



# Social Media and Cyberbullying During Covid-19 in Nigeria: Implication for Guidance and Counselling

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**Abstract:** *This study investigated the level and impact of cyberbullying among adult social media users in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. A cross-sectional online survey design was employed, with data collected from 98 participants (aged 18-45) recruited via social media influencers on Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. Findings indicate a significant increase in both social media usage and associated risks, including cyberbullying, during the lockdown period. Respondents primarily attributed this rise to increased online activity, anonymity, and socio-political tensions. Reported impacts included psychological distress, depression, low self-esteem, and social isolation. The study concludes that the pandemic exacerbated a distinct, communally-driven form of adult cyber aggression. Consequently, it recommends a paradigm shift in counselling practices, advocating for the development of adult-focused cyber-wellness programs, specialised training for counsellors in digital harm, and collaborative advocacy for safer online spaces.*

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Social Media, COVID-19, Adult Users, Guidance and Counselling  
**JEL Code:** I29, Z13

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## **Introduction**

Social media became a critical tool for many people to stay connected with friends and family, share information, and find humour and distraction from the pandemic through Internet memes. Research has shown that social media usage during the pandemic decreased anxiety and stress in some individuals, while others experienced negative impacts on their mental health (Voss et al., 2023). Social media helped improve mental health during the coronavirus lockdown period through reducing loneliness, enabling access to family members, and loved ones (Cauberghe et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020) and providing accessibility to information, support, and assistance (Naslund et al., 2020).

According to reports, the epidemic has had a detrimental effect on almost 1.5 billion pupils around the globe, and in only a few months, the number of people using social networks and the internet has increased to over 300 million individuals (See Ozgur, 2020). The World Health Organization in 2021 reported that the pandemic has demonstrated how social media and other digital platforms can be a source of both misinformation and an opportunity to keep people informed, connected and safe. Due to the pandemic, many social media users noticed an increase in their usage of the platform (Jain et al., 2020). Thus, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on social media usage, with changes in the way people use social media and the role it plays in society.

With the shift in social interaction from physical space to the cyberspace during the COVID-19 pandemic, cyberbullying has increased within the past year (*see* Rosli et al., 2021). Shin & Choi (2021) argued that in comparison to the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea, cyberbullying among adolescents has become worse, as a result of social distancing practises leading to a greater use of online platforms and social networking platforms. Kee et al. (2022) equally hypothesised that the likelihood of cyberbullying occurrences has increased due to the development of numerous apps that allow online connections. Thus, it is important to examine the phenomenon of social media and cyberbullying during COVID-19. Specifically, this study will examine the views of adult social media users on the level of cyberbullying on social media platforms and possible effects of such bullying.

### **Concept and Literature**

Differentiating cyberbullying from traditional bullying, some scholars identified features of social networking sites and how they improve negative impacts from six aspects: intentionality, repetition, power imbalance, anonymity, accessibility, and publicity (Ferrara, et al., 2018; Tokunaga, 2010). Nocentini et al. (2010) examine the attributes of cyberbullying behaviour and equally identified that majority possess the above attributes. Digital accounts give offenders an extra level of anonymity, escalating the power disparity between them and the victims (Chan et al., 2021). The networked platform allows other users to access bullying posts, which causes victims to suffer injury repeatedly. Through elements that are unusual in the digital networking mediums, including liking, sharing, and hash-tagging, social networking sites can enable the quick transmission of bullying content to a larger audience (Chan et al., 2021).

Social media bullying is quite unique but even easier to conceptualize than kinds of cyberbullying, it is a type of cyberbullying that involves intentional and hostile behaviour by a person or group of people that entails utilising social media virtual platform to spread harmful or upsetting content to a target frequently (Chan et al., 2019). Because of the ease of access to the internet and social media accounts, cyberbullying, which is not limited by factors like sexual orientation or gender identity, age, etc. has now spread to many social media users around the world (Jain et al., 2020).

According to Jain et al. (2020) the coronavirus pandemic has influenced the vulnerability of internet users to cyberbullying victimization. People have been isolated throughout the pandemic, making them more susceptible to the bad behaviour of their bullies. Habes et al. (2020) writing about Jordan, stated that the state witnessed cyberbullying in situations, cases, or occurrences comparable to those associated with the Corona epidemic in 2020. Increased reliance on social media due to the implementation of social distancing rules, which implies higher risk of cyberbullying (Shin & Choi, 2021; Yang, 2021). Thus, in addition to moving social interaction in daily life, the workplace, and education into digital environments, the coronavirus pandemic has also contributed to bullying's ongoing digitisation. Teenagers and young adults are becoming more concerned about online-aided victimization, particularly as the role of the internet and social media in our daily lives continues to rise (Jain et al., 2020). Among the most prevalent issues that users of social media platforms encounter are bullying and online harassment (Ali et al., 2020; Tahat et al., 2020).

Because the coronavirus pandemic sprouted from China, some studies (e.g., Alsawalqa, 2021; Yang et al. 2022) have examined the prevalence of cyberbullying associated with the coronavirus global epidemic, concentrating primarily on adults and people from East and Southeast Asia as they were more likely to be the target of discrimination and hate speech. Other studies (e.g., Dong et al., 2020; Han et al., 2021; Marzo et al., 2021) have investigated the

use of internet and associated psychological factors during the coronavirus pandemic in China. Zaffaroni et al. (2022) found how emotional stress attached to the coronavirus epidemic serve as a significant predictor for experiencing cyberbullying victimization.

Some studies focused on investigating if the pandemic led to an upsurge in cyberbullying incidences in several countries. For example, Barlett et al. (2022) found a discernible increase in the incidence of cyberbullying during the coronavirus pandemic. Kee et al. (2022) analysed how the coronavirus pandemic, which has an impact on social media use, equally impact on cyberbullying. They employed a sample of 200 Malaysian volunteers to test the hypotheses. The findings reaffirmed a substantial link between the COVID-19 pandemic's influence and cyberbullying and found an increase in cyberbullying events because of increasing social media use brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic. However, the study was unable to uncover any statistical support for the idea that gender modifies the association. Using MongoDB and Python libraries between January 1st, 2020, and June 7th, 2020, Karmakar & Das (2021) quantitatively assessed the significance of COVID-19 on cyberbullying reports using advanced time series statistical algorithms with 454, 046 publicly available tweets from Twitter. Such research provides some compelling proof of the surge in tweets connected to cyberbullying around the exact same period as the coronavirus pandemic.

Using the same data, Karmakar & Das (2020) examined the hypothesis of whether cyberbullying and reporting of such incidents have increased in the wake of coronavirus pandemic. Although the findings did not suggest an upsurge in reporting cyberbullying, they revealed a significant relationship between the pandemic and the discussion of such incidents by individuals. Accordingly, Nazir & Thabassum (2021) reviewed the phenomenon of cyberbullying during the wake of coronavirus pandemic in Turkey with secondary data. They found a strong prediction that cyberbullying will get worse during the pandemic. The review has shown that at the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, Twitter trends relating to cyberbullying have increased, and that some populations are the targets of racist internet attacks. A conference hosted by the Jordanian Ministry of Culture in cooperation with other relevant organizations revealed the spread of cyberbullying behaviour among Jordan social media users specifically against women and through Facebook by 69.4% during the coronavirus period (Tahat et al., 2020).

Some scholars examined whether there may be changes in the determinants of cyberbullying during the coronavirus pandemic. For example, Jain et al. (2020) focused on studying whether the factors that are known to significantly influence cyberbullying vulnerability changed with the coronavirus pandemic lockdown using survey with 256 students in India. The study surveyed 256 students before the lockdown pace and 118 students during the lockdown pace. The study found that factors important in both durations include, experience with offline bullying, individuals' perceptiveness to others' opinions and frequency of social media posts. Additionally, factors like tendency to interact with strangers online, whether they've started a relationship online and hours spent on social media were found significant before the lockdown pace. Conversely, being opinionated on public platforms, preference of Instagram, preferred gaming platform, number of games played, sexual orientation and age were found to be significant during the lockdown pace.

Accordingly, Barlett et al. (2021) tested the relationship between experience of coronavirus disease and cyberbullying. The study employed data from two cross-sectional studies of US adults involving 194 respondents selected from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They analysed whether personal and proximal experiences with coronavirus disease are associated to cyberbullying perpetration because of increase in stress. The study found that personal and

proximal coronavirus disease experiences positively correlated with cyberbullying, while personal coronavirus disease experiences were indirectly related to cyberbullying through stress, but not proximal experiences. Contrarily, Choi et al. (2022) used a comparison study to investigate the variables influencing the experience of cyberbullying among Korean elementary school kids in the year 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic started to spread more intensely. They used binary logistic regression to analyse information from the Korea Communications Commission's 2019 and 2020 Cyber Violence Survey. The study found that only in 2020 did relationships between parents and their kids, school policies on cyberbullying, and awareness of cyberbullying as an issue statistically significantly affect how children experience cyberbullying.

Mkhize & Gopal (2021) used a non-participant observation to explore the vulnerabilities for victimization of minors and youth through cyberbullying during the coronavirus lockdown period in South Africa. Data was gathered from posts on three popular social media websites (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). According to the survey, most of the minors and youths who used social media more frequently during the lockdown became victims of cyberbullying. Using online quantitative survey, Zaffaroni et al. (2022) studied the level of cyberbullying victimization among young internet users ranging from 10 to 18 years during the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of coronavirus lockdown in Germany and Italy. The results of two binary logistic regressions used to examine the roles of various factors show that children's emotional distress was the most reliable predictor in both types of bullying encounters. The results also reveal no mathematically significant national differences on the strength of the above factor in bullying encounters.

With a sample of 992 adolescents from the United States recruited via social media site advertisements, Espinoza (2022) examined whether witnessing cyberbullying victimization incidents among peers strengthens or weakens the association between personal cyberbullying victimization incidents and adolescents' feelings of anxiety during the beginning stages of the coronavirus disease in 2019. The key results revealed a significant moderating role of witnessed cyber victimization incidents during early period of the coronavirus disease. Espinoza (2022) found that adolescents who personally experience cyber victimization may feel less alone in their plight and thus, less anxious if they also witness others being targeted online.

Rosli et al (2021) studied the notions of cyber bullying harassment, the risks associated with such crimes, and the legal and management mechanisms for dealing with such crimes during coronavirus disease period in Malaysia. The study employed doctrinal content analysis as well as secondary data from the law, academic journals, books, and online sources. The study found that unequal power relations in the workplace, anonymity, and cross-border connectedness are some of the rationales for cyberbullying, which can be expressed in a variety of ways with negative consequences for employers and employees alike. With regards to mechanisms, Vejmelka et al (2022) tried examining parental role in determining cyberbullying during lockdown. Using a quantitative online survey, Vejmelka et al. (2022) made a comparison of internet habits, cyberbullying, and parental role in the online activities of young internet users prior to and during the coronavirus lockdown period, when the use of the Internet improved because of online classes and the lockdown measures imposed to ensure social distancing. They found that the rate of cyberbullying decreases even when use of internet increases, with parental control factor found to play a key role in the decrease.

In view of the above, several studies were conducted on cyberbullying and COVID-19. Some studies have examined prevalence of cyberbullying during the pandemic (Alsawalqa, 2021;

Dong et al., 2020; Han et al., 2021; Marzo et al., 2021; Yang et al. 2022), the link between COVID-induced emotional stress and experience of cyberbullying (Zaffaroni et al., 2022), relationship between upsurge in cyberbullying cases and COVID-19 lockdown (Karmakar & Das, 2021; Kee et al., 2022; Ponde-Mutsvedu & Chirongoma; 2022; Nazir & Thabassum, 2021; Tahat et al., 2020), investigate changes in determinants of cyberbullying due to COVID-19 (Jain et al., 2020; Barlett et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2022), while, others focus on vulnerabilities of young social media users to cyberbullying due to COVID-19 (Mkhize & Gopal, 2021; Zaffaroni et al., 2022). Thus, there is paucity of literature on cyberbullying experiences of social media users during COVID-19 in Nigeria.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a cross-sectional online survey design to investigate experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying on social media among adults in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey instrument was designed and administered using the Qualtrics XM platform, facilitating the collection of both structured and qualitative primary data. This approach was selected to enable efficient, wide-reaching data collection across geographical boundaries within a constrained timeframe.

The target population consisted of adult social media users in Nigeria, aged 18 to 45. A non-probability sampling strategy was utilized, employing recruitment via social media influencers. Prior to data collection, agreements were secured with three influencers, one each on Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram, who posted invitation links to the survey on their platforms. The initial target was 20 respondents; however, the final sample comprised 98 participants who fully completed the survey.

The online questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section A collected demographic and social media usage data through closed-ended questions. Section B addressed the substantive research issues, employing a mix of closed-ended (e.g., Likert-scale, multiple-choice) and open-ended questions to capture both frequency and personal experiences related to cyberbullying. Data collection was active for a period of 14 days. Ethical participation was ensured through a digital informed consent process on the first page of the survey; only participants who provided consent could proceed to the questionnaire.

Data analysis was conducted using the Qualtrics analytics suite and complementary thematic analysis. Numerical data derived from closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and presented in tabular form. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed thematically. This involved generating initial codes from the textual data, which were subsequently reviewed and grouped into evolving thematic categories to identify key patterns and insights.

To enhance content validity, the survey instrument was reviewed and refined by a Professor of Sociology (with specialization in Criminology) to ensure alignment with research objectives, clarity, and the removal of ambiguous or irrelevant items. Reliability was supported by using standardized, clearly worded questions and a secure, reputable data collection platform. Key ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, including guaranteeing participant anonymity (no personally identifiable information was collected), securing informed consent, providing information on support services, and ensuring encrypted, password-protected data storage on a secure university server. The research progress was monitored bi-weekly by the academic supervisor.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The use of an online, English-language survey and influencer-mediated recruitment may have biased the sample toward more educated, urban, and socially connected individuals, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, the nature of the survey carries inherent risks of social desirability bias, non-response to certain items, or potential dishonesty. While steps were taken to use clear and neutral language, these methodological constraints are acknowledged.

## Results

### Demographic Information

#### Age of the Respondents

**Table: 4.1 Age Distribution of the Respondents**

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-24 years	26	27%
25-31 years	52	53%
32-38 years	13	13%
39-45 years	7	7%
Total	98	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

According to the Table 4.1, the majority of respondents (53%) are between the ages of 25 and 31, while many are between the ages of 18 and 24 (27%), 32-38% (13%), and few between 39-45 (5.4%). Thus, the data revealed that the majority of the survey respondents are adults younger than 32 years old.

#### Gender of the Respondents

**Table 4.2: Gender Distribution of Respondents**

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	62	63.3%
Female	36	36.7%
Transgender	0	0
Non-Binary	0	0
Total	98	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

From the Table 4.2, the percentage of male respondents is a little higher than that of female respondents, with 54.8% and 45.2%, respectively.

### Social Media Usage

#### Hours Spent on Social Media Daily

**Table 4.3: Hours spent on social media daily**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Less than an hour	1	1%
1-2 hours	8	8%
3-6 hours	52	53%
More than 6 hours	37	38%
Total	98	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

According to Table 4.3, most of the respondents (53%) revealed that they spent 3-6 hours daily on social media networks (53%); almost two fifth spent more than 6 hours daily on social media (38%); some used for 1-2 hours (8%); and a small number used for less than an hour. This implies that the majority of the respondents spent 3 or more hours a day on social media.

### **Social Media Usage Increase or Decrease During COVID-19**

**Table 4.4: Did your social media usage increase or decrease during COVID-19**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Increased	69	70.4%
Decreased	8	8.2%
Stayed the same	21	21.4%
Total	98	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

From Table 4.4, over three quarters of the survey respondents, constituting almost 70.4%, said their social media usage increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.;21.4% of the survey respondents said it stayed the same, while only 8.2% said it decreased. This means that the majority of the respondents used social media for more hours than they used to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Social Media and Cyberbullying Main Risks of Social Media Use**

**Table 4.5: What in your view are the main risks of social media use? (Tick more than one option)**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Cyberbullying	47	20.2%
Exposure to inappropriate contents	66	28.3%
Addiction to social media use	77	33%
Sleep deprivation	43	18.5%
Total	233	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

Table 4.5 revealed that some of the survey respondents said sleep deprivation is among the main risks of social media use (18.5%), some also viewed cyberbullying as part of the main risks of social media usage (20.2%), some also identified exposure to inappropriate contents (28.3%), and others also identified addiction to use (33.3%). However, even though addiction to use and exposure to inappropriate contents got more responses, it still indicates that a reasonable number of the survey respondents believe cyberbullying to be among the main risks involved in using social media.

### **Risks Associated with Social Media use Increased or Decreased during COVID-19**

**Table 4.6: Do you think that the risks associated with social media use increased or decreased during COVID-19?**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Increased	83	85%
Decreased	2	2%
Stayed the same	8	8%
Not sure	5	5%
Total	98	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

Table 4.6 revealed that a significant majority of the survey respondents (85%) believed that the risks associated with social media use increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, while only 2% said they decreased. Additionally, a small number of the respondents said it stayed the same (8%), while 5% were not sure or couldn't say precisely. This means that the survey respondents believed that cyberbullying (which many believed was a main risk of social media use) would also increase during COVID-19.

### **Likelihood of Cyberbullying Increased, Decreased or Stayed the same During COVID**

**Table 4.7: Do you think that the likelihood of cyberbullying increased, decreased or stayed the same during COVID?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Increased</b>	65	66.3%
<b>Decreased</b>	5	5.1%
<b>Stayed the same</b>	10	10.2%
<b>Not sure</b>	18	18.4%
<b>Total</b>	98	100%

*Source: Online Survey, 2023*

As revealed in Table 4.7, two thirds (66.3%) of the survey respondents said that the likelihood of cyberbullying increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, while only 5.1% said it decreased. Some said they were not sure or couldn't say precisely (18.4%), while some perceived that it stayed the same (10.2%). This means that the survey respondents believed that there was a likelihood of a rise in cyberbullying cases during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **What do you think is the reason(s) for the increase in cyberbullying during COVID-19?**

The majority of the respondents explained that the lockdown and physical restrictions imposed by the government during COVID-19 led to an increase in social media usage, which gives users the chance to voice out their opinions and behaviours, and by so doing, brings out their 'true character.' The following are examples of this type of view:

"The lack of physical confrontation coupled with anonymity is the primary contributing factor to cyber bullying. During the pandemic, the entire human social interaction (for most of the population) was moved online, leading to exposure to a vast world different from our immediate bubbles i.e. exposure and access to more people you wouldn't agree with. The result is that the human need for voicing one's opinions overwhelmed the relevance/nature of those opinions once the physical barrier/accountability was removed".

"Because everyone was locked up in doors and have ample time on their hands you be on social media. Thereby leading to more audience and making bullying more rampant".

"Well, it became the social centre for most people as movements around town was significantly restricted, and with this increased engagement came the true character of some folks as well".

In addition to spending more time on social media platforms because of the physical barriers, some respondents added that cyberbullying became a 'savage' trend on the social media platforms, involving users bullying other users just to have fun and entertain themselves. Example of such responses include the following:

"People started spending more time on social media leading to the need to be 'savage' so to say, have a say in everything, not giving space

for alternative viewpoints and replying without bothering about how it might make the other party feel”.

“People had a lot of free time hence there was an increase in the use of social media. Also, people hide behind the word ‘savage’ in the funny sense to bully people and be mean to people”.

“There was also a time someone [announced intention to commit] suicide on Twitter because he was accused of rape and that led to a mob action from social media users. He was not given the chance to prove himself”.

Other respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic and attendant lockdown, coupled with the result of the 2019 general elections, affected the mood and emotions of many individuals, who subsequently opted to use social media platforms to vent their anger on others. The following are type of such responses:

“Lot more people were exposed to social media during the COVID period where there were so much information uncertainty and authenticity. People aired their opinions without minding consequences just to stay busy”.

“I think it's because there wasn't much to do for everyone, there was a lot of frustration, and it was a case of people taking out their anger on each other”.

“Because, during the just concluded election season, many were cyberbullied for the political choices, for example: Some celebrities and politicians were bullied on the bird app (Twitter) because they refused to follow the bandwagon”.

“90% of Nigerians were online during the COVID-19 era. The era allowed everyone to know much more about what happen in the environment [country] that made it person to bully one another”.

In view of the above, the data revealed that the majority of the respondents believed that the reason for the increase in cyberbullying during COVID-19 was linked to the lockdown and physical barriers, which led to increased time spent on social media platforms. The respondents also provided that the ‘savage’ trend during COVID-19 on some social media platforms like Twitter and the mood of users contributed to the increase in cyberbullying during COVID-19.

#### ***What are the impacts of cyberbullying during COVID-19?***

Most of the respondents stated that the experience of cyberbullying can go beyond emotional and psychological wellbeing, involving social effects like exclusion or isolation and physical harms like suicide. Example of such views include:

“Psychological impacts mostly, it had on several occasions led people to the brink of suicide and some actually go ahead and do it”.

“Cyberbullying messes with the victims head, beyond what you can think of. In some cases suicide might be the end result if care is not taken”.

“Cyberbullying can have serious emotional and psychological impacts on the victim, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. It can also lead to social isolation and even physical harm”.

“Depression. Seeking validation from the people of the internet. Delusions. Losing touch with reality. Impacts physical quality time and relationships with people who actually matter”.

Some of the respondents stated that the experience of cyberbullying is also related to the perception of oneself and low self-esteem. Some of the individuals who experienced cyberbullying felt less of themselves, and the intensity of the impact depends on the number of encounters. Some of such responses include:

“Cyber bullying is mean, so it causes one to have low self-esteem, feel worthless and maybe not good enough”.

“It leads to depression, low self-esteem, and reduction in the feeling of self-worth of the person being bullied. People also are under the impression that since it's online, there's no sanction on them hence they can get away with it and so it's okay to continue”.

“It causes reduction in self-esteem of the affected parties. The more the cyberbullying the higher the likelihood it'll affect one negatively”.

The data revealed that respondents believe that cyberbullying has a negative impact on those who experience it. The impact of cyberbullying goes beyond emotional and psychological wellbeing, involving social effects like exclusion or isolation and physical harms like suicide. Cyberbullying experiences are also related to a low sense of self-worth and low self-esteem. Respondents also believed that the effect of the impact is related to the number of cyberbullying encounters.

### **Discussion**

The study found that cyberbullying, which is among the risks of social media use during COVID-19, increased in Nigeria during COVID-19. As discussed in the literature review, this finding is in conformity with those found in other studies. For example, several studies conducted in different countries found an increase in cyberbullying during COVID-19 (Antonio et al., 2021; Barlett et al., 2022; Habes et al., 2020; Kee et al., 2022; Ponde-Mutsvedu & Chirongoma; 2022; Tahat et al., 2020). This agreement may be because all the studies employ survey methods. However, the findings of studies that analysed Twitter and other social media posts equally identified an upsurge in cyberbullying during COVID-19 (Gopal, 2021; Karmakar & Das, 2021; Nazir & Thabassum, 2021).

The study also found that increased use of social media during COVID-19 corresponded to an increase in cyberbullying. Prior studies that were discussed in the literature review have also linked social media usage to cyberbullying experience (Adebayo et al., 2019a; Adebayo et al., 2019b; Balogun et al., 2017; Olamide et al., 2016; Sampasa-Kanvinga & Hamilton; 2015). The findings of Mustapha et al. (2020) revealed that not merely using social media, but the length of time spent on social media is a stronger factor in cyberbullying experience.

The data also indicated that the post-2019 election period in Nigeria rendered some individuals vulnerable to cyberbullying during COVID-19. This means that social conditions like public events that attract public attention and opinion may result in or contribute to the increase in cyberbullying. The finding of Yang (2021) supported this finding by revealing that incidences of cyberbullying were particularly high among the residents of Hubei Province because COVID-19 started in Wuhan, Hubei Province, which makes them targets of cyberbullying.

The study indicates that the anonymity of users on social media platforms is a strong factor that explains the upsurge. The finding is in agreement with Rosli et al. (2021), who found anonymity and cross-border connectedness as reasons for cyberbullying. The space transition theory also corroborates this finding. Jaishankar's space transition theory (2007, 2008) emphasises how the shift to online interactions created new opportunities for different forms

of cybercrime, like cyberbullying, to occur. The high-level shift to cyberspace makes it possible that cyberbullying could thrive, as individuals could easily target and harass others from behind the anonymity of a screen. The lack of physical presence and oversight during COVID-19 allowed cyberbullies to operate with fewer consequences, as it became easier for them to initiate and sustain online bullying behaviour without the risk of immediate formal intervention. Overall, an implication of the findings is that increased use of social media puts users at risk of cyberbullying. This is particularly problematic, considering that more social networking sites are created or launched, which indicates increased vulnerability for potential users.

With regards to the effects, the study also found that cyberbullying affects victims psychologically through depression or emotional stress, socially through self-isolation, and may lead to suicide. This finding is in agreement with a number of similar studies that were conducted during COVID-19 in other countries (Antonio et al., 2023; Espinoza, 2022; Pang et al., 2023). This similarity may be because all the studies adopted a survey method to examine the effect of cyberbullying on victims and have similar age group characteristics of respondents.

Several other studies (discussed earlier) that were conducted on cyberbullying before COVID-19 are in conformity with the above finding (Ademiju, 2019; Nwufu & Nwoke, 2018; Omotoso & Omolua, 2015). However, Sam et al. (2019) found that cyberbullying has a negligible impact on victims psychological wellbeing. Almost all 844 participants have been victims of cyberbullying, but there is no difference in terms of psychological wellbeing between victims and non-victims. It may be that Ghanaians view cyberbullying as a normal behaviour conducted by adolescents and young adults for amusement (See Sam et al., 2019).

The study found that cyberbullying led to low self-esteem among social media users who went through the experience. This finding is in agreement with Mustapha et al. (2020), who found that the experience of cyberbullying on social media platforms results in low self-esteem or a negative self-perception among the victims. The study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, but the similarity of the data may be because the study specifically investigated the experience of cyberbullying and self-esteem among undergraduate students in Nigeria.

The study found that some Nigerians are already depressed during COVID-19 because of fear of disease and isolation, which also makes others engage in cyberbullying. The study of Zaffaroni et al. (2022) in Germany and Italy also found emotional discomfort to be a significant determinant of cyberbullying during the COVID-19 lockdown. A high level of depression was equally recorded in China (Yang, 2021), but it is not clear whether the high level is linked to increased cyberbullying or the spread of COVID-19 (Yang, 2021). Thus, it can be said that depression serves as both a determinant and an effect of cyberbullying during COVID-19. This is because some studies conducted in Nigeria prior to COVID-19 have also identified depression as an effect of cyberbullying (i.e., Ademiju, 2019; Amalu, 2018). Overall, the data implies that the effect of cyberbullying on individuals, especially those who experienced repeat victimisation is considerable and not different from the pre-COVID-19 period. However, the increase in cyberbullying cases during COVID-19 may have increased the impact on the victims due to the possibility of repeat victimisation.

### **Conclusion and Implication for Counselling**

This study sought to investigate the perception of adult social media users on cyberbullying during the unique social conditions of the COVID 19 pandemic. The findings confirm the persistent prevalence of cyberbullying, predominantly verbal/written harassment and online

shaming. Based on the findings, it is concluded that users are more likely to experience cyberbullying as social media use increases. This is especially troubling given that there are more social networking sites being developed or launched, which suggests a greater susceptibility for potential consumers. The study also concludes that cyberbullying has a significant negative impact on social media users, especially those who have been victims of the behaviour repeatedly. This effect precedes COVID-19, however, due to the potential for repeat victimisation, the rise in cyberbullying incidents during COVID-19 is likely to have an even more significant effect on victims. A significant outcome is the revelation that some adult users are not merely bystanders or late-stage victims of schoolyard bullying, but active participants in a distinct form of digital aggression rooted in identity-based disagreements. The formal and communal nature of this aggression, coupled with the significant negative impacts on mental well-being including stress, anger, and anxiety highlights an urgent need for a paradigm shift in guidance and counselling frameworks. Traditional models focused on adolescent victims and school settings are insufficient. Therefore, the implications for guidance and counselling are threefold, targeting institutional, professional, and public spheres:

1. **Development of Adult Focused Cyber Wellness Programs:** Counselling services, particularly within university campuses, corporate Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and community mental health initiatives, must integrate digital citizenship and cyber wellness modules for adults. These programs should move beyond basic online safety to address conflict resolution in digital spaces, emotional regulation in response to online hostility, and strategies for disengaging from toxic communal debates. Proactive education on responsible online discourse and the psychological consequences of digital aggression is as critical for adults as it is for adolescents.
2. **Specialist Training for Counsellors and Mental Health Professionals:** There is a pressing need for continuous professional development to equip counsellors with the competency to address technology facilitated harm. Counsellors must be trained to: (a) routinely screen for cyberbullying experiences during client intake, especially when presenting issues involve anxiety or social stress; (b) employ therapeutic techniques tailored to the unique nature of online victimization, which often involves a blurred line between public and private trauma; and (c) guide clients in practical digital boundary setting, such as curating online spaces and using platform reporting tools effectively. Professional bodies in guidance and counselling should formalize this into training standards and ethical guidelines.
3. **Advocacy and Collaborative Prevention:** Guidance counsellors have a vital role as institutional advocates. They should collaborate with university administrations, workplace HR departments, and social media platforms to advocate for and help design clearer, more accessible reporting mechanisms and transparent moderation policies. Furthermore, counsellors can lead public awareness campaigns that reframe cyberbullying among adults not as an inevitable part of online life, but as a preventable form of psychosocial harm with serious consequences. This positions the guidance and counselling profession as a key stakeholder in shaping a healthier digital public square.

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