Social Media Access and Cyberbullying- A Nigerian Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Freedom of speech is a core index of the strength of any democracy. The social media and messaging platforms today have become the ultimate expression of this right. Many social media platforms exist today and are commonly used by young people. In all forms of communication, the importance of mutual respect cannot be over-emphasized and social media platforms are not an exception. The dividing line between freedom of speech and respect for the person at the other end of the communication is becoming blurry today and this transition zone is widening. The "social media disinhibition phenomenon" is the mindset behind cyberbullying.

Children are treasures to their parents and loved ones but are often worst hit by cyberbullying.The World Health Organization (WHO) defined health in its 1948 constitution as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."[1] This definition stands true today as it did then. Often, the physical aspect of health is emphasized while little or no attention is paid to the mental and social aspects of health. It is important that a child is healthy for proper growth and development.

Social Media refers to forms of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)[2]. Social media has surpassed traditional means of communication in terms of audience and usage. Over 60% of 13 to 17-year-olds have at least one profile on social media, with many spending more than two hours a day on social networking sites.[3] Many social media platforms exist today, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, Tumblr, Snapchat, WeChat and QQ.The largest of these is Facebook, with up to 1.9 billion users worldwide[4]. Facebook and WhatsApp are probably most commonly used in Nigeria today.

Social media has played a vital role in the evolution of modern communication. Thus, it has become a vital tool for dissemination of news, entertainment andadvertising. It has also assumed important roles in business, activism, health, agriculture, education and technology. Little wonder, having a social media presence is now a prerequisite for almost any business outfit to thrive today. The future still holds lots of potential applications to which social media can be used.

Social media is not without its disadvantages. From its use by militant groups to radicalize and recruit innocent people, to pornography, scams, fake news, poor time management skills in children and piracy. A narrative review published in 2014 which included 43 studies published from 2003 to 2013 looked at the effects of online communication and social media on the mental health of young people[5].It found that despite its advantages, social mediacan affect children's development in other ways such asdifficulty forming sustainable real-life relationships leading to social isolation, depression and cyberbullying[5]. It is an unpleasant irony that something that is supposed to be "social" can lead to social isolation and depression.

CYBERBULLYING

Moreno MA (2004) defined cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself"[6]. Bullies used to exert their harmful acts physically especially in schools, but with the evolution of social media over the years, they now have a platform with a reach that that transcends physical contact. Cyberbullying may be an extension of bullying often experienced in schools or may occur completely on its own. Both adults and children can be victims of cyberbullying, but children are the most vulnerable. This is because of their innocence and the fact that children often have no voice. Mentally or physically challenged people are also susceptible. As a result, most cases of bullying probably go unreported. Many adults now probably experienced one form of bullying or the other during childhood. Some may even wrongly believe that it is a normal part of development-as certain cultures may impress it upon them in Nigeria.

Cyberbullying can assume different forms such as flaming, impersonation, cyberstalking, outing, trolling[7] and roasting. Flaming refers to an aggressive exchange between two or more people that is meant to cause provocation; impersonation refers to when people post or comment as others if they have gained access to another's account and can be used to bully. Cyberstalking is when people follow and harass their victims for malevolent reasons. "Outing" is the sharing of someone's personal data and secrets for

malicious purpose. "Trolling" refers to an attempt to try to wind up others online with immature questions or mean comments to elicit a reaction[7]."Roasting" occurs when there is a convergence of attacks from different people on a single victim to cause humiliation. Other forms of cyberbullying probably exist. Some of these forms of attacks may be presented as humour to conceal the real intent.

Cyberbullying is on the rise. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children(NSPCC) in the United Kingdom documented an 88% increase in the number of children and young people experiencing online bullying over 5 years[8]. Also, nearly a third of all counselling sessions were from children and young people experiencing bullying on a gaming or social networking site. Children as young as 7 were tormented with hurtful messages. Comments ranged from bullying about looks to death threats and in the most extreme of cases, children and young people were told to "go and kill yourself"[8].

Effects of cyberbullying on the victims are enormous and its after-effects can last into adulthood. Common signs children show from cyberbullying includebeing withdrawn, anxious, clingy, depressed and aggressive behaviour. Others are behavioural changes, insomnia, eating disorders, missing school, changes in eating habits, bed wetting, clothe soiling, obsessive behaviour, nightmares, use of drugs or alcohol, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Such children lose their self-esteem, have fewer friends, are suspicious of others, and don't do well in school. Children who witness bullying may show similar signs to children being bullied[9].

Numerous cases of suicide have been linked with cyberbullying. Popular cases include Ariyo Olanrewaju Taiwo, a Nigerian who expressed suicidal thoughts on Facebook, only to be bullied online with taunts to go ahead; he committed suicide few hours after the post in March 2017[10].Rehtaeh Parsons, a Canadian, was gang-raped and photos were distributed online. She attempted suicide as a result, which led to a coma. Her life support machine was switched off in April 2013 and she died at 17 years[11].

Jadin Bell (American; 1997-2013)[12] and Kenneth Weishuhn (American; 1997-2012)[13] both committed suicide in separate events after being cyberbullied because of their sexual orientation. Other suicide victims of cyberbullying include Amanda Todd[14], Audrie Pott[15], Phoebe Prince[16], Megan Meier[17] and Ryan Patrick Halligan[18]. Many cases of such suicide probably go unreported or uninvestigated.

Perpetrators of cyberbullying are also affected by their activity as they are at risk of substance misuse, an academic problem, and violent behaviour in later life[9].It is not hard to imagine the Cyberbully being involved in sexual violence, domestic violence, substance addiction and other criminal activities.

In 2012, Reuters sponsored one of the most intensive worldwide cyberbullying surveys ever performed. The survey polled 18000 people living in 24 countries. It was found that 80% admitted that cyberbullying was a serious problem in their country, 10% of parents reported that their child had been a victim, while 25% reported that they knew a child who had been victimized. It was also found that countries with limited internet access have relatively low cyberbullying rates, while countries with higher internet access have higher cyberbullying rates. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, where about 50% of the population has access to the internet, only 29% of the population know about cyberbullying. Australia, by contrast, with a higher internet access rate than the United States of 83%, has up to 87% of its citizens being aware of the issue-making it the worst place for cyberbullying worldwide. In addition, countries with high censorship rates tend to under-report awareness of cyberbullying-Reuters found that less than 50% of Chinese citizens have heard of cyberbullying[19].A similar or worse scenario may exist in North Korea.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA DISINHIBITION PHENOMENON

It is commonsense observation that people tend to exhibit disinhibition on social media platforms compared with real-life interactions[20]. This is because of a perceived protective disconnect from the target recipient. The cyberbully feels there is an "opaque" veil separating him and the victim, and so is emboldened and insensitive in his antisocial behaviour. It is the psychological basis behind this predatory mindset that is referred to as the "Social Media Disinhibition Phenomenon". This disinhibition results from several veneers that the cyberbully assumes are protective. They include anonymity, physical distance, encryption, ease of provocation and impersonation. These veneers have not only directly or indirectly played roles in cyberbullying, but also militant/terror group recruitment, human trafficking, hacking, fake news,scams, piracy and pornography.

The issue of internet anonymityfor instance, is one that would be rightly termed a "double-edged sword". Internet anonymity has proven useful in whistleblowing and anti-censor activism. People living in countries with oppressive governments have benefitted immensely from anonymity. Many have gone to great lengths to preserve online anonymity e.g. the Tor Project and virtual private network (VPN). Anonymity also provides a level playing ground for people to engage in discussions without discrimination. On the other hand, anonymity serves as a hidingplace forpiracy, hacking, identity theft and carrying out other nefarious activities. Many even call

for the removal of internet anonymity entirely e.g. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeierhas called for an end to internet anonymity to curb harassment or hateful speech[21]. The argument regarding internet anonymity and encryption will undoubtedly continue and censoring measures will probably be matched by anti-censoring/circumvention efforts.

Cyberbullies are motivated by envy, pathological obsession(professional or sexual), unemployment or failure with job or life, intention to intimidate and make others to feel inferior, delusional acquaintance with target, desire to instil fear, intimidation for financial gain or business competition, revenge over perceived or imagined rejection or even plain anonymity[22,23]. Religious fanaticism, political ideology, racial prejudice, gender discrimination and philosophical points of view could serve as motivation. Sometimes, there is no obvious drive.

The objectives of bullies are power, control, domination, subjugation and humiliation. Cyberbullies derive a perverse sense of gratification from what they do. They harbour a lot of internal aggression which they direct at others. This may include projection, false criticism and patronising sarcasm whilst contributing nothing of any value. Many are also chronic attention-seekers. The anger of a serial bully is especially apparent when they come across someone who can see through them to espy the weak, inadequate, immature, dysfunctional aggressive individual behind the mask[24]. It is likely that cyberbullying reflects covert psychological disorders that have been neglected.

DISCUSSION

Bullying is no longer about the strong picking on the weak in the schoolyard. The physical assault has been replaced by a 24 hour per day, seven days a week online bashing.i-SAFE America surveyed 1500 American students in 2004 and found that42% of kids have been bullied while online, with 1 in 4 having had it happen more than once. Also, 35% of kids have been threatened online, with nearly 1 in 5 having had it happen more than once; 21% of kids have received mean or threatening e-mail or other messages. Similarly, 58% of kids admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online, with more than 4 out of 10 saying it has happened more than once. Furthermore, 53% of kids admit having said something mean or hurtful to another person online and more than 1 in 3 having done it more than once. In addition, 58% have not told their parents or an adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online[25].Online bullying is obviously a big issue as can be seen from this study and some of the kids were involved too. This study also points out something important-that most children do not report their cyberbullying experiences.

In 2009, researchers at the University of Valencia(Spain), conducted a survey in 11 secondary schools in Valencia. There were 2101 teenagers between the ages of 11 and 17 involved-out of this, 1098 were boys and 1003 were girls. Sofia Buelga, co-author of the study stated, "The data from our study shows that technological bullying affects 24.6 percent of teenagers in the case of mobile telephony, and 29 percent with regard to the Internet." The study also found that girls suffer more bullying than boys in most cases, particularly verbal bullying, invasions of privacy, spreading of rumours and social exclusion[26]. This is less than the American study but not any less significant. The study also introduces a gender dimension to how children are affected in Valencia. Although it is possible that societal expectations of the male to be tough (as it is in Nigeria) may play a role in how open respondents were to the survey.

The cyberbullying research centre conducted ten different studies from 2007 to 2016 in the United States of America. The study assessed lifetime cyberbullying victimization rates across school children. The rates have gradually risen over the years, from 18.8% in 2007 to 33.8% in 2016. The average rate is 27.9% over the years[27]. This rate of cyberbullying has been gradually rising but is less than the i-SAFE study.

A 2015 study of 653 students in Oyo state (Nigeria), found thatall respondents had personal mobile phones and about half had internet access. About 40% accessed the Internet every day while about 48% accessed it at least once to several times a week and <5% accessed it about once every 2 weeks. Also, 23.9% had harassed someone electronically, 39.8% had been victimized and 21.0% were both victims and perpetrators[28]. This study highlights an important fact-that some respondents were both victims and perpetrators. How this came about is not clear, but it is more likely that they were victims first before becoming perpetrators.

Another 2015 study took place in Benin, Edo state (Nigeria). Simple random sampling technique was used to select 300 in-school adolescents from fifteen randomly selected secondary schools. Data were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression. The measures of association between the variables (self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy and cyberbullying) identified in the study revealed a significant relationship. The study produced an F-Ratio which implies the consequence of cyberbullying which has an impact on in-school adolescent's self-esteem, self-concept and self-efficacy. Self-esteem, self-concept, andself-efficacy all correlatesignificantly with cyberbullying of in-school adolescents[29].

Today, the average Nigerian kid has a cell phone and already has a social media account by the time he gets to secondary school. Internet penetration in Nigeria is 46.1%, accounting for 2.5% of the world

internet users. Although it has consistently been rising yearly, it is quite low for the country's potentials and a population of about 187 million[30]. Despite this, it is proportionate to its level of cyberbullying.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria is a very rich, diverse and promising country-but like every other country, it has its peculiar challenges. Cyberbullying is one of these challenges facing young people. It has the potential to rise steadily over the years probably due to increased internet penetration and availability of cheaper smart phones. Unfortunately, the proliferation of social media and messaging platforms has contributed also because these are the means used. Proactive steps need to be taken to control it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need to curb the menace of cyberbullying in Nigeria to ensure healthy psychological development in individuals, especially children. It is recommended that this is done at the level of the family, institution and government. Internationally, several non-governmental organizations are currently working on this, such as cyberbullying research centre, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, No Bullying, Quit Stalking Me and Bully online. Most of these are more active in first-world countries. Under-developed and developing countries need to give more attention to the prevention and control of cyberbullying. The following are endorsed:

1) More awareness needs to be created about cyberbullying in schools and workplaces through seminars, conferences, etc.

2) Institutions such as schools and workplace need to operate an open-door policy regarding cyberbullying to allow appropriate assessment and investigation.

3) Social media and messaging platforms need to create and reinforce channels for reporting cyberbullies.

4) Individuals, especially children should be taught to adhere to online safety protocols.

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