Technological Determinism Theory is a reductionist theory that originated from the American sociologist, Thorstein Veblen (1857 – 1929). It assumes that the technology found in a society will determine how the society's social structure and cultural values develop. The theory aims at gaining an understanding into how human actions and thoughts are influenced by technology. It also assumes that a change in technology is the root of corresponding change in the society. The theory seeks to examine technical developments, media or technology as a whole as being the chief catalyst of history as well as social change.

One important form of technological determinism is Media Determinism. It is a form of philosophical and sociological position that allocates lot of power to the media to impact on the society. Online media technology with its associated uses has brought tremendous change to the lives of both the young and the old all over the world, in line with the stance of media determinists. The Technological Determinism Theory is relevant to the present study which is on usage of the Internet for cyberbullying by undergraduates. The Internet technology makes it possible today for the youth including undergraduates to interact with their computers, smartphones and other Internet enabled devices. Camera, alarm, text, video, audio, timer and other devices are present on smartphones and these are used to perform different life changing tasks including online harassment.

Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative aspect of Survey research. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were held among a total of 29 university undergraduates, male and female, from three selected universities in Lagos State, the social and financial capital of Nigeria. For the sake of balance, one federal university; the University of Lagos (UNILAG), one state university; Lagos State University (LASU), and one private

university; Pan Atlantic University (PAU) were selected. The state has only one state and one federal university as such, they qualify for selection automatically. Lagos State was purposively selected as it is the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) hub of the country, with the highest number of Internet users nationwide. Studies have established that cyberbullying always thrive where there are large numbers Internet users.

There are six private universities in Lagos, approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC). They are Augustine University, Ilara – Epe; Pan Atlantic University, Lekki; Caleb University, Imota; Anchor University, Ayobo; Eko University of Medical and Health Sciences, Ijanikin, and James Hope University, Lekki. Pan Atlantic University was selected out of the six, through simple random sampling.

Though, 30 discussants were initially selected, that is 10 from each of the three universities, but this was reduced to 29 because only 9 discussants showed up at LASU. The discussants were purposively selected as those with Internet enabled devices who are constantly exposed to online content. The discussions were recorded on tape and the content analyzed by the researcher with the help of three research assistants.

Data Presentation

Two major questions were discussed by the focus group discussants in line with the study's objectives. They have to do with whom the discussants would report incidents of cyberbullying affecting them; and, who they believe is guiltier of cyberbullying between male and female undergraduates and why? The responses form the basis of the findings and analysis.

On who they would report incidents of cyberbullying, findings from the University of Lagos (UNILAG) showed that 4 of the 5 female discussants disclosed that they would not report to anybody but deal with it personally because among other reasons, "it is not worthy of report", while 1 female discussant affirmed that she would report to the police "if it concerns nudity or threat to life". Also, 4 of the 5 male discussants claimed they would report to the relevant authorities, like the police, if the cyberbullying is life threatening while 1 male discussant revealed that he would not report but would also "deal with it personally". On who is guiltier of cyberbullying, 7 (5 females and 2 males) of the 10 discussants pointed to male undergraduates, while the remaining 3 male discussants accused female undergraduates of being guiltier. Reasons discussants gave for accusing males as perpetrators include, "they are abusive in nature", "they do it for fun", "they feel their opinions are superior", "they are carefree", "they gossip a lot" and "they enjoy it".

From the foregoing one could conclude that in UNILAG, half of the discussants affirmed that they would report incidents of cyberbullying to relevant authorities to sanction the perpetrators. And, in terms of level of attacks, male undergraduates perpetrate cyberbullying more than their female counterparts. Most of the discussants also used uncomplimentary words to describe the reasons behind male undergraduates' involvement in electronic aggression.

With respect to who they will report incidents of cyberbullying, 2 out of the 5 male discussants from Lagos State University (LASU) disclosed that they would report to the police or other relevant authorities. Another 2 claimed that their reporting depended on the gravity of the harassment while 1 male respondent disclosed that he would not report to anybody.

Furthermore, 2 out of the 4 female discussants revealed that their reporting of the cyberbullying incident also depended on the gravity of the attack. Also, 1 discussant affirmed that she would report to the relevant authorities while the last 1 announced that she would ignore the bullying incident because "it's not worth reporting".

On who is guiltier of bullying online, 3 out of the 5 male discussants blamed male undergraduates for the menace while the other 2 males asserted that female undergraduates were fond of harassing others online. Out of the 4 female discussants, 3 agreed that males were fond of perpetrating online bullying while 1 female discussant identified females as culprits.

From the LASU findings, one may conclude that most of the discussants (6 out of 9) would not report incidents of cyberbullying to relevant sanction - bearing authorities. It seems most of them do not

believe in such reporting but would rather ignore the incidents. Also, majority of the discussants agreed that male undergraduates are guiltier of perpetrating cyberbullying.

On who they will report acts of cyberbullying, 5 out of the 7 female discussants from Pan Atlantic Univers**ity (PAU)** affirmed that they would report perpetrators to the social media administrators or owners of the website, to sanction them by removing them from the medium or closing their accounts, among others. The other 2 revealed that they would report to a friend to advise them on what to do. All the 3 male discussants agreed that they would report the bully to their friends for advice by sharing the information online.

Out of the 7 female discussants from the university, 5 of them reported that females engaged more in cyberbullying, 1 of them attributed cyberbullying to both males and females, while the last 1 reported that males were guilty. They accused males of engaging in cyberbullying more because "they want to revenge especially when they are lovers to the females".

Out of the 3 male discussants that participated at the university, 1 of them identified females as perpetrators stating that they harassed others online because "they really hate themselves". Also, 1 male discussant mentioned males as culprits while the last 1 announced that he had no idea on who was guiltier between male and female undergraduates.

The foregoing results from PAU show that on the average, discussants, especially female discussants would report cyberbullies to website or social media administrators for punishment while males would just share the information with fellow males for advice without actually reporting to any authority for punishment, or website administrators for sanctions on the perpetrators. Also, majority of the discussants (6 out of 10) believed females were guilty of perpetrating cyberbullying on others more than the males.

Generally speaking, 51.7 percent of discussants from the three universities would report incidents of cyberbullying against them to a third person or authorities, while 55.1 percent agreed that male undergraduates were guiltier than females in perpetrating the menace.

Discussion of Findings

Looking at results from the three universities, one could conclude that on the average, undergraduates, especially female undergraduates would report cyberbullies to website or social media administrators for punishment while males would just share the information with fellow males for advice and not actually reporting to any authority for punishment or website administrators for sanctions on the perpetrators. Generally, about half of the undergraduates affirmed that they would report incidents of cyberbullying to relevant authorities to sanction the perpetrators. More male undergraduates tend to report to friends rather than adults. This aligns with the findings of Slonje and Smith (2008) who discovered that students saw adults as people who were unaware of the problem at hand. This could be interpreted to mean that they think adults will not be able to handle the problem well if they tell them. A consistent finding was that if at all these students decided to tell somebody, their first choice was usually a friend, followed by a parent and lastly one of their teachers. Another study, by Li (2007), showed that the vast majority of the students who were bullied online or who knew someone bullied online preferred to stay quiet rather than inform adults.

In the present study, more females report incidents to website or social media forum administrators to sanction the perpetrator. Also, more males than females tend to prefer reporting to the police or relevant authorities. The present findings also showed that male undergraduates are guiltier of perpetrating cyberbullying. This is in agreement with some previous studies which demonstrated that boys were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying as perpetrators, while girls were more likely to be cybervictims (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansal, 2009; Li, 2006; Ortega et al., 2009; Wade & Beran, 2011).

Limitations of study

The study would have been better and the findings more representative if more universities across the country were included and equal number of male and female discussants participated. Also, during the

group discussions, some discussants were impatient, rowdy, and not cooperating fully with the researcher, with some of them in a hurry to end the sessions and face other engagements.

Conclusion

When one reports or discusses a problem, the problem is halfway solved. Reporting the perpetrator of cyberbullying, rather than keeping quite; is a coping strategy that will go a long distance in reducing the menace if not totally eradicating it among the youth. Online harassment is a global problem with consequences that are sometimes fatal. One could infer from the outcome of the study that cyberbullying is alive and trending on the campuses and many undergraduates are reporting it.

Recommendations

From the findings, it is recommended that, since few undergraduates seem to be reporting cyberbullying attacks directly to the campus authorities, the authorities should encourage more of them to come out and report. Reporting is a first step in the right direction towards solving the problem. More reports by victims mean more actions by the authorities in reducing the vice, as sanctions would be imposed on the offenders. Gradually, solution to the problem would become a reality. Authorities should also be carrying out constant enlightenment campaigns against cyberbullying on campus and directing more of the anti–bullying messages, at male undergraduates since they are guiltier of the offence.

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