ICT, CYBER-BULLYING, AND SELF-DISCLOSURE: AN EXPERIENTIAL STUDY OF *TWITTER*

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Abstract: With the advent of the Internet and the convergence of communications technologies, cyber-bullying has become a perennial issue among media scholars and educators. Across the globe, the Internet is no longer just a medium that facilitates the movement of data in the information superhighway; it has become the medium for peers to inflict harm on others. This paper, therefore, explores how cyber-bullying is manifested on its victims and its negative effects on self-disclosure. The survey method was used to gather data with the questionnaire as the major instrument of data collection. The paper found out that 46% of the respondents have been cyber-bullied, while 87% had witnessed other persons cyber-bullied on *Twitter*. In addition, 55% agreed that they bully others on *Twitter*, while 44% indicated that they retaliate in verbal and visuals forms whenever they are cyber-bullied. The paper recommends that the developing countries like Nigeria should establish laws and policies to discourage the act of cyber-bullying while non-governmental organizations should join the crusade against cyber-bullying.
Keywords: Internet, Cyber-bullying, Self-disclosure, Young people, *Twitter*

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is today regarded as the most technologically advanced medium of communication the world over because of its capacity to share digital information through a common set of networking and software protocol (Okorie, 2009; Okorie & Oyedepo, 2011). The Internet has been a major driver in facilitating social interaction among people across the globe. In addition, the Internet has opened new vistas in promoting social interaction, learning and online dating among young people across the globe.

The explosive growth and development of the Internet has significantly contributed to the emergence of social networking sites in the cyber space (Okorie, Ekeanyanwu & Obanua, 2010; Okorie & Oyedepo, 2011; Okorie, Oyedepo & Usaini, 2012). The Internet has also transformed the cultural landscape in modern societies by re-inventing the way

individuals interact and how relationships are developed.

Okorie and Oyedepo (2011) argue that social networking sites are often considered innovative and different from the traditional media such as television, radio, film, newspaper and magazines. This is because they allow direct interactions with others. In a study by Lenhart and Madden (2007) on the influence of *Facebook* and other social networking sites in the United States, it was discovered that 50% of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 log on daily to social networking sites and another 22% logged on to different social networking sites several times per day.

In recent times, the growing influence of the Internet has created several societal vices. One of such is the practice of cyber-bullying among young people across the globe. A study by Mishna *et al* (2009) had discovered cyber-bullying to be a perennial issue while some research participants feel that it was more serious than 'traditional' bullying due to the associated anonymity (Mishna *et al*, 2009). Shariff (2009) observes that young people subjected to verbal abuse at school can have this abuse supported by a number of spectators and bystanders. When this verbal abuse follows the young person into cyber-space in the rapid way it does, it becomes more dangerous. Thus, cyber-bullying is detrimental to the mental health

and emotional development of young people in any modern society.

Across the globe, *Twitter* is widely used for conversations and online self-disclosure (Ritter *et al*, 2011). Some studies exist that examine different aspects of conversations on *Twitter* (see Boyd, 2009; Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil *et al*, 2011; Ritter *et al*, 2011). However, studies that examine the relationships and associations between online self-disclosure and the practice of cyber-bullying on cyber space using *Twitter* as a case study are not readily available. Thus, this study investigated the influence of Internet use on cyber-bullying and attempted to establish a link or causal relationship between cyber-bullying and self-disclosure.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY
Against the above background, this paper shall be guided by these specific objectives study:

1. To determine the relationship between Internet use and the act of cyber-bullying.
2. To assess the attitude of respondents to the act of cyber-bullying.
3. To assess the challenges of self-disclosure on cyber-space.

HYPOTHESES
The following hypotheses were formulated and tested in this study:

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between regular Internet

use and respondents' practice of cyber-bullying.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between Internet use for cyber-bullying and respondents' challenges of self-disclosure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratification theory (U & G) which deals with the use to which different individuals put the media and the gratification they derive from such. Okorie, Ekeanyanwu and Obanua (2010) citing Chandler (1994, p. 1) state that the

> Uses & Gratification arose originally in the 1940s and underwent a revival in the 1970s and 1980s. The approach springs from a functionalist paradigm in the social sciences. It presents the use of media in terms of the gratification of social or psychological needs of the individual (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The mass media compete with other sources of gratification, but gratifications can be obtained from a medium's content (e.g. watching a specific programme), from familiarity with a genre within the medium (e.g. watching soap operas), from general

exposure to the medium (e.g. watching TV), and from the social context in which it is used (e.g. watching TV with the family). U & G theorists argue that people's needs influence how they use and respond to a medium. Zillmann (cited by McQuail 1987: 236) has shown the influence of *mood* on media choice: boredom encourages the choice of exciting content and stress encourages a choice of relaxing content.

Also, West and Turner (2004, p. 396) summarize the assumption of the theory as providing "a framework for understanding when and how individual media consumers become more or less active and the consequences of that increased or decreased involvement. Hence, the uses and gratifications approach is concerned with how people use Internet to gratify their needs as it relates with social needs and relationship. In other words, the theory is relevant to this study since it deals with how young people could use the Internet in the practice of cyber-bullying, which may also influence the extent of self-disclosure on social media platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The advancement of digital technologies has led to the intense use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in promoting online self-disclosures. From an all-purpose perspective, online self-disclosure involves communicating personal information about self via contributions to a website or other online platforms; it is one of the most rampant activities of young people on social networking sites. Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis (1993) support this description when they define self-disclosure as communication of personal information, thoughts, and feelings to other people, especially in interpersonal relationships (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Peitromonaco, 1998).

Social media such as *Twitter* provide all-encompassing and incessant opportunity for online self-disclosure, through message content, personal profiles, and shared networks. Walton and Rice (2013) argue that sharing is one of the fundamental tenets of social media, and so *Twitter* could be used to share messages that are even of personal nature. Walton and Rice (2013) citing Boyd (2009) emphasize this argument thus:

> While many *Twitter* postings (tweets) may be banal, the purpose is broadly social. *Twitter* users share varying degrees of private information about their current status. In turn, their followers or other network members may respond to the messages either through the public feed or with a private, direct message. On *Twitter*, users become the center of a unique social network, one in which reciprocity is invited but not required, and followers of a particular tweeter may range from none to millions.

Online self-disclosure activities involve placing pictures, tagging pictures, and having a personal diary, which friends can have access to on the social networking sites. Walton and Rice (2013) note that self-disclosure is typically a gradual, reciprocal exchange process in which one person's disclosure often prompts an equal or even greater disclosure from the other person. Benefits include social control, validation, increased liking and intimacy, and relational maintenance.

Scholars have argued that self-disclosure can also be risky because it may invite ridicule or even rejection, thereby placing the discloser in a socially awkward or vulnerable position (Pennebaker, 1989; Okorie, Ekeanyanwu & Obanua, 2010). Scholars also believe that it also makes hidden

things known, adding uncertainty to the relationship as "it involves the risk of confiding in others, the responsibility of deeper awareness, and the danger that one's confidence may be breached" (Corcoran & Spencer, 2000, p. 1). Thus, online self-disclosure could have negative implications on image, identity and computer-mediated relationship on cyber-space.

Despite the broad number of researches on self-disclosure, there are few empirical investigations establishing a link or association between self-disclosure and cyber-bullying. Belsey (2008) observes that "cyber-bullying involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group that is intended to harm others" (p. 1). Several other studies have suggested that cyber-bullying is one of the main challenges young people face in the digital world (Cross *et al*, 2009; Shariff, 2009). Shariff (2009) further argues that studies have shown that the motives for bullying someone online have remained fairly the same as traditional bullying. These motives, according to Shariff include the need for power to dominate or subdue others and to have ones way all the time.

However, the profile of bully is gradually changing. The anonymity of being online has empowered those who may not have typically shown aggression in an open forum to begin to display such banal instincts. Scholars have identified the differences between cyber and traditional bullying, which are (1) cyber-bullying can be anonymous, (2) It can have a rapid effect as comments/videos etc are sent around the world in minutes and (3) It is a form of bullying that victims cannot easily escape from.

Aftab (2008) study identified five typical types of online bullies, which she believes is the key to understanding motivations behind their actions thus:

> The (a) **Vengeful Angel**-These types of online bullies target those they feel are victimizing their own person or others, and they want to get back at them. The problem initially begins somewhere else, and the vengeful angel retaliates online, (b) **Power Hungry**, (c) **Revenge of the Nerds**-the Power Hungry and Revenge of the Nerds are often grouped together as their motives and responses are similar. The Power Hungry can be likened to the typical offline bully. These bullies want to feel strong, hurt others, and wield terror. It is important to them that someone else knows about

their acts of bullying. They are proud of what they are doing, and if responses from others do not satisfy them, they will escalate their bullying into bigger and meaner acts. (d) **Mean Girls-** Mean Girls bullying is usually done by a group who are looking for something to do and do not care that they may hurt others while doing it. They are trying to entertain themselves at the expenses of others, and (e) **Inadvertent**- Inadvertent do not understand that their actions can be seen as bullying. They are usually just playing or pretending. Their words are mere responses to what they receive and are not meant to hurt but to just be part of what is happening – part of the game.

METHOD

For this study, an online survey was carried out among young Nigerians who are *Twitter* users. A sample size of 100 respondents was purposively selected. Individuals with more than 300 "followers" on their account were purposively selected for the study. The "300 Followers Category" selection was made because such persons are deemed "active" to have such number of followers on their Account. Questionnaire was used as an instrument of data collection and the data were analyzed with the use of cross tabulation and correlation using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program software.

Quantitative data were generated from copies of the questionnaire administered, which were analysed with the use of SPSS version 15. Data analysis followed a combination of two major statistical analytical techniques namely: Univariate and Bivariate analyses. The Univariate segment features descriptive statistics such as frequencies. This was used to assess the demographic and cultural characteristics of the respondents and distribution of other important variables that were done in the study.

In the Bivariate analysis, series of cross tabulations were run in order to identify the patterns of relationship between selected background variables and conjugal relationship indices. Thus, descriptive statistics, expressed in value of frequency counts and percentages were used in describing the influence of the mass media and interpersonal channels in creating awareness and knowledge of cyber-bullying. For the hypotheses, Pearson product moment correlation ® as produced by logistic technique were used to ascertain relationships (positive, negative or zero association) and the direction of association between

the variables of interest. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was also considered, while attempting to know the relationship observed between the variables. When the variables are found to be significantly related, the observed probabilities (p-values) associated with chi-square are displayed in the cross tabulation tables.

Second, Bivariate analysis is used to establish relationship between two variables or establish independence. In addition, the correlation test result was further subjected to the Somers'd directional measure and symmetric measures so as to determine the strength and nature of the relationship using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program software.

RESULT

Ninety-seven copies of the questionnaire were returned out of the 100 administered. This represents a response rate of 97 percent. However, in supplying the answers, many respondents skipped some questions, which they were supposed to answer. In analyzing the data, the researchers treated all unsupplied responses as missing cases.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variables	Percent
Gender	
Male	20.6
Female	79.4
Total	**100**
	n= 97
Marital Status	
Single	100
Married	0
Others	0
Total	**100**
	n=97
Age	
16-18	61.9
19-21	11.3
22-24	21.6
25 and above	5.2
Total	**100**
	n=97

Table 2: Respondents' Use of *Twitter*

Responses	Usage of Internet	Use of social networking sites	Use of *Twitter*
Frequently	88.7%	72.5%	53.6%
Occasionally	11.3%	27.5%	46.4%
Never	0%	0	0
Total	**100%** **n=97**	**100%** **n=97**	**100%** **n=97**

Table 3: Respondents' Attitude to Cyber-Bullying

Responses	I have been cyber-bullied on *Twitter*	I have witnessed persons cyber-bullied on *Twitter*	I cyber-bully others on *Twitter*
Strongly Agree	22.7%	53.6%	33.0%
Agree	13.0%	33.0%	21.6%
Undecided	0	13.4%	0%
Strongly	50.9%	0	45.4%
Disagree	13.4%	0	0
Disagree	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Total	**n=97**	**n=97**	**n=97**

Table 3 shows that 35.7% of respondents indicated that they were victims of cyber-bullying, while a majority (86.6%) of the respondents had witnessed persons cyber-bullied on *Twitter*. Interestingly, 54.6% of the respondents cyber-bully others on *Twitter*.

Table 4: Respondents' Attitude to Self-Disclosure

Responses	I am sensitive to disclosure of materials on the cyberspace	Cyber-bullying has made me change my profile information on *Twitter*	I make use of avatars (symbols, animations or cartoons) to avoid being cyber-bullied	When I am cyber-bullied, I retaliate by verbal or visual forms
Strongly Agree	53.6%	12.4%	0%	10.3%
Agree	21.6%	10.3%	22.7%	34.0%
Undecided	24.7%	0	20.6%	0
Strongly	0%	34.0%	23.7%	23.7%
Disagree	0%	43.3%	33.0%	32.0%
Disagree	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**
Total	**n=97**	**n=97**	**n=97**	**n=97**

From Table 4, a majority of respondents were sensitive to disclosure materials on the Internet, while 22.7% of the respondents indicated that they

usually make use of avatars (symbols, animations or cartoons) to avoid being cyber-bullied. Interestingly, 44.3% of the respondents indicated that they retaliate in verbal and visuals forms whenever they are cyber-bullied.

TEST OF SIGNIFICANCE

To test our hypotheses, we cross-tabulated selected variables and computed correlations using the SPSS program package thus:

Hypothesis 1: **There is no significant relationship between regular Internet use and respondents' practice of cyber-bullying**

Table 5a: Correlation Test

		REGULAR INTERNET USE	I CYBER-BULLY OTHERS ON *TWITTER*
REGULAR INTERNET USE	Pearson Correlation	1	.310(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	97	97
I CYBER-BULLY OTHERS ON *TWITTER*	Pearson Correlation	.310(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	97	97

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation coefficient is a measure of linear association between two variables. The values of the correlation coefficient range from -1 to 1. The sign of the correlation coefficient indicates the direction of the relationship (positive or negative). The correlation coefficients on the main diagonal are always 1.0, because each variable has a perfect positive linear relationship with itself. In this test, the correlation coefficient for Regular Internet usage and respondents' practice in cyber-bullying is 0.310

5b: Directional Measures

			Value	Asymp. Std. Error(a)	Approx T(b)	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d	Symmetric	.295	.044	3.820	.000
		INTERNET Dependent	.194	.052	3.820	.000
		I CYBERBULLY OTHERS ON *TWITTER* Dependent	.616	.052	3.820	.000

(a) Not assuming the null hypothesis
(b) Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis

5c: Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Contingency Coefficient	.365	.001
N of Valid Cases		97	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between Internet use for cyber-bullying and respondents' challenges of self-disclosure

6a: Correlation Test

Correlations		I CYBER-BULLY OTHERS ON *TWITTER*	CHALLENGES TO DISCLOSURE MATERIALS ON THE CYBERSPACE
I CYBER-BULLY OTHERS ON *TWITTER*	Pearson Correlation	1	.584(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	97	97
CHALLENGES TO DISCLOSURE MATERIALS ON THE CYBERSPACE	Pearson Correlation	.584(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	97	97

The correlations table displays Pearson correlation coefficients, significance values, and the number of cases with non-missing values. The absolute value of the correlation coefficient indicates the strength, with larger absolute values indicating stronger relationships. The correlation coefficients on the main diagonal are always 1.0, because each variable has a perfect positive linear relationship with itself. In this test, the correlation coefficient for Internet usage for cyber-bullying and respondents' challenge in self-disclosure is 0.584.

6b: Directional Measures

			Value	Asymp. Std. Error(a)	Approx. T(b)	Approx. Sig.
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d	Symmetric	.492	.067	7.659	.000
		I CYBERBULLY OTHERS ON *TWITTER* Dependent	.506	.074	7.659	.000
		I AM SENSITIVE TO DISCLOSURE MATERIALS ON THE CYBERSPACE Dependent	.479	.064	7.659	.000

a Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

6c: Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Contingency Coefficient	.621	.000
	N of Valid Cases	97	

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

First, on the analysis of intense Internet usage and respondents' practice in cyber-bullying, the hypothesis as stated was rejected. Correlation analysis on Table **5a** shows a linear association between two variables. The correlation coefficient of Internet use and respondents' practice in cyber-bullying is 0.310. Table **5b** and **c** help to determine the strength and direction between the variables i.e. the approximate significance value has 0.00 in its column; one can infer there was a relationship between the variables. In addition, the value statistics helps to determine the strength or the direction of the relationship, it can range from -1 to 1 i.e. negative value indicates a negative relationship, and positive values indicate a positive relationship. From table **3b** and **c**, the relationship between the variables is a weak one. This finding is in line with other studies that show that some 93% of today's teens use the Internet. More and more of this use is for online socialization with peers; not all of it is positive in

nature (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

The analysis of the second hypothesis also shows that there is no significant relationship between Internet use for cyber-bullying and respondents' challenges with issues of self-disclosure. We rejected the hypothesis subsequently. From the available data on Tables **6a, b** and **c**, the hypothesis was not accepted because the correlation coefficients on the main diagonal are always 1.0, because each variable has a perfect positive linear relationship with itself. In this test, the correlation coefficient for Internet use for cyber-bullying and respondents' challenge in self-disclosure is 0.584. Tables **6b** and **c** reveal that the relationship between the variables is, however, a positive and strong relationship.

The literature suggests availability of studies on the effectiveness of social networking sites and self-disclosure among social media users. However, there are few available empirical studies on the use of social networking sites in the practice of cyber-bullying on self-disclosure. This aspect is important because it has several implications for building social relationships and personal development among people of diverse cultures and situations.

The summary of the findings to justify this aspect of the study shows that many of the respondents were victims of the act of cyber-bullying, while another majority had witnessed persons cyber-bullied on *Twitter*. In addition, majority of the respondents were sensitive to disclosure materials on cyberspace, while a significant number of the respondents indicated that they usually retaliate in verbal and visuals forms whenever they are cyber-bullied.

There are several implications of these results. One major implication is that individuals could develop a false self-identity on cyber space. Self-identity is beyond the simple recognition of the stable, constant, and consecutive facts of oneself. It contains the unique characteristics of oneself formed by social interactions, developed continuously by time and place, and distinguished from other people's (Willard, 2003; Shariff, 2009). Self-identity in reality is pretty limited and constrained. This informs the thinking of Kang (2011) that avatars have special meanings as symbol of identity in online interaction that is not necessarily identical to that of real world.

The second implication is the negative cultural undertone a false self-identity could do to an individual's self-knowledge and awareness of who s/he is. Since culture is all about people, who they are, their aspirations, challenges, hopes, and failures, it becomes important that the illusory of an avatar type of meaning on

ones public disclosures could be very harmful on ones cultural aspirations and development. It could also lead to false relationships and associations; a situation that could lead to distorted worldviews, perceptions, and a false sense of reality.

Another major implication of bullying on *Twitter* and the reactions to it as identified in this study is the issue of self-exclusion/isolation and the negative implications of such, which literature suggests could even lead to suicide or suicidal tendencies. Social media primarily encourage open conversations, people engagement, interaction, participation, and unrestricted involvement in the public space. If these are now at risk because of the traumatizing effects of bullying, then exclusion and self-isolation tendencies could drive persons with a weak knowledge and respect of self to experience greater inferiority complex and become very dangerous to his or herself and to the society around them. Recent suicides over social media attacks in India and the US are typical example of the first scenario and the school children shootings in the US by deranged youths who have psychological imbalance is another example of a case two scenario of this same situation.

The second author recently intervened in a case of a student (a mentee) in his current university who had threatened to withdraw from the university because of attacks by peers on social media. She wanted to leave the university because she was able to trace the cyber attacks to her course mates in school who ganged up and resolved to frustrate her out of the university over a male incidence. Because of the anonymity of some of the attackers and the pseudo names used, the university could not largely deal with all of them. The author intervened to get the young lady back on campus and get through to one of the attackers. The university management also took some steps to get the situation under control. The reality of this example is the frustration the attacked student faced and the negative steps it was leading her to take.

Studies have also shown that a great number of youths are daily actively engaged in social media use. There may be serious implication if for any negative reason(s), this number are forced by bullying or related concerns to isolate themselves from such engagement. Nature, we are told abhors vacuum. If this is still correct, then, what will the self-excluded youths be doing when they are not growing and developing relationships, engaging in conversations etc with mates, colleagues etc? The reality of this answer could be very scary if not properly analyzed.

Scholars agree that victims of bullying are usually traumatized and emotionally unstable, leading to a series of potential negative effects on social development. Following widespread concerns about these negative effects in relation to social development and emotional well-being, bullying has become a key public policy issue in many countries like United States (Aftab, 2008). Many young people who engage in cyber-bullying, whether perpetrating it, or supporting it, are unaware of the emotional and psychological consequences associated with it. Several scholars agree that because of the extension of time and space for online bullying, additional signs may exist for cyber victims. They may seem anxious and have unexplainable mood swings after online use or stop using their equipment at home all together. They are less likely to talk about their online experiences or friends, and may avoid allowing others to view their computer usage (Willard, 2003; Shariff, 2009). All of these are signs of a youth reclining to a life of seclusion, disillusion, and possible depression.

CONCLUSION

Twitter has become a preferred medium for social interactions and relationship among young people all over the world. Through personal conversation with a group of students under the supervision of the authors, we note that young

persons now prefer *Twitter* to the popular *Facebook* because their parents and adult guardians are yet to "invade" it as they did with *Facebook*. In order words, *Twitter* still offers the youths some privacy from prying adults and parents unlike *Facebook* that has become all comers' affair. This as well as other peculiarities of *Twitter,* makes it a popular demand among today's youths.

Twitter's emergence is both revolutionary and critical of existing interactive platforms and relationship models especially in a place like Nigeria with diverse cultural backgrounds and different traditional methods of establishing social relationships. Nevertheless, the growing incidences of cyber bullying on the platform have developed serious concerns among social scientists and experts in the field of media psychology. In the case of this study, we conclude that self-disclosure is negatively affected by the act of cyber-bullying with other attendant and dire consequences.

It is also believed that the proliferation of multimedia devices and ubiquitous Internet access would increase the rate of cyber-bullying leading to self-exclusion and possible suicidal tendencies. The social effects of this cannot be overemphasized. We have already noted some of these concerns and recommend that governments at various levels should establish laws and policies to discourage the act of

cyber-bullying. In addition, non-governmental agencies and international bodies should spearhead campaigns to educate and enlighten young people about the nature and dangers of cyber-bullying and the necessity of building positive social relationships online.

Above all, every youth should have a self-consciousness that this world belongs to us all and that no one has any rights to bully another. Second, no youth should accept bullying or fall to their antics. If every youth stands up against bullying on *Twitter* or other social media platforms, the incidences will reduce. This, we believe should be part of an international alliance and campaign to sensitize youths to stand up against all forms of cyber-bullying and attacks.

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