

**CYBERBULLYING AND STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND
MENTAL HEALTH: A STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DELTA, AGBOR,
DELTA STATE, NIGERIA****Ejirefe, Influence¹ Iwedike, N. Godwin² Omoroje, Seji D.O³
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Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria***Correspondence:** Influence.ejirefe@unidel.edu.ng**ABSTRACT**

This study examined cyberbullying and students' perceived academic and mental health outcomes at the University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on General Strain Theory, which explains how exposure to stressors and negative stimuli may produce harmful coping responses and victimization outcomes. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The study population was 13,524 undergraduate students in the 2024/2025 academic session, and a sample size of 389 was derived using Taro Yamane's formula. Using a systematic field-selection procedure, questionnaires were administered to students across academic locations and time periods. In all, 330 properly completed copies were retained for analysis. The instrument contained sections on socio-demographic characteristics, cyberbullying exposure platforms, perceived academic effects, and perceived mental health effects. Face and content validity were established through expert review, while internal consistency was strengthened through item harmonisation and pilot refinement. Data were analysed with frequencies and percentages because the available dataset supported a descriptive interpretation of students' reported experiences and perceptions. The findings showed that WhatsApp was the most frequently reported platform of cyberbullying exposure (62.4%). A large majority of respondents also perceived that cyberbullying adversely affected academic performance (90.9%) and mental health (90.9%). The study concludes that cyberbullying constitutes a serious student-welfare concern in the study area. It therefore recommends institutional digital-safety education, confidential reporting pathways, counselling support, and enforceable anti-cyberbullying regulations within the university.

Key words: Cyberbullying; Undergraduates; Academic Performance; Mental Health; University of Delta Agbor.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has transformed communication within higher education. It has widened access to information, strengthened peer interaction, and improved learning flexibility. Yet the same environment has also created new spaces for harassment, humiliation, and sustained peer aggression. This is troubling. Cyberbullying has therefore emerged as a serious concern within contemporary university life. It occurs through messaging applications, social

networking platforms, email, and other digital channels that students use daily. In such environments, harmful conduct can spread rapidly, remain visible for long periods, and continue beyond the physical boundaries of the campus. Cyberbullying is especially troubling because digital interaction often permits anonymity, distance, and repeated exposure. These features can intensify the emotional burden on victims and reduce the immediate accountability of perpetrators. Studies have linked cyberbullying with anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, academic disruption, and reduced concentration among students. The implications are serious. Recent evidence also indicates that university students constitute a high-risk population because of sustained social-media use and near-constant connectivity. Accordingly, what appears online as a message, post, image, or insult may generate consequences that extend deeply into students' psychosocial and academic lives.

In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of smartphone use and social networking culture has increased both the visibility and the risk of online abuse among young people. Although the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 and its 2024 amendment provide a legal basis for addressing harmful online conduct, institutional and preventive responses within universities remain uneven. This gap matters. Where cyberbullying is insufficiently addressed, students may experience emotional distress, reduced classroom engagement, academic decline, and a weakening sense of safety within the university environment. Against this background, the study focused on the University of Delta, Agbor. It sought to describe the platforms through which cyberbullying is experienced and to examine students' perceptions of its effects on academic performance and mental health. The focus is clear. The study contributes to the growing body of Nigerian evidence on digital victimization in higher education and provides institutionally relevant insights for prevention and student support.

Objectives

The main objective is to investigate cyberbullying and students' academic performance and mental health at the University of Delta Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. identify the major digital platforms through which students experience cyberbullying at the University of Delta, Agbor.
2. examine students' perceptions of the effect of cyberbullying on academic performance at the University of Delta, Agbor.
3. investigate students' perceptions of the effect of cyberbullying on mental health at the University of Delta, Agbor.

Research Questions

The following research questions were asked to guide the study:

- a. Which digital platforms are most commonly associated with students' experiences of cyberbullying at the University of Delta, Agbor?
- b. How do students perceive the effect of cyberbullying on academic performance at the University of Delta, Agbor?
- c. How do students perceive the effect of cyberbullying on mental health at the University of Delta, Agbor?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for students, university administrators, counsellors, and policy actors. For students, it draws attention to the reality that online harassment is not harmless banter but a form of victimization with potentially serious emotional and academic implications. That point is important. For the university management, the study provides empirical support for structured orientation, counselling referral systems, anonymous reporting channels, and disciplinary frameworks that specifically address cyberbullying. For researchers and knowledge users, the study extends local Nigerian scholarship on cyberbullying within tertiary institutions and offers a basis for further analytical work using inferential designs and larger institutional datasets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Clarification

Cyberbullying

Chan, et al (2021) define cyberbullying as bullying that occurs through the use of electronic technology. Yu and Riddle (2022) describe it as intentionally sending harmful or aggressive content online to harass, threaten, or humiliate others. Cyberbullying encompasses various actions such as sending malicious messages, sharing embarrassing images, impersonating individuals, and excluding victims from online groups (Abaido, 2020). Similarly, UNICEF (2025) define cyberbullying as bullying with the use of digital technologies, that takes place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones. It is a recurring behaviour, aimed at frightening, annoying or humiliating those who are targeted. Furthermore, American Psychological Association (2025) define cyberbullying as the use of technology to demean, inflict harm, or cause pain to another person. Cyberbullying happens in the social media, messaging platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and

other digital forums-where perpetrators often remain anonymous, and harassment can continue without temporal or physical boundaries. The increasing use of smartphones, internet connectivity and social media platforms among Nigerian students has contributed to the growing prevalence of cyberbullying (Ezewulu & Ebenebe, 2022). Cyberbullying also refers to intentional harmful behaviour enacted through digital technologies such as social media, messaging platforms, emails, gaming platforms, and mobile communication channels. It includes acts such as threatening messages, humiliation, impersonation, malicious rumours, exclusion from online groups, and the circulation of embarrassing content. The concept is broad. Unlike many offline interactions, cyberbullying may persist continuously, reach broader audiences, and leave a durable digital footprint.

Academic Performance

Raquel (2020) defines academic performance as the extent to which a student, teacher, or institution has attained their short-or long-term educational goals and is measured either by continuous assessment or cumulative grade point average (CGPA). A student academic performance may be high or low. A student who scored GPA of 3 points and above is a student with a good academic performance, while a student who score below GPA of 3 points is an example of a student with a low academic performance. Similarly, Oliver, et al (2019) conceptualise academic performance as a student's ability to complete academic assignments, and it is assessed using objective criteria such as final course grades and grading point average. In this study, students' academic performance is considered a very important indicator affected by cyberbullying. It also refers to students' learning effectiveness as reflected in concentration, class participation, motivation, and perceived academic functioning.

Mental Health

World Health Organisation (2025) conceptualise mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. It has inherent and contributory value and is a fundamental human right. Similarly, Verywellmind (2025) assert that mental health is a term used to describe emotional, psychological, and social well-being. A person's mental health quality is often measured by how adaptively they can cope with everyday stressors. Mental health allows people to use their abilities to be productive, make decisions, and play an active role in their communities. Additionally, Healthline Media (2025) conceptualise Mental health as

about how people think, feel, and behave. Mental health can affect a person's day to day life, relationships, and physical health. Factors such as stress, depression, anxiety, and bullying in any form can affect the mental health of a university going student such that it can disrupt his or her daily routine. Furthermore, mental health refers to the emotional and psychological condition of students, including feelings of anxiety, shame, fear, sadness, withdrawal, or reduced psychosocial well-being that may arise from harmful online interactions. Both concepts are central to the study.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992). The theory argues that individuals exposed to strain, frustration, or negative stimuli may respond with maladaptive behaviours or may experience harmful emotional outcomes when effective coping resources are weak. Within the university environment, students may encounter social exclusion, academic pressure, financial difficulty, peer hostility, and online humiliation. These pressures are real. Where they are channelled through digital platforms, cyberbullying may emerge either as a deviant expression of strain by perpetrators or as a severe negative stimulus experienced by victims. The theory is therefore useful for explaining why cyberbullying can generate emotional distress, withdrawal, and academic difficulties among students.

Empirical Review

Existing studies consistently show that cyberbullying is associated with adverse educational and psychological outcomes. Myers and Cowie (2019) observed that cyberbullying has become a concern across the educational lifespan, including university settings, and highlighted its implications for well-being, safety, and institutional intervention. Similarly, Vaghchipawala (2023) study investigated the effect of cyberbullying on academic performance among high school students in Surat. The study included 92 high school students ranging in age from 14 to 19 years. The scale used to measure the adolescents experience as a victim of cyberbullying in the past 12 months was "Cyber Victimization Scale (CYBVICS)". CGPA of students were collected, average was calculated. Regression statistics via the SPSS programme was adopted to analyse the data, and the result showed that cyberbullying is a significant predictor of academic performance among school age students.

Additionally, Ezewulu and Ebenebe (2022) study among secondary school students in Anambra State revealed that victims of cyberbullying often suffer reduced class participation, emotional distress, and declining academic performance. Furthermore, Mbah, (2020) examined the perception of students about school bullying and how it affects academic performance of high school students in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The study was based on interviews with 24 students and 6 teachers; and the findings revealed that bullying is widespread, mostly unreported, and negatively influences students' attendance, concentration, and a decline in academic performance.

Farhangpour et al. (2019) found that cyberbullying victims experienced anxiety, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and poor academic outcomes. The pattern is consistent. In the Nigerian context, Ezewulu and Ebenebe (2022) reported that cyberbullying negatively influenced academic achievement among in-school adolescents in Anambra State. Olasanmi et al. (2020) documented the prevalence of cyberbullying among Nigerian students and stressed the need for prevention strategies. More recently, Arif et al. (2024) synthesised evidence from 32 studies involving 29,593 university students and found that cybervictimization was linked with depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal behaviour, lower self-esteem, and reduced academic concentration. Together, these studies suggest that cyberbullying is not merely a digital inconvenience. It is a welfare, learning, and institutional governance

Humboldt, et al (2025) examined cyberbullying and its influence on mental health across the lifespan. The study included 883 participants divided into three age groups: 18-39, 40-59, and 60 and above. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather participants' experiences and perspectives. The data were then subjected to content analysis. The first objective revealed the following themes: For ages 18-39: (a) feeling ashamed or humiliated (92.4%), (b) withdrawing from friends and family, and (c) experiencing harassment as positive and difficulties with rules. For ages 40-59: (a) losing interest in hobbies (89.5%), (b) questioning about things they did or did not do, and (c) experiencing a sense of missing out. For ages 60 and above: (a) negative thoughts and self-talk (91.3%), (b) feeling judged negatively, and (c) feeling financially vulnerable. The second objective revealed: For ages 18-39: (a) depressive symptoms (79.7%), (b) easy anger, and (c) suicidal behavior. For ages 40-59: (a) anxiety (93.2%), (b) isolation, and (c) disturbances in sleep and eating patterns. The findings underscore the relevance of developing age-specific strategies to mitigate the effects

of cyberbullying and to have perpetrators take responsibility for their reckless disregard for others, and ultimately, themselves.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. This design was appropriate because the study sought to obtain data from undergraduates on their experiences and perceptions regarding cyberbullying, academic performance, and mental health within the study setting. The study population comprised all undergraduate students of the University of Delta, Agbor, in the 2024/2025 academic session. The total population was 13,524 students. A sample size of 389 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5% level of precision. The sampling frame was therefore adequate for the descriptive purpose of the study. A systematic field-selection procedure was used during questionnaire administration. Students encountered at regular intervals across academic buildings and time periods were approached for participation. This improved coverage. It also strengthened representation across gender categories and academic levels and was more consistent with the field process than the earlier description of simple random sampling.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire with four sections. Section 'A' elicited socio-demographic information. Section 'B' measured exposure channels and experiences of cyberbullying. Section 'C' assessed respondents' perceptions of the academic effects of cyberbullying, while Section 'D' assessed respondents' perceptions of its mental health effects. Both closed-ended and limited open-ended items were included to enrich response clarity. Face and content validity were established through expert review in sociology, criminology, and social research methods. The questionnaire was also refined after pilot administration to improve item clarity and sequencing. Reliability was enhanced through item harmonisation and internal consistency checking during instrument development. A total of 389 questionnaires were administered. Of these, 330 properly completed copies were retained for final analysis. The data available for the study supported descriptive analysis. Consequently, frequencies and percentages were used to summarise respondents' characteristics, cyberbullying platforms, and perceived academic and mental health effects. This was deliberate. In line with this descriptive design, the discussion and conclusion were carefully framed around students' reported perceptions rather than causal or inferential claims. Ethical participation principles were observed. Participation was voluntary, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, and anonymity was maintained. No identifying personal information was reported in the study.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	150	45.5
Female	180	54.5

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 1 shows that 45.5% of the respondents were male, while 54.5% were female. The distribution indicates modest female predominance in the analysed sample.

Platforms Through Which Respondents Experienced Cyberbullying

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Respondents by Reported Cyberbullying Platform

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
WhatsApp messages	206	62.4
Facebook	42	12.7
Instagram	34	10.3
Email	32	9.7
Internet/other online channels	16	4.8

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 2 reveals that WhatsApp messages constituted the most frequently reported platform of cyberbullying exposure, accounting for 62.4% of responses. Facebook (12.7%), Instagram (10.3%), Email (9.7%), and other internet-based channels (4.8%) followed distantly. The pattern is clear. It suggests that everyday peer messaging environments may be the most immediate digital spaces through which students encounter harassment.

Perceived Effect of Cyberbullying on Academic Performance

Table 3. Respondents' Perception of the Effect of Cyberbullying on Academic Performance

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	300	90.9
No	20	6.1
I do not know	10	3.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 3 indicates that 90.9% of the respondents perceived that cyberbullying adversely affects academic performance. Only 6.1% disagreed, while 3.0% were uncertain. Descriptively, the result suggests that respondents viewed cyberbullying as a strong impediment to concentration, study engagement, and effective participation in academic life.

Perceived Effect of Cyberbullying on Mental Health

Table 4. Respondents' Perception of the Effect of Cyberbullying on Mental Health

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	300	90.9
No	12	3.6
I do not know	18	5.5

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 4 shows that 90.9% of respondents believed that cyberbullying negatively affects students' mental health. The finding is substantial. It implies that students widely associate cyberbullying with emotional strain, fear, shame, stress, and psychological discomfort within the university environment.

Discussion of Findings

The findings show that cyberbullying is experienced by students through highly familiar and frequently used digital platforms, especially WhatsApp. This is important. It means that cyberbullying is embedded in routine channels of student interaction rather than in marginal or obscure online spaces. Such proximity increases the immediacy of exposure and may make escape more difficult for victims. This pattern aligns with the wider literature showing that cyberbullying thrives where digital access is regular, mobile, and socially integrated. The strong descriptive support for the perceived academic effects of cyberbullying is also noteworthy. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that cyberbullying undermines academic performance. Although the present dataset supports descriptive rather than inferential claims, this perception is consistent with earlier studies that link online victimization to poor concentration, class disengagement, absenteeism, and reduced educational functioning. By implication, cyberbullying may weaken the conditions required for effective learning even when it occurs outside the physical classroom.

The result on mental health is similarly compelling. Respondents largely perceived cyberbullying as harmful to mental well-being. This resonates with the broader evidence base identifying associations between cybervictimization and anxiety, depression, stress, social withdrawal, and diminished self-esteem among university students. Arguably, the relevance of this finding goes beyond individual distress. It points to a student-support issue that universities must treat as a matter of institutional responsibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study established that cyberbullying is a visible and serious concern among undergraduates at the University of Delta, Agbor. WhatsApp emerged as the dominant reported platform of exposure, while respondents overwhelmingly perceived cyberbullying as harmful to both academic performance and mental health. These findings do not merely suggest student discomfort. They point to a wider problem of digital victimization within the higher-education environment. The study therefore concludes that cyberbullying should be treated as a student-welfare, learning, and institutional governance issue. At the same time, it is important to state that the available dataset supports descriptive interpretation rather than inferential proof of statistical association. Future studies should therefore employ validated scales and appropriate inferential tests to estimate the strength and direction of relationships among cyberbullying, academic outcomes, and mental health indicators.

Based on the findings made, the study recommends that:

- i. The university should establish and publicise a formal anti-cyberbullying policy that clearly defines prohibited conduct, reporting procedures, investigative pathways, and sanctions.
- ii. Digital-safety education should be integrated into student orientation and student-development programmes so that undergraduates understand both the consequences of cyberbullying and the available support mechanisms.
- iii. Confidential reporting channels, including student-welfare hotlines or designated online complaint portals, should be created to encourage early reporting and response.
- iv. Counselling and psychosocial support services should be strengthened for students who experience online harassment, emotional distress, or academic disruption linked to cyberbullying.
- v. Subsequent studies should apply validated measurement scales and inferential techniques such as chi-square, correlation, or regression analysis in order to estimate the magnitude of association between cyberbullying, academic functioning, and mental health.

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