

Cyberbullying in the Social Media Space: Perception, Security Concerns and Coping Strategies of Dr. B.U Nzeribe State Polytechnic Students

Kingsley Onyemekara Emecheta (FCPA)

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic

Awo-Omamma, Imo State

Email: emecheta.kins@gmail.com

Phone No. +2348034949499

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0008-4026-9529>

(Mrs) Stella Nkechi Obijuru PhD

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic

Awo-Omamma, Imo State

Phone No. +2348038714656

Donald Dimma Ukachu

School of General Studies'

Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic

Awo-Omamma, Imo State

Email: donaldukachu12@gmail.com

Phone No. 08036094563

<https://doi.org/10.56201/wjimt.v10.no9.2026.pg168.184>

Abstract

Cyberbullying has become a serious challenge for students in tertiary institutions. It can affect their emotional well-being, social life, and academic performance. This study explores the experiences of students on social media cyberbullying at Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma and how they respond to it. Through in-depth interviews, students shared how they face online harassment, identity misuse, and other forms of digital aggression, and how they cope to regain a sense of safety. Routine Activity Theory explains this from the perspectives of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. This study looks at the role of bystanders and the larger campus community in determining whether incidents flourish or are stymied, thus indicating one practical outcome the institution can build in through policy and counselling support: namely, digital resilience. The results reveal that the development of institutional policy, awareness programs, peer support, and digital literacy are the key components of safe online environments for students.

Keywords: *cyberbullying, social media, tertiary students, digital security, Routine Activity Theory, digital resilience*

Introduction

Background to the Study

Social media has become the melting pot of social engagement and activities, and as much, an essential part of students' lives. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter) provide spaces to connect, share ideas, showcase achievements, promote, and engage in business. They also provide a place to build friendships and social networks. By the start of 2025, more than 107 million Nigerians, greater than 45 percent of the population, were active internet users, and almost 39 million had at least one social media identity, a number that is increasing every year (DataReportal, 2025). This means that for students in tertiary institutions, much of their everyday lives including their course work groups and circle of friends, have transferred from physical to virtual spaces. While these spaces have their fair share of positives, they are not easily accessible nor are they safe, but predisposed to negative and antisocial behaviour (Ray et al., 2024). Some students experience cyberbullying of teasing, different forms of harassment, spreading misinformation, and impersonation. These can leave students feeling anxious, isolated, and reluctant to engage online. Most instances of cyberbullying do not happen behind closed doors. Instead, they happen in front of an audience of classmates, group members and casual social media followers, and how this audience responds can help either end or perpetuate the incident (Huang, Li, & Ai, 2023). The bystander aspect is essentially non-existent when many Nigerian institutions discuss online safety, although it fits quite naturally with the theoretical lens used later in this study. The two years since COVID-19 began some campus activities on phones and group chats, and accounts that do not have a clear link to a known identity make it easier for a harmful incident to spread before anyone comes to the rescue (Li, Zhou, McManus, Stewart, & Roberts, 2024). Cyberbullying is not just emotionally damaging, but also harmful to a student's learning, self-esteem, and relationships with friends, sometimes with long term consequences. As Twenge (2020) points out, there is a lot of literature on cyberbullying that has shown that the associated effects are depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. The phenomenon itself is becoming more visible in Nigeria, but most institutions have no policies or support systems in place to address the problem. Students must deal with the problem on their own while focusing on their studies. The study investigated how the students at Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic, Awo-Omamma conceptualise and experience cyberbullying, the security concerns associated with the phenomenon, and the strategies they utilise to cope. The findings will equip the institution to draft and/or amend its policies, programmes of support, and awareness drives. Using Routine Activity Theory, the study shows that cyberbullying emerges when motivated offenders and suitable targets converge in the absence of capable guardianship. In the case of cyberbullying, peers, course-mates, and other campus agents are potential guardianship. It also shows how the above points linked with cyberbullying are configured with the students' experience and proposes a framework for developing practical solutions that will secure and protect online spaces of the students.

Statement of the Problem

Although the use of internet and social media is increasingly ubiquitous among Nigerian high and tertiary students, and the number of incidents of online harassment or cyberbullying is rapidly

increasing, little has been done by tertiary institutions in general, and especially polytechnics, in providing guidelines and counselling mechanisms to help students manage cyberbullying. Although the Nigerian literature revealed a breadth of literature on cyberbullying, most of the studies, which will be discussed later in the paper, were carried out on university undergraduates, and polytechnic students were not adequately studied, and yet polytechnics students also use social media in the same manner as university students, and hence also experience the same problems. Polytechnic students are offered classroom-based courses and at the same time gain more practical and workshop-based knowledge. Thus, the study of cyberbullying needs to take into consideration the situations of polytechnics students, in terms of when and with whom these students use social media and how that will influence the way these students experience cyberbullying. Few policies designed to deal with the problem of cyberbullying are informed by direct investigations undertaken into students' lives; they are rather based mostly on the assumptions of the policymakers concerning everyday occurrences in schools and those among the students who are the real victims. Defining who these victims are in their own words is the main goal this research aims to achieve.

Objectives of the Study

Based on the above-said problem, this study is thus guided by the following five objectives, which in turn guided the discussion and recommendations presented at the end of the paper and are reviewed again in terms of the interview data obtained. To address the gap in knowledge, the present study is designed to:

- examine how Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma students perceive and describe their experiences of cyberbullying on social media;
- identify the security concerns that students associate with online harassment, identity misuse, and other forms of digital aggression;
- explore the coping strategies students adopt in response to cyberbullying;
- apply Routine Activity Theory and Social Learning Theory to explain why these incidents occur and persist within the campus community; and
- draw out institutional and policy recommendations that could make online spaces safer for students.

Collectively, these objectives take the study from description to explanation and then finally toward action. In this respect, the study goes beyond just documenting what happens to students to seeking the reasons why these things happen and what institutions can do practically to mitigate these challenges.

Significance of the Study

Firstly, the study is significant to the management of Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic, Awo-Omamma, in that it will provide empirical evidence on which the management can develop policies on cyberbullying, digital safety, and counselling, reflecting the students' reality. Secondly, the study will enable the students to break their silence and provide some of the recommendations with which students can readily identify. Thirdly, for the counsellors and student affairs officers, the four themes that emerged from the findings provide some operational terminology to locate a student anywhere on the trajectory from exposure to cautious recovery. Fourthly, for researchers and other Nigerian tertiary institutions, especially polytechnics with similar student profiles, this study provides an additional piece of context-specific evidence in an otherwise university-

dominated literature. Lastly, the study brings together Routine Activity Theory and Social Learning Theory to a Nigerian polytechnic sample and makes a minor contribution to the academic discussion of how these widespread Western criminological theories are mapped onto a West African context of tertiary education, a context where empirical testing is still thin.

Scope of the Study

The study is limited to Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma and draws on the accounts of sixty students purposively selected from eight departments because of their exposure to cyberbullying incidents. The study is therefore limited to social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter). Offline bullying and cyber threats targeting the institution are therefore beyond the scope of this study. As a qualitative phenomenological study, it prioritises in-depth understanding over statistical generalizability; thus, its findings are an account resonating closely with this population of students rather than a claim that these findings apply to Nigerian polytechnic students generally.

Operational Definition of Terms

For this study, the terms are defined as follows:

- **Cyberbullying:** wilful and repeated harm inflicted on a person through computers, phones, and other electronic devices, including harassment, impersonation, denigration, and exclusion carried out on social media (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Willard, 2007).
- **Social media:** internet-based platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, that allow users to create profiles, share content, and interact with others.
- **Security concerns:** the worries students express about their safety, privacy, and reputation because of exposure to cyberbullying, including fear of further harassment or exposure of personal information.
- **Coping strategies:** the behaviours students adopt in response to cyberbullying, ranging from withdrawing from a platform to adjusting privacy settings or seeking support from others.
- **Guardianship:** the presence of a person, policy, or system capable of discouraging or interrupting a cyberbullying incident, whether formal, such as an institutional office, or informal, such as an attentive course mate (Cohen & Felson, 1979).
- **Digital resilience:** a student's ability to regulate their response to online harm and gradually rebuild a safer, more confident way of using social media (Samoh, Guadamuz, Khlaisang, & Choemprayong, 2026).

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Cyberbullying is a form of aggression carried out through digital platforms. It is usually repeated and intentional, designed to harm someone emotionally or socially, and it is commonly defined as wilful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, phones, and other electronic devices (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). What separates it from ordinary online disagreement is repetition, an imbalance of power between the offender and the target, and the fact that a single post or message can reach an audience far wider than the people originally involved (Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019; Tokunaga, 2010). Unlike traditional bullying, which usually ends when a student leaves the school compound, cyberbullying can follow a student home, into their bedroom, and through every device they own, since the phone that connects them to friends and coursework is

the same phone that can carry harassment. Scholars have tried to capture the many shapes this aggression can take. Willard (2007) offers one of the most widely used classifications, describing eight recognisable forms. Flaming involves sending angry or insulting messages, often in a public thread, to provoke a reaction. Harassment refers to repeated, targeted messages meant to intimidate or wear a person down. Denigration is the posting of cruel or false statements about someone to damage their reputation among people who know them. Impersonation happens when an offender logs into or creates an account that looks like that of the target, then posts things in their name. Outing and trickery both involve exposing private information, either by sharing something a person confided in secret or by tricking them into revealing it in the first place. Exclusion is the deliberate removal of someone from a group chat, forum, or online circle as a form of social punishment. Cyberstalking, the most persistent of the eight, involves repeated threats or unwanted contact that leaves a target feeling unsafe. These categories rarely appear in isolation. A single episode described by a student, such as an impersonated account used to spread false rumours, often combines several of them at once.

Empirical Review: Global Perspectives

Research in high income countries shows that victims often experience anxiety, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and poor academic performance (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018; Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019). A large-scale meta-analysis pooling finding across many studies and age groups found a consistent, moderate association between cyberbullying victimization and outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem, suggesting these links are not an artefact of any single country or sample (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). The online disinhibition effect explains why people act more aggressively online than they would face to face, often because they feel anonymous and less accountable (Suler, 2004). This anonymity is not fixed. Where a social media account is clearly linked to a verified, known identity, users tend to behave with more restraint, while unverified or anonymous accounts are associated with harsher and more frequent cyberbullying, a pattern that became more visible during the COVID-19 period as public life moved further online (Li, Zhou, McManus, Stewart, & Roberts, 2024). Beyond direct victimisation, a growing body of work looks at what bystanders do once they witness an incident, since their willingness to intervene, or their choice to look away, often decides how far the incident travels. Evidence from college samples suggests that bystanders are more likely to intervene when an incident feels severe and when they feel personally responsible for what happens next, and that empathy strengthens this effect (Huang, Li, & Ai, 2023). Factors like gender, platform type, and frequency of online use can increase vulnerability, with young women often at higher risk (Tokunaga, 2010; Wright & Wachs, 2022). Yet the gender pattern is not always straightforward. A study of a rural South African university found that structural factors, such as poor network access and a weak institutional response, shaped victimisation as much as gender did, suggesting that findings from one setting should not be assumed to travel evenly across the continent (Mabika, 2022).

Empirical Review: African and Nigerian Perspectives

In Africa, cyberbullying is becoming more common among students in tertiary institutions. Nigerian research shows that students face identity theft, harassment, and content misuse, but institutional support is often limited (Adesina & Ajayi, 2022; Nwachukwu, 2023). An earlier study of undergraduates at a Nigerian university found that more than half of the students surveyed were

aware of cyberbullying incidents within their own social circles, and that between roughly 48 and 57 percent had themselves been bullied through some form of electronic medium, most often text messages, phone calls, and chat rooms, while close to a third admitted to having bullied someone else the same way (Nwosu, Ementa, & Ejikeme, 2018). A separate study of undergraduates in Kwara State linked frequent social media use directly to higher rates of cyberbullying involvement and found that students themselves saw structured counselling interventions as one of the more promising ways to reduce it, a finding that lines up with what this study's own participants describe wanting from their institution (Adebayo, Ninggal, & Ajiboye, 2019). Studies from Southwestern Nigeria similarly link cyberbullying to moral disengagement among undergraduates, where offenders rationalise harmful posts as jokes or as deserved payback (Adebayo & Omotayo, 2021), while research in Eastern Nigeria describes the psychological cost of online shaming, including shame, withdrawal, and diminished trust in digital spaces (Iwuoha & Nwosu, 2020). Similar findings exist in Ghana and Kenya, where students experience harm but lack effective reporting channels or counselling services (Asare, 2021; Kariuki & Wanjiru, 2022). Peer rivalry, social reputation, and moral policing are also important cultural factors influencing cyberbullying on the continent (Chikere & Eze, 2023; Mbatha, 2021), and broader accounts of digital aggression across Sub-Saharan Africa point to a generational shift in how conflict and reputation are contested online rather than face to face (Tchouassi, 2020). Comparable patterns appear further east, where female health science students in Ethiopia described leaning on prayer, silence, and selective disclosure to cope with online harassment, often well before any counsellor or institutional office became involved (Tsegaye, Kena, Debela, & Azeze, 2025). Weighed alongside the Nigerian evidence, this points to a coping style shaped less by formal institutional systems than by informal networks of friends, family, and faith.

Effects of Cyberbullying on Students

Across the studies reviewed so far, three broad areas of impact recur. The first is psychological, where victims consistently report anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and in more serious cases the depression, self-harm, and suicidal thinking that both Twenge (2020), and Hinduja and Patchin (2018) link to sustained exposure to online harassment. The second is social, where students describe withdrawing from friendships, group activities, and the platforms themselves as a way of avoiding further harm, a pattern that appears clearly in both the global literature (Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019) and the Nigerian evidence reviewed above. The third is academic since anxiety and withdrawal rarely stay contained to a student's social life alone. A student distracted by an ongoing harassment campaign, or reluctant to check a phone that has become a source of dread, is a student whose attention to coursework suffers as a direct consequence. These three impacts are interrelated. For instance, a victim may socially withdraw to protect herself from further harm, but she will miss the social and academic peer support that may have mitigated the psychological distress caused by victimization. This is why the coping mechanisms discussed later in this study are as important as victimization.

Policy and Legal Context in Nigeria

Nigeria's principal legal instrument against online harassment is the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015, whose Section 24 criminalises the use of a computer system to send messages that are offensive, threatening, or intended to cause annoyance, insult, or needless anxiety, with penalties that can include a fine or a prison term. A 2024 amendment narrowed some

of the broad wording in the original section after years of criticism that it was being used against journalists and government critics rather than the victims of harassment it was meant to protect. What this legal history means for a tertiary institution like Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma is that the law exists, but it operates far above the level of everyday campus life. A student being impersonated or harassed in a departmental group chat is unlikely to think of the Cybercrimes Act as a route to safety, and would more naturally turn first to a lecturer, a hostel warden, or a friend. This is why the gap between national legislation and protection at the campus level is one of the main reasons for this study's recommendations, particularly the call for a Digital Safety Response Unit.

Summary and Gap in the Literature

The literature, thus, concurs on the emotional and academic cost of cyberbullying, the different modes through which it manifests, and the key role of both individual-level factors, such as gender and Internet use patterns, and structural-level factors, such as poor institutional guardianship. What the literature has not systematically done is focus on polytechnic students whose experiences of cyberbullying are very different because they mix the classroom with workshop-based training. Indeed, this study takes a polytechnic case: Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic, Awo-Omamma, and seeks to fill this gap by exploring the experiences, perceptions, and reactions of students to cyberbullying in social media spaces.

Theoretical Overview

This study was conducted within the framework of the Routine Activity Theory, supplemented by the Social Learning Theory in terms of how the offending behaviour is acquired and repeated. Hence, the two theories have ensured that the study captures both sides of the incidents' students report, including the reasons an opportunity to cause harm exists and again, why an individual seizes such an opportunity.

Routine Activity Theory

According to Cohen and Felson (1979), Routine Activity Theory was initially developed to account for why crime rates sometimes rise when traditional social causes of crime, like poverty, do not worsen. They argued that rather than a severe social breakdown, the routine activities of ordinary life would be responsible for bringing together the elements of harm. Harm occurs only when, in time and place, a motivated offender meets a suitable target without the presence of a capable guardian. The absence of any one of these three elements would preclude the commission of the offense. The motivated offender in this study is the student who impersonates, harasses, or spreads rumours about a fellow student, actions often emboldened by the seeming distance and anonymity offered by digital platforms. The suitable target is the student whose profile, postings, or personal information is readily available and accessible, usually the one active and well known in the department or among friends. Finally, the absence of a capable guardian is a missing layer of oversight, either institutional policy, monitored platforms, or peer intervention, as bystander research has shown to prevent or stop the commission of a crime (Huang, Li, & Ai, 2023). Okeke and Ugochukwu (2024) found similar patterns in Nigerian tertiary institutions, where anonymity is easily exploited, students with visible digital profiles are targeted, and institutional oversight is either weak or absent. Furthermore, guardianship cannot be limited to an office of the polytechnic/university or a set of regulations. It may well be constituted by an attentive course

mate or a group administrator who will challenge a hurtful post before it goes viral. Some scholars have gone further, suggesting that, rather than simply fitting into the three-element model, the Internet is better thought of as a new setting for their interaction. In this regard, Reyns, Henson, and Fisher (2011) developed a cyber-life-style approach to extending Routine Activity Theory, arguing that the online equivalent of lifestyle choices (decisions about how much personal information to share, which and how many platforms to use, and the visibility of one's profile to strangers) shape victimization risk by influencing exposure to motivated offenders. For example, students who live an online lifestyle by using multiple social networking sites, accepting friend requests from people they do not know, and posting updates about their daily activities are more visible to motivated offenders than students who do not engage in those activities. According to the extension of this approach, the routine daily use of social media by students should be considered a determining factor in whether they become targets, not just isolated instances of risk-taking behaviour.

Social Learning Theory

Where Routine Activity Theory speaks to the conditions under which an incident is made possible, Social Learning Theory addresses the question of why a student may elect to become an offender. Bandura (1977) maintains that, like most other human behaviours, aggression is learned by observing other people and the consequences that other people experience, whether rewarding or punishing. Applied to cyberbullying, it follows that if a student sees other students repeatedly flaming, denigrating, and impersonating people online and if these acts are neither punished nor condemned but rather socially approved by, for example, "likes" and shared laughter, then this student will be more inclined to model that behaviour. This may explain how cyberbullying may spread very quickly within a shared platform, such as a departmental group chat, once a single act of bullying goes unchallenged. However, it also gives a potential foothold for prevention, as even one post whose harmful nature is pointed out and corrected may stop the very modelling process that would otherwise normalize such conduct.

Relevance to the Present Study

Reading these two theories together shaped how this study approached the interview data. Routine Activity Theory guided attention to the setting of each incident, who was present, and what oversight was or was not available, while Social Learning Theory guided attention to how students described the behaviour of offenders and bystanders as something learned and repeated rather than isolated. This combined lens carried through into the four themes reported in the findings, from the initial encounter with hostility to the more deliberate, cautious way students eventually returned to social media.

Application and Critique

Both theories bring something useful to this study, but neither is without limits. Routine Activity Theory was originally built to explain crime in physical space, where distance, time, and visibility work differently than they do online, and applying it to cyberspace requires treating concepts like presence and guardianship somewhat loosely, since a guardian online does not need to be physically near an offender to matter. Social Learning Theory, for its part, explains how offending behaviour spreads but says less about why a particular student becomes a target in the first place, which is where Routine Activity Theory's idea of target suitability remains useful. Used together

rather than separately, the two theories cover more of the picture than either would alone, and this combined use is consistent with how Nigerian scholars have applied Routine Activity Theory to campus level cyberbullying elsewhere (Okeke & Ugochukwu, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture students' lived experiences with cyberbullying. A phenomenological design was chosen because the study is concerned less with how often cyberbullying happens and more with what it feels like to go through it, from the moment of first encounter to the point where a student settles into a more cautious way of being online. This design allowed each student's account to be treated as a meaningful whole rather than reduced early to a set of numbers. Again, a quantitative survey could have produced a prevalence figure, but would have said little about how an incident actually unfolds for a student, how it changes their behaviour week by week, and what recovery looks like in their own words, all of which the objectives of this study specifically call for.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out at Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma, a state-owned tertiary institution in Imo State, Nigeria, offering National Diploma and Higher National Diploma programmes across a range of applied, technical, and management fields, including the eight departments represented in this study's sample and more. Like many Nigerian polytechnics, the institution draws students from within and beyond the state, most of whom rely on smartphones as their main point of access to the internet and to each other, which makes campus life and online life difficult to separate in practice.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised undergraduate students of Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma, across its various schools and departments. This broad population was narrowed through purposive sampling to those students known, through departmental referrals and self-identification, to have direct experience of cyberbullying on social media.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was adopted, since the study needed students who could speak directly to the experience of cyberbullying rather than a sample representative of the entire student population. Sixty students (30 males, 30 female), aged between 18 and 25, were selected based on their exposure to cyberbullying incidents. They were drawn from eight departments, with a deliberate effort to include a spread of male dominated, female dominated, and mixed disciplines. Table 1 summarises the gender and age breakdown, while Table 2 reports how the sixty students were distributed across departments.

Table 1

Breakdown of Gender and Age Categories

Category	Number of students
Male	30
Female	30

Total	60
Age range	18 to 25 years

Table 2

Students Distribution across Departments

Department	Number of students
Science Laboratory Technology	10
Computer Science	8
Business Administration and Management	6
Chemical Engineering	8
Mechanical Engineering	5
Public Administration	10
Agriculture Technology	7
Agriculture & Bio Engineering	6
Total	60

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher around the study's objectives. The guide covered how students first became aware of being targeted, the emotional and social impact of the experience, the steps they took to protect themselves, and their perception of the support available from the institution. Its semi-structured format allowed each interview to follow a consistent core while leaving room for students to raise details the guide had not anticipated, which is where several of the richer descriptions reported in the findings originated. The guide was reviewed by colleagues in the School of General Studies for clarity and relevance before use, and questions were phrased in plain, everyday language so that no student would need to first decode academic terminology before answering.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the sixty students. Students were asked about their experiences of cyberbullying, emotional responses, coping strategies, and perceptions of institutional support. Interviews were conducted in a private setting on campus to encourage candid disclosure, and each session was recorded with the student's permission and later transcribed in full for analysis.

Procedure for Data Collection

Before the main data collection began, the interview guide was piloted with a small number of students outside the final sample to check that the questions were clear and appropriately paced, and minor adjustments to wording were made as a result. Each of the sixty interviews lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes and was conducted in English, with students free to switch briefly into Pidgin or their local language where a term or feeling was easier to express that way. Interviews were arranged around students' lecture schedules so as not to disrupt their academic commitments, and each student was thanked and reminded of the availability of counselling support at the close of the session.

Validity and Trustworthiness of the Study

The study's qualitative nature guided the process of establishing trustworthiness using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported by using the students' own words wherever possible when developing the themes, rather than imposing categories on the data in advance. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research setting, sample, and department representation that would allow another researcher to judge the applicability of the findings to another setting. The use of a consistent interview guide and thematic analysis procedure applied across all 60 interviews ensured dependability, while confirmability was assured by the derivation of the themes from identifiable patterns in the transcripts, not from the researcher's prior assumptions about the subject.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and departmental consent were obtained before data collection began. Every student was informed of the purpose of the study, and participation was entirely voluntary, with students free to withdraw at any point without consequence. Given the sensitive nature of cyberbullying, particular care was taken to protect confidentiality. No names or identifying details are used in the reporting of findings, interviews were conducted privately, and recordings were stored securely and accessible only to the researchers. Students who appeared distressed while recounting their experiences were given the option to pause or stop the interview, and information about the institution's available counselling support was shared with all participants at the end of each session.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, following the six-step approach to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis began with close familiarisation, reading and re-reading each transcript before any coding took place. Initial codes were then generated across the full data set, capturing recurring words, images, and experiences in the students' own accounts. These codes were grouped into candidate themes, reviewed against the coded extracts and the transcripts, and refined until four coherent themes remained, each named to reflect the stage of experience it represented. Throughout this process, Routine Activity Theory and Social Learning Theory guided interpretation, drawing attention to offender behaviour, target vulnerability, the presence or absence of guardianship, and the ways in which harmful conduct appeared to be learned and repeated within student groups.

Limitations of the Study

As with any qualitative study built on purposive sampling, the findings reflect the experiences of the sixty students interviewed and are not intended to be statistically generalised to every student at Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic or to polytechnic students across Nigeria more broadly. Since the study purposively sampled known victims of cyberbullying, the findings relate to in-depth accounts of students' experiences and responses to online harassment. They do not constitute estimates of the frequency of such experiences within the entire population. Furthermore, the retrospective self-reported nature of the data implies that the findings are based on participants' memories and interpretations of their experiences at the time of the interview, which may be subject to minor distortions compared to the exact unfolding of incidents now. Future studies with

larger samples and comparative research across several polytechnics may better establish the generalizability of the four themes identified in this study beyond a single polytechnic.

Summary of the Chapter

In summary, this chapter has laid out the qualitative phenomenological design of the study, the area of study being Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma, and the purposive selection of 60 participants, 30 males and 30 females, aged between 18 and 25 years, drawn from eight departments in proportions ranging from five to ten per department. It described the semi-structured interview guide and the data collection procedure, and the six-step thematic analysis, through which four themes were developed from the transcripts. It has further discussed the strategies for establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings; ethical considerations taken; and finally, the limitations of the study, which should be borne in mind while reading the findings and discussions in the following chapters.

Findings

Theme 1: Encounter - Drifting into Digital Hostility

Cyberbullying often begins with subtle intrusions, such as sharing private messages or impersonating someone online. Students were unable to retain control over their digital presence.

Theme 2: The Wound - Emotional Erosion and Silent Suffering

Victims described feelings of anxiety, self-consciousness, and social withdrawal. Many felt powerless and unsure how to respond.

Theme 3: Endurance - Negotiating Safety and Self-Preservation

Students were negotiating their safety and self-preservation through defensive strategies, such as withdrawing from online platforms, staying silent, and managing their shared content, to be able to stay engaged digitally.

Theme 4: Becoming - Reclaiming Self and Psychological Security

Students were reclaiming their self and psychological security through the gradual reconstruction of a cautious digital identity. With awareness, boundary setting, and selective online participation, they were able to gain confidence and security.

Synthesis

The students described a gradual progression from subtle intrusion to emotional impact through defensive coping, and tentative recovery. Motivated offenders, vulnerable targets, and the absence of oversight represent critical factors in this behaviour.

Discussion

Part 1: Summary of Findings

This study has shown that cyberbullying impacts students' psychological well-being and inhibits their active participation in campus life. As such, many students respond by avoiding online spaces or adapting their behaviours to prevent additional victimization. The general process of avoiding and then tentatively returning to online spaces has been referred to as digital resilience in recent studies, whereby resilience is conceptualised as the ability to regulate responses to adversity and gradually reconstruct safer ways of being online (Samoh, Guadamuz, Khlaisang, & Choemprayong, 2026).

Part 2: Theoretical Integration

Routine Activity Theory explains the persistence of cyberbullying. Motivated offenders exist, vulnerable targets exist, and there is insufficient institutional or social guardianship to prevent victimization. However, the third leg of guardianship in this theory is not limited to institutional policy alone. Peers, group administrators, and casual bystanders provide an informal level of guardianship. The frequent silence of these groups in this study supports evidence from a broader literature base, which suggests that most bystanders do not act unless an incident seems serious enough to warrant intervention (Huang, Li, & Ai, 2023).

Part 3: Implications

- Institutions should implement clear policies and monitoring systems.
- Awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs can help students protect themselves.
- Counselling services and peer support programs are essential to help victims recover.
- Ethical digital behaviour should be emphasized to create a safer online culture.
- Peer led guardianship, where trained students or class representatives are equipped to notice and respond to early signs of harassment, could close some of the oversight gap that Routine Activity Theory identifies (Huang, Li, & Ai, 2023).
- Structured digital resilience programs, rather than leaving students to work this out alone, offer a more durable form of protection than withdrawal from social media altogether (Samoh, Guadamuz, Khlaisang, & Choemprayong, 2026).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, cyberbullying among students of Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma has behavioural and structural causes, and its consequences are felt at the levels of psychological security, identity, and learning. It harms psychological security, identity, and learning. Explaining the persistence of cyberbullying through Routine Activity Theory brings into focus the triad of motivated offenders, vulnerable targets, and weak guardianship. Because guardianship in these spaces is rarely just an institutional matter, closing this gap will also depend on peers and course mates who are willing to notice and respond, not only on formal policy. Students cope through withdrawal and cautious online behaviour, emphasizing the need for stronger institutional, policy, and psychosocial interventions. Based on the perceptions, security concerns, and coping strategies described by students in this study, and analysis through the combined lens of Routine Activity Theory and Social Learning Theory, the following recommendations are proposed for Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma and institutions like it.

1. Develop and enforce formal cyberbullying policies. Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic should adopt a written policy that defines cyberbullying in terms students recognise, sets out clear reporting steps, and states the disciplinary consequences for offenders. A policy that exists only on paper will not close the guardianship gap identified in this study, so it should be circulated during orientation and referenced in student handbooks so that every student knows it exists before they ever need it.
2. Establish a Digital Safety Response Unit. A dedicated unit, distinct from the general disciplinary office, would give students a specific place to report incidents without having to explain a sensitive experience to an unfamiliar office. This unit should be staffed by people trained to handle disclosures with care, and its existence should be

publicised widely enough that students think of it as a first point of contact rather than a last resort.

3. Run awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs. Regular campaigns, delivered through orientation week, departmental meetings, and social media itself, can help students recognise the early signs of cyberbullying described in Theme 1 of this study before they escalate. Digital literacy content should also cover practical safety habits, such as privacy settings and how to document and report harassment.

4. Provide trauma informed counselling and peer support. Given the emotional erosion described in Theme 2, counselling services should be resourced and trained specifically to handle cyberbullying cases, recognising that victims may feel shame or reluctance about coming forward. Peer support groups, run alongside professional counselling, can also give students a space to discuss experiences with others who understand them without judgement.

5. Encourage peer guardianship to support vulnerable students. Because guardianship in Routine Activity Theory does not have to come only from an office, the institution should actively encourage students to look out for course mates who show signs of withdrawal or distress, and to speak up when they witness harassment rather than remain silent bystanders.

6. Collaborate with authorities for severe cases. For incidents that cross into criminal conduct, such as persistent cyberstalking or the distribution of private images, the institution should have a clear working relationship with the Nigeria Police Force's cybercrime units and other relevant authorities, so that students are not left to navigate the legal system alone.

7. Implement technology-based monitoring tools. Where appropriate and proportionate, the institution's official platforms and group spaces could use basic moderation tools to flag abusive language, without extending this monitoring into students' private accounts in a way that would raise its own privacy concerns.

8. Integrate digital citizenship and ethics into curricula. A short module on responsible online conduct, introduced through the general studies curriculum that already carries this study's author's own school, would reach every student regardless of department and could draw directly on the Social Learning Theory perspective that behaviour modelled early tends to be repeated.

9. Train peer mentors and class representatives to recognise and respond to early signs of online harassment. Extending guardianship beyond formal offices, in the way bystander research suggests is effective, means equipping the students who are already closest to an incident, class representatives, hostel leaders, and departmental social media administrators, with simple guidance on what to do when they notice harassment developing.

10. Build structured digital resilience programs. Rather than leaving students to work this out alone, as many described doing in Theme 3 and Theme 4, the institution should offer structured programs that help students regulate their response to harm and return to online spaces with more confidence, drawing on approaches already piloted elsewhere for youth affected by cyberbullying (Samoh, Guadamuz, Khlaisang, & Choemprayong, 2026).

None of these ten recommendations is likely to work well on its own. A written policy without a Digital Safety Response Unit to enforce it becomes another document student never read, and a counselling service without awareness campaigns to point students toward it will sit underused no matter how well trained its staff are. Put together, the recommendations move along the same path the findings themselves trace, from early recognition of an incident, through response and support once it has occurred to the more durable, resilience building work that helps a student return to social media on steadier terms. Dr. B. U. Nzeribe State Polytechnic Awo-Omamma does not need every recommendation implemented at once, but a deliberate sequence, beginning with the policy and reporting structure and building outward from there, offers a realistic route toward the safer online environment this study's participants were, in their own way, asking for.

References

- Adesina, O., & Ajayi, T. (2022). Cyberbullying and emotional well-being among Nigerian university students. *Journal of Communication and Media Studies*, 14(2), 55–71.
- Adebayo, D. O., Ninggal, M. T., & Ajiboye, S. K. (2019). Frequent social media use as predictor of cyberbullying among university undergraduates in Kwara State, Nigeria. *Education, Sustainability & Society*, 2(2), 17–21. <https://doi.org/10.26480/ess.02.2019.17.21>
- Adebayo, K., & Omotayo, O. (2021). Digital aggression and moral disengagement among undergraduates in Southwestern Nigeria. *African Journal of Behavioural Science*, 9(1), 33–49.
- Akinola, B. (2020). Social media usage and peer victimisation among Nigerian youth. *Ife Social Sciences Review*, 28(1), 92–108.
- Amadi, P. (2022). Digital insecurity and the politics of online harassment in tertiary institutions. *Nigerian Journal of Social Research*, 7(3), 45–62.
- Asare, J. A. (2021). Cyberbullying awareness and intervention strategies among Ghanaian students. *African Educational Review*, 15(2), 77–90.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chikere, S., & Eze, N. (2023). Institutional guardianship and student safety in Nigerian polytechnics: The case of digital spaces. *Journal of African Policy and Education*, 10(1), 101–117.
- Cohen, L. E., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44(4), 588–608.
- DataReportal. (2025). Digital 2025: Nigeria. Kepios. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-nigeria>. Retrieve on 10/9/2026.
- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2018). Connecting adolescent suicide to the severity of bullying and cyberbullying. *Journal of School Violence*, 17(4), 1–15.
- Huang, L., Li, W., & Ai, D. (2023). The severity of cyberbullying affects bystander intervention among college students: The roles of feelings of responsibility and empathy. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 16, 893–903. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S397770>
- Iwuoha, E., & Nwosu, C. (2020). The psychological cost of online shaming: A study of university students in Eastern Nigeria. *African Journal of Psychology and Human Development*, 5(2), 121–136.
- Kariuki, M., & Wanjiru, L. (2022). Cyber victimisation and self-esteem among Kenyan undergraduates. *East African Journal of Applied Psychology*, 4(1), 65–79.
- Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(4), 1073–1137. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035618>
- Kowalski, R. M., Limber, S. P., & McCord, A. (2019). A developmental approach to cyberbullying: Prevalence and protective factors. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 93, 168–176.
- Li, L., Zhou, J., McManus, S., Stewart, R., & Roberts, A. (2024). Social media users' attitudes toward cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic: Associations with gender and

- verification status. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1395668>
- Li, Q. (2010). Cyberbullying in high schools: A study of students' behaviours and beliefs. *Journal of School Health*, 80(9), 373–379.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Mabika, M. (2022). The gendered perspective of cyberbullying: The case of a rural university in Limpopo. *Communicare*, 41(1). <https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v41i1.1399>
- Mbatha, D. (2021). Digital rights and online safety among South African youth. *Journal of African Cyber Studies*, 3(2), 88–104.
- Nwachukwu, L. (2023). Moral panic, anonymity, and the rise of online cruelty in Nigeria. *Journal of Media and Society in Africa*, 12(4), 58–74.
- Nwosu, K. C., Ementa, C. N., & Ejikeme, P. E. (2018). Cyberbullying among undergraduate students in a Nigerian university: Awareness and incidence. *Romanian Journal of Psychological Studies*, 6(1), 43–58.
- Okeke, P., & Ugochukwu, I. (2024). Institutional response to cyberbullying in Nigerian tertiary education: Challenges and opportunities. *Nigerian Journal of Digital Ethics*, 2(1), 33–50.
- Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2020). *Cyberbullying: Identification, prevention, and response* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Ray, G., McDermott, C. D., & Nicho, M. (2024). Cyberbullying on social media: Definitions, prevalence, and impact challenges. *Journal of Cybersecurity*. <https://academia.oup.com/cybersecurity/article/10/1/tyae026/7928395>, Retrieved on 26/10/2025.
- Reyns, B. W., Henson, B., & Fisher, B. S. (2011). Being pursued online: Applying cyberlifestyle-routine activities theory to cyberstalking victimization. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, 38(11), 1149–1169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854811421448>
- Samoh, N., Guadamuz, T. E., Khlaisang, J., & Choemprayong, S. (2026). Fostering digital resilience among youth who experienced cyberbullying: Design thinking approach. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 28, e93891. <https://doi.org/10.2196/93891>
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 7(3), 321–326.
- Tchouassi, G. (2020). Youth, technology, and the new culture of virtual aggression in Sub-Saharan Africa. *African Review of Sociology*, 26(3), 151–169.
- Tokunaga, R. S. (2010). Following you home from school: A critical review and synthesis of research on cyberbullying victimization. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 26(3), 277–287.
- Tsegaye, T. G., Kena, S. S., Debela, D. E., & Azeze, G. A. (2025). Cyberbullying, its associated factors, and coping mechanisms among female health science students in Hawassa City, Sidama, Ethiopia, 2025. *BMC Public Health*, 25, 4362. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-25630-8>
- Twenge, J. M. (2020). Increases in depression, self-harm and suicide among U.S. adolescents after 2012 and links to technology use: Possible mechanisms. *Psychiatry Research and Clinical Practice*, 2, 19–25.
- Willard, N. E. (2007). *Cyberbullying and cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social aggression, threats, and distress*. Research Press.
- Wright, M. F., & Wachs, S. (2022). *Cyberbullying in global perspective: Causes, consequences, and prevention*. Springer.