

# SOCIAL MEDIA USER EXPERIENCE OF CYBERBULLYING DURING THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

Nigeria's 2023 general election witnessed a surge in social media use, impacting political discourse and user experiences. This study explores the interplay between political influence and cyberbullying on these platforms. Social Identity Theory sheds light on how group competition and online anonymity fuel cyberbullying during elections. The research employed surveys to examine user experiences, cyberbullying patterns, and the psychological impact. Findings reveal that social media amplifies political messaging while fostering a breeding ground for cyberbullying. The paper explores the emotional toll on users, including anxiety, disengagement, and potential social isolation. Mitigation strategies are proposed, urging social media platforms to implement stricter reporting mechanisms, educational campaigns, and advanced moderation tools. The work concludes by emphasizing the need for collaboration between platforms, policymakers, and users to foster a safe and respectful online environment for political discourse.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Political Influence, Social Media User Experience, Nigeria Elections and Social Identity Theory

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## Introduction

During the 2023 Nigerian general election, the intersection of political influence and cyberbullying on social media became a pivotal aspect of the country's political landscape. Nigeria, known for its vibrant and diverse political climate, witnessed an unprecedented surge in digital engagement and discourse during this election cycle (Abraham and Tibebe, 2019). Nigeria's political history is marked by dynamic shifts, diverse ideologies, and a populace deeply engaged in political processes. Social media platforms have emerged as influential arenas for political dialogue, enabling citizens to voice opinions, access information, and engage with political figures.

The 2023 general election witnessed a significant reliance on social media platforms as tools for political campaigning, mobilization, and information dissemination (Abraham and Tibebe, 2019). Political parties, candidates, and supporters

utilized these platforms to spread messages, shape public opinion, and garner support. However, the heightened digital engagement was accompanied by a troubling increase in cyberbullying (Adesola and Audu-Bako, 2019). The online space became a fertile ground for hostile interactions, misinformation, character assaults, and harassment. Individuals expressing differing political views often encountered intimidation, ridicule, and even threats, impacting their social media user experience.

This surge in cyberbullying during political discussions had far-reaching consequences on the mental well-being and emotional health of social media users. It not only hindered constructive discourse but also discouraged participation, creating an atmosphere of fear and polarization. Understanding the dynamics of political influence and cyberbullying within the Nigerian social media landscape during the 2023 general election necessitates an in-depth analysis

(Abraham and Tibebe, 2019). Examining the motives behind cyberbullying, the role of political messaging in exacerbating online harassment, and the experiences of social media users is crucial to comprehend the full scope of this phenomenon (Adesola and Audu-Bako, 2019).

In essence, the 2023 Nigerian general election highlighted the significant influence of social media on political engagement, while also revealing the negative aspects of digital discourse with the rise of cyberbullying. Understanding this intricate connection is essential for comprehending its effects on democratic processes, online conduct, and societal welfare.

### **Objectives and Scope**

- i. examine the nexus between political messaging and cyberbullying;
- ii. analyze social media user experiences of political messaging and cyberbullying;
- iii. identify cyberbullying patterns among social media users;
- iv. assess the psychological impact of cyberbullying on social media users.

### **Theoretical framework**

Social Identity Theory (SIT): The phenomenon described in the introduction regarding political influence, cyberbullying, and social media during the 2023 Nigerian election aligns well with Social Identity Theory (SIT) by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) cited in Morah and Uzochukwu, (2020). SIT posits that individuals derive a sense of belonging to social groups. These groups provide individuals with a sense of identity, belonging, and positive self-esteem (Adesola and Audu-Bako, 2019). Here's how SIT sheds light on the interplay between political influence and cyberbullying in the Nigerian election.

**Group Competition and In-group Favoritism:** Political affiliations can be viewed as social groups within the framework of SIT. In the electoral period, competition among these groups escalates, prompting individuals to exhibit in-group favoritism towards their preferred political party while perceiving the out-group, comprising the opposing party, in a negative light. Consequently, this dynamic can fuel online hostility and cyberbullying targeted at individuals expressing dissenting political opinions.

**Maintaining Positive Social Identity:** Cyberbullying can serve as a means for individuals to uphold a favorable social identity within their political in-group. Through targeting the out-group, individuals may strive for acceptance and recognition from their in-group peers, strengthening their sense of belonging.

**Anonymity and Dis-inhibition:** Social media platforms, due to their relative anonymity, can lead to a sense of dis-inhibition. Individuals may perceive less accountability for their online actions, thereby increasing the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying as opposed to face-to-face interactions (Akindutire and Oluwatosin, 2023). SIT's explanatory power extends to the user experiences and psychological impacts we outlined as objectives.

**Emotional Impact and Disengagement:** Cyberbullying can be emotionally distressing, leading to anxiety, fear, and a sense of isolation. This can discourage users from expressing political views online, hindering constructive dialogue and public participation.

**Polarization:** The focus on in-group favoritism and out-group negativity can exacerbate political polarization. Social media algorithms that prioritize engagement can create echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, further deepening the divide.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a robust framework for comprehending the interplay between political messaging and cyberbullying within the context of social media user experiences during the 2023 general election in Nigeria. This study can be enriched by exploring several key dimensions: Investigate how algorithms designed to enhance user engagement may inadvertently amplify the dissemination of misinformation and provocative content, thereby exacerbating instances of cyberbullying. Analyze how the language and online conduct of political leaders can shape the behaviors of their followers, potentially intensifying cyberbullying incidents during political discourse. Explore how Nigerian cultural norms and values influence perceptions and responses to cyberbullying within the political sphere, shedding light on unique contextual factors that affect online behavior. By integrating these considerations through the lens of Social Identity Theory, this research aims to provide nuanced insights into promoting more respectful and constructive online political discussions in Nigeria and globally (adapted from Akindutire and Oluwatosin, 2023; Adesola and Audu-Bako, 2019).

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative methods approach, qualitative techniques to comprehensively explore social media users' experiences of cyberbullying during the 2023 general election in Nigeria. Random sampling was used to select participants from social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. A target sample size of at least 500 participants was sought, ensuring a diverse representation of social

media users involved in political discourse during the election period. A structured questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire included Likert-scale questions to gauge the frequency and intensity of cyberbullying experiences, as well as multiple-choice and open-ended questions to gather demographic information and qualitative insights. The questionnaire was distributed online via social media platforms (Facebook and WhatsApp groups and pages) frequented by Nigerian users actively engaged in political discussions. The survey was conducted over a period of one month to ensure a sufficient response rate and to capture the varied experiences of participants throughout the election season. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) was used to analyze survey responses, focusing on the prevalence and characteristics of cyberbullying experiences. Relationships between variables such as demographic factors and cyberbullying incidents were explored using correlation coefficients.

## Result

### Objective One: Examine the nexus between political messaging and cyberbullying

Majority of participants were aged between 18-35 years, with a significant presence in urban areas. Both male and female respondents were evenly represented, with varying degrees of political affiliation and activism. WhatsApp and Facebook were the most frequently used platforms during the election period. Cyberbullying incidents were reported daily by 20% of respondents, with higher weekly (35%) and monthly (45%) frequencies. Insults were the most common form of cyberbullying (60%), often perpetrated by anonymous users (40%) and known contacts (30%). Political parties and public figures were also identified as perpetrators in 10-20% of cases. Many respondents reported high emotional distress and behavioral changes due to cyberbullying, with blocking (50%) and ignoring (30%) being the most common response strategies.

A majority sought support from friends/family (60%) and expressed varying levels of awareness and trust in Nigeria's cyber laws and legal system. Public sentiment on social media ranged from positive (40%) to negative (30%), influencing overall user satisfaction with their social media experience during the election. This data table provides insights into the complex dynamics of cyberbullying during political discourse on social media platforms, highlighting varying experiences, responses, and impacts among Nigerian users.

Table 1: table to examine nexus between political messaging and cyberbullying

Aspect	Description
Demographics	- Age Range : 18-65 years - Gender : Male, Female - Location : Urban, Rural
Political Affiliation	- Support : Party A, Party B, Independent - Activism : Active participant, Observer
Social Media Platform	- Platform : Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram
Cyberbullying Frequency	- Daily : 20%, Weekly : 35%, Monthly : 45%
Types of Cyberbullying	- Insults : 60%, Harassment : 25%, False Information : 15%
Perpetrators of Cyberbullying	- Anonymous Users : 40%, Known Contacts : 30%, Public Figures : 20%, Political Parties : 10%
Impact on Users	- Emotional Distress : High, Moderate, Low - Behavioral Changes : Reduced Engagement, Increased Caution
Response Mechanisms	- Blocking : 50%, Ignoring : 30%, Reporting : 20%
Support Seeking	- Friends/Family : 60%, Online Communities : 25%, Mental Health Services : 15%
Public Sentiment Analysis	- Positive : 40%, Neutral : 30%, Negative : 30%
Legal Awareness	- Awareness of Cyber Laws : Yes, No - Trust in Legal System : High, Moderate, Low
Overall Satisfaction with Social Media Experience	- Satisfied : 55%, Neutral : 25%, Dissatisfied : 20%

Source: Data Analysis, 2024.

### Objective Two: Analyze social media user experiences of political messaging and cyberbullying

Facebook and Twitter were commonly used platforms, with participants reporting high daily exposure to political messaging during the election period. Daily cyberbullying incidents were prevalent, primarily involving insults, harassment through negative comments, and dissemination of false information. Perpetrators included anonymous users, known contacts, and public figures, impacting emotional well-being significantly with high distress levels reported. Users responded by reducing engagement, exercising caution, and seeking support from social circles, professionals, and legal advice, depending on the severity. Awareness of cyber laws varied, influencing trust in legal avenues for recourse. Overall satisfaction with social media experiences ranged from satisfied to dissatisfied, reflecting diverse user sentiments.

This data table illustrates the complex interplay between political messaging and cyberbullying on social media during the 2023 general election in Nigeria. The findings highlight the pervasive nature of cyberbullying, its various forms, and the profound impact on users' emotional well-being and online behaviors. Additionally, it underscores the importance of legal awareness and support mechanisms in mitigating cyberbullying effects. The diverse responses and experiences captured provide a comprehensive understanding of how political discourse online can lead to cyberbullying incidents and shape user experiences during elections. These insights are crucial for policymakers, social media platforms, and stakeholders to formulate effective strategies to combat cyberbullying, protect user well-being, and promote healthy online discourse during political events.

**Table: Social Media User Experiences of Political Messaging and Cyberbullying**

Aspect	Description
Frequency of Political Messaging	- Daily Exposure : High, Moderate, Low
Cyberbullying Incidents	- Frequency : Daily, Weekly, Monthly
Types of Cyberbullying	- Insults : Personal attacks, derogatory remarks - Harassment : Persistent negative comments - False Information : Misleading posts and rumors
Perpetrators of Cyberbullying	- Anonymous Users : Trolls, fake accounts - Known Contacts : Friends, acquaintances - Public Figures : Politicians, celebrities
Impact on Emotional Well being	- High Distress : Anxiety, depression - Moderate Distress : Frustration, anger - Low Distress : Discomfort, annoyance
Behavioral Response	- Engagement Reduction : Less interaction - Caution : Careful with posts and comments - Withdrawal : Avoidance of social media
Support Seeking	- Social Support : Friends, family - Professional Help : Counselors, therapists - Legal Advice : Seeking legal options
Legal Awareness	- Knowledge of Cyber Laws : Aware, unaware - Trust in Legal System : High, moderate, low
Overall Satisfaction with Social Media Experience	- Satisfied : Content with experience - Neutral : Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied - Dissatisfied : Unhappy with experience

Source: Data Analysis, 2024.

**Objective Three: Identify cyberbullying patterns among social media user**

The result revealed daily incidents of cyberbullying were reported by a significant portion of participants, indicating persistent harassment and negative interactions. The most prevalent types included personal attacks, derogatory remarks, persistent negative comments, and dissemination of false information. These patterns suggest a range of aggressive behaviors aimed at undermining individuals' reputations or causing emotional distress. Trolls and fake accounts were frequently identified as perpetrators, leveraging anonymity to engage in malicious behavior without repercussions. Friends and acquaintances also contributed to cyberbullying incidents, highlighting intra-personal conflicts exacerbated by political discussions.

Politicians and celebrities were cited as sources of cyberbullying, with their followers or supporters sometimes engaging in aggressive behavior on their behalf. Participants reported significant emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and frustration, particularly when subjected to personal attacks or persistent harassment. Responses included reduced engagement with social media, caution in posting, and in severe cases, withdrawal from online platforms to avoid further harassment. Many sought support from friends and family to cope with cyberbullying, emphasizing the role of personal networks in mitigating emotional harm. A subset of participants sought assistance from counselors or therapists to manage the psychological impact of cyberbullying. Awareness of cyber laws varied, influencing participants' trust in legal recourse. Some expressed frustration with the inadequacy of legal protections against online harassment.

The identified cyberbullying patterns

underscore the pervasive and detrimental impact of online harassment during political discourse on social media. The frequent occurrence of personal attacks and dissemination of false information reflects a deliberate effort to influence public opinion or discredit opponents. The involvement of anonymous users and known contacts suggests that cyberbullying can arise from both external and internal social circles, exacerbating interpersonal tensions. The emotional toll on victims, characterized by high distress levels and behavioral changes, highlights the urgent need for robust support systems and effective policies to safeguard users' mental well-being. Legal frameworks must be strengthened to address gaps in protecting individuals from online harassment, particularly during sensitive periods like election campaigns. Overall, understanding these patterns is crucial for developing targeted interventions and policies that promote respectful online discourse, protect users from harm, and uphold the integrity of democratic processes in digital spaces.

**Objective Four: Assess the psychological impact of cyberbullying on social media users.**

75% of participants reported experiencing high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress due to cyberbullying during the election period. This indicates a significant psychological toll, with the majority of users affected by negative emotional states that can impair overall well-being and productivity. 60% of respondents noted behavioral changes, such as reducing their social media activity or avoiding certain platforms altogether. These changes suggest adaptive responses to mitigate exposure to cyberbullying and its associated stressors, potentially affecting online engagement and social interactions. Half of the participants reported experiencing psychological symptoms like sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, and mood swings. These symptoms reflect the broader impact of cyberbullying on mental health, influencing daily functioning and quality of life.

**Table 3: Psychological Impact of Cyberbullying**

Category	Frequency (%)	Impact Description
Emotional Distress	75%	High levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.
Behavioral Changes	60%	Reduced engagement with social media platforms.
Psychological Symptoms	50%	Sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, mood swings.
Coping Mechanisms		Seeking social support (70%), professional help (30%).
Legal Awareness	40%	Awareness of cyber laws; frustration with enforcement.
Impact on Daily Life	65%	Interference with work or personal relationships.

Source: Data Analysis, 2024.

70% sought support from friends, family, or online communities to cope with cyberbullying, indicating the importance of social networks in resilience-building. 30% sought assistance from counselors or mental health professionals,

underscoring the need for specialized interventions to address psychological distress. 40% demonstrated awareness of cyber laws but expressed frustration with their effectiveness in combating online harassment. Limited trust in legal recourse highlights gaps in protecting individuals from cyberbullying, suggesting a need for enhanced legislative measures and enforcement. 65% reported that cyberbullying interfered with their daily activities, including work or personal relationships. This disruption underscores the pervasive nature of cyberbullying, which extends beyond online interactions to affect real-world functioning and social dynamics. The data highlights the profound psychological impact of cyberbullying on social media users during the 2023 general election in Nigeria. High frequencies of emotional distress, behavioral changes, and psychological symptoms indicate widespread vulnerability to online harassment, exacerbated by political discourse. Coping mechanisms such as social support and professional help play crucial roles in mitigating distress, emphasizing the importance of community and mental health services in resilience-building.

Moreover, participants' awareness of legal protections underscores concerns about inadequate enforcement and the need for robust legislative frameworks to safeguard digital rights. The interference of cyberbullying with daily life activities underscores its disruptive influence on personal well-being and social functioning. In conclusion, addressing the psychological impact of cyberbullying requires a multifaceted approach, including education on digital etiquette, enhancing mental health support systems, and strengthening legal protections to ensure a safer online environment for all users, particularly during politically charged periods.

### Summary of Findings:

The study investigated the psychological impact of cyberbullying on social media users during the 2023 general election in Nigeria. Based on the data:

- A significant majority (75%) experienced high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress due to cyberbullying.
- 60% of respondents altered their social media usage patterns, reflecting efforts to mitigate exposure to online harassment.
- Half of the participants reported psychological symptoms like sleep disturbances and mood swings, indicating a pervasive impact on mental health.
- Most participants sought support from social networks (70%) and some sought professional help (30%), highlighting adaptive strategies to

manage cyberbullying effects.

- 40% were aware of cyber laws but expressed frustration with their efficacy in addressing online harassment.
- Cyberbullying significantly interfered with daily activities for 65% of respondents, affecting work and personal relationships.

### Conclusion

The research highlights the extensive and varied effects of cyberbullying on individuals active on social media during critical junctures like elections. It reveals that emotional distress, shifts in behavior, and psychological symptoms are clear indicators of how prevalent online harassment significantly impacts mental health and everyday life. Moreover, the study examines participants' coping mechanisms and their understanding of legal recourse, shedding light on both their resilience in combating cyberbullying and the existing shortcomings in safeguarding individuals from such online abuses. These insights underscore the complex interplay between digital interactions and personal well-being in the context of contemporary socio-political events.

### Recommendations

- i. Increase access to mental health resources and counseling services tailored to address the psychological effects of cyberbullying.
- ii. Launch campaigns to promote digital literacy and responsible online behavior, empowering users to recognize and combat cyberbullying.
- iii. Advocate for strengthened cyber laws and effective enforcement mechanisms to better protect individuals from online harassment.
- iv. Collaborate with social media platforms to implement robust policies and tools for reporting and mitigating cyberbullying incidents.
- v. Foster supportive online communities that promote empathy, respect, and inclusivity to counteract cyberbullying culture. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards creating safer digital environments that uphold users' well-being and rights, particularly during sensitive periods like electoral campaigns.

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