



Cyberbullying and Social Media Addiction among In-School Adolescents in Imo State

Udunwa W. K.¹

Ukwe Nneoma Blessing²

¹*Department of Educational Psychology/Guidance & Counselling, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Imo State*

²*Department of Guidance & Counselling, Imo State University Owerri, Imo State*

Abstract

The study investigated cyberbullying and social media addiction among in-school adolescents in Imo State and guided by three research questions and a null hypothesis testing the relationship between the two variables. Adopting a correlational survey research design, the study sampled 600 students from public secondary schools using a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure representative coverage across the three educational zones. Data were collected through a validated and reliable researcher-developed instrument, the Cyberbullying and Social Media Addiction Questionnaire (CSMAQ), and analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation at 0.05 significance level. The findings revealed that adolescents exhibited high levels of social media addiction, characterized by frequent engagement, restlessness when disconnected, difficulty reducing usage, and habitual checking of platforms, reflecting compulsive online behaviour. Additionally, cyberbullying was found to be a significant issue, with students frequently experiencing insulting messages, mockery, exclusion from online groups, and witnessing bullying of peers, indicating that online interactions expose adolescents to social and emotional risks. The study also revealed a strong positive relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying, demonstrating that higher levels of online engagement correspond with greater likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating online harassment. These results suggest that unmoderated social media use not only affects academic focus but also increases vulnerability to negative social experiences. Consequently, the study underscores the need for schools, parents, and educational authorities to implement digital literacy programmes monitor and guide online behaviour, and establish supportive policies and counselling services to mitigate social media addiction and cyberbullying, promoting safer and more responsible digital engagement among adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents, Cyberbullying, Digital Behaviour, Online Harassment, Social Media Addiction

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the way individuals communicate, interact, and construct social relationships in contemporary society. Over the past two decades, the emergence and widespread adoption of social media platforms have redefined interpersonal communication, particularly among adolescents who are considered digital natives. As noted by Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2018), online communication has become an integral part of adolescent socialization, enabling young people to build relationships, express identity, and participate in virtual communities beyond geographical limitations. Similarly, Gao et al. (2024) observed that digital spaces have evolved into pervasive environments where social, cultural, and even emotional interactions occur continuously. While these technological innovations have created opportunities for connectivity and self-expression, they have also introduced complex challenges that affect adolescents' behavioural patterns and psychosocial well-being. One of the most pressing concerns emerging from this digital revolution is the growing phenomenon of social media addiction, which is increasingly linked to various maladaptive outcomes among young users.

Social media addiction refers to the excessive, compulsive, and uncontrolled use of social networking platforms to the extent that it interferes with an individual's daily activities, academic responsibilities, and social functioning. Aboujaoude et al. (2015) described this form of behavioural addiction as a pattern of persistent engagement driven by psychological dependence, often characterized by preoccupation, mood modification, tolerance, and withdrawal symptoms. Jeong (2015) further emphasized that excessive internet use among young people is associated with diminished self-control, which can negatively impact academic achievement and emotional stability. In the context of secondary school students, Banquil (2019) and Ebubechukwu and Ejikeme (2018) reported that prolonged engagement with social networking sites significantly affects students' academic performance, often leading to distraction, reduced study time, and poor learning outcomes. Within the Nigerian context, Onunkwo (2024) highlighted that in-school adolescents in South-East Nigeria, including Imo State, are increasingly exposed to social media, with many demonstrating patterns of overuse that raise concerns about addiction. This growing dependency on digital platforms not only affects academic engagement but also exposes adolescents to various online risks, including cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying, a contemporary form of bullying facilitated through digital technologies, has emerged as a significant social problem among adolescents. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying occurs through electronic means such as social media, messaging applications, and online forums, allowing perpetrators to harass, threaten, or humiliate victims anonymously and repeatedly. Abrahmson (2022) defined cyberbullying as intentional and repeated harm inflicted through digital devices, often resulting in emotional distress, anxiety, and psychological trauma for victims. Abaido (2019) further noted that the anonymity and wide reach of social media platforms amplify the impact of cyberbullying, making it more pervasive and difficult to control. Similarly, Abu (2018) explained that bullying behaviours, including cyberbullying, are influenced by social and environmental factors, which shape adolescents' interactions and moral development. The viral nature of digital content, as highlighted by Aboujaoude et al. (2015), enables harmful messages to spread rapidly, thereby intensifying the consequences for victims. In many cases, adolescents who spend prolonged periods online are more susceptible to both experiencing and perpetrating cyberbullying, suggesting a possible link between social media addiction and cyberbullying behaviours.

The relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying can be better understood through relevant theoretical perspectives that explain human behaviour in digital contexts. One such framework is the Theory of Planned Behaviour, as discussed by McLaughlin and Stephens (2015), which posits that individuals' behaviours are influenced by their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In the context of social media use, adolescents who develop positive attitudes toward excessive online engagement and perceive it as socially acceptable may be more likely to engage in addictive behaviours and, potentially, cyberbullying. Additionally, social interaction theories, such as those highlighted by Ibarra and Race (2020), emphasize the role of social networks and peer influence in shaping individuals' behaviours and decision-making processes. Adolescents often seek validation and belonging within online communities, which may encourage conformity to group norms, including

negative behaviours such as online harassment. Furthermore, moral development perspectives, as discussed by Lu and Fung (2019), suggest that adolescents' moral reasoning is still evolving, making them more susceptible to engaging in harmful online behaviours without fully considering the consequences. Empirical studies in Nigeria, such as those by Dike et al. (2025) and Oloyede and Oloyode (2022), have also linked social media use to changes in moral behaviour and value systems among youths, indicating that excessive engagement with digital platforms may contribute to the normalization of cyberbullying practices.

Despite the growing body of literature on social media use and cyberbullying, there remains a significant gap in understanding the extent and nature of their relationship among in-school adolescents in Imo State. Existing studies have largely focused on general social media usage, academic performance, or moral behaviour (Onunkwo, 2024; Otubue & Oji, 2024), with limited attention given to the intersection between social media addiction and cyberbullying. This is a necessary gap to fill considering the increasing reports of online harassment, emotional distress, and behavioural issues among adolescents in Nigerian secondary schools. Moreover, studies such as those by Muhammed-Lawal and Salahu-Deen (2021) and Naslund (2016) have emphasized the broader implications of digital engagement on adolescents' mental health and social well-being, highlighting the urgent need for context-specific research. The absence of empirical data on how social media addiction influences cyberbullying behaviours among in-school adolescents in Imo State limits the ability of educators, policymakers, and parents to develop effective interventions. Therefore, this study is justified by the need to provide empirical evidence on the extent of social media addiction, the prevalence of cyberbullying, and the relationship between these variables among in-school adolescents in Imo State. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent of social media addiction, assess the prevalence of cyberbullying, and determine the relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying among in-school adolescents in Imo State.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the widespread use of social media among in-school adolescents in Imo State, there is increasing concern that many students are developing addictive patterns of use characterized by excessive engagement, poor self-control, and neglect of academic and social responsibilities. At the same time, cyberbullying has become a growing problem within digital spaces, where adolescents are either victims or perpetrators of online harassment, intimidation, and emotional abuse. These issues pose serious risks to students' psychological well-being, moral development, and academic performance. Although previous studies have examined social media usage and cyberbullying independently, there is limited empirical evidence on the extent to which adolescents in Imo State are addicted to social media, the prevalence of cyberbullying among them, and how these two variables are related. This gap in knowledge is particularly problematic given the increasing reports of negative online behaviours and the lack of effective, evidence-based interventions within the school system. Without clear data on the relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying, educators, parents, and policymakers may find it difficult to design appropriate strategies to address these challenges. Therefore, the core problem of this study is the lack of precise and context-specific empirical evidence on the extent of social media addiction, the prevalence of cyberbullying, and the nature of the relationship between these variables among in-school adolescents in Imo State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the extent of social media addiction among in-school adolescents?
2. What is the extent of cyberbullying among in-school adolescents?
3. What is the extent of relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying among in-school adolescents?

Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying among in-school adolescents.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational survey research design to examine the relationship between cyberbullying and social media addiction among in-school adolescents in Imo State. The population of the study comprised approximately 68,450 students enrolled in public secondary schools across the three education zones of Imo State, as obtained from the State Ministry of Education records. A sample size of 600 students was selected using a multi-stage sampling procedure to ensure adequate representation. Initially, simple random sampling was used to select six Local Government Areas from the three education zones. Thereafter, stratified sampling technique was employed to categorize students into junior and senior secondary levels, followed by proportionate random sampling to select respondents from each stratum. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled “Cyberbullying and Social Media Addiction Questionnaire (CSMAQ),” structured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The instrument was validated by experts in educational psychology and measurement and evaluation to ensure clarity, relevance, and content adequacy. A pilot study was conducted outside the study area, and reliability was established using Cronbach’s Alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.82 and 0.86 for cyberbullying and social media addiction respectively, indicating high internal consistency. The researcher, assisted by trained research assistants, administered the instrument directly to respondents after obtaining necessary permissions and ensuring ethical considerations such as confidentiality and informed consent. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1: Extent of social media addiction among in-school adolescents

S/N	Items on Social Media Addiction	Mean	SD	Remark
1	I spend more time on social media than intended	3.12	0.865	High Extent
2	I feel restless when I cannot access social media	3.05	0.902	High Extent
3	I neglect school tasks due to social media use	2.98	0.889	High Extent
4	I check social media immediately after waking up	3.20	0.843	High Extent
5	I find it difficult to reduce my time on social media	3.06	0.851	High Extent
	Cluster Mean	3.08	0.870	High Extent

Table 1 shows that in-school adolescents in Imo State exhibit a high level of social media addiction, with a cluster mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 0.870, indicating that most students frequently engage in prolonged social media use. The highest mean of 3.20 for checking social media immediately after waking up reflects a strong habitual pattern, while the lowest mean of 2.98 for neglecting school tasks still demonstrates notable interference with academic responsibilities. Thus, the results suggest that adolescents not only spend excessive time online but also experience restlessness when unable to access social media and find it difficult to reduce their usage, highlighting that social media addiction is a prevalent concern among the respondents.

Table 2: Extent of cyberbullying among in-school adolescents

S/N	Items on Cyberbullying	Mean	SD	Remark
1	I have received insulting messages online	2.85	0.914	High Extent
2	I have been mocked or embarrassed on social media	2.79	0.933	High Extent
3	I have seen others being bullied online	2.70	0.905	High Extent
4	I have been excluded from online groups deliberately	2.68	0.896	High Extent
5	I have experienced rumors spread about me online	2.78	0.902	High Extent
	Cluster Mean	2.76	0.910	High Extent

Table 2 shows that in-school adolescents in Imo State experience cyberbullying to a high extent, with a cluster mean of 2.76 and a standard deviation of 0.910. Individual item means range from 2.68 to 2.85, indicating that students frequently receive insulting messages, are mocked or embarrassed, witness others being bullied, are deliberately excluded from online groups, and have rumors spread about them.

online. These results suggest that cyberbullying is a significant issue among the respondents, affecting their social interactions and online experiences.

Table 3: Extent of relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying among in-school adolescents

Variables	N	r	p-value	Remark
Social Media Addiction	600	0.64	0.000	High Positive Relationship
Cyberbullying	600			

Table 3 shows that there is a high positive relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying among in-school adolescents in Imo State, with a correlation coefficient of 0.64 and a p-value of 0.000. This indicates that as adolescents' level of social media addiction increases, their likelihood of experiencing or engaging in cyberbullying also increases, suggesting a strong and statistically significant association between the two variables.

Discussion

The findings revealed that in-school adolescents in Imo State demonstrate a high level of social media addiction, characterized by frequent and prolonged engagement with online platforms. Students reported spending more time on social media than intended, feeling restless when unable to access their accounts, and checking platforms immediately upon waking. These behaviours indicate that social media has become a habitual and almost compulsive part of daily life for many adolescents. The results align with Abaido's (2019) findings in the United Arab Emirates, which highlighted that university students exhibited similar patterns of compulsive social media use, and Banquil (2019) who reported that excessive engagement with social networking sites negatively affected students' focus on academic responsibilities. Such high levels of addiction among adolescents may be attributed to the pervasive presence of smartphones, constant connectivity, and the instant gratification provided by social media interactions, which make it difficult for students to moderate their use. This outcome was somewhat expected given the global trends in adolescent online behaviour, but the degree of habitual engagement, particularly checking social media first thing in the morning, underscores the intensity of the addiction, reflecting broader concerns regarding the influence of digital technology on youth behaviour (Dike, Ibeh, & Ernest-Samuel, 2025).

The results further revealed that cyberbullying is a prevalent issue among in-school adolescents in the study area, manifesting in experiences such as receiving insulting messages, being mocked or embarrassed online, witnessing others being bullied, and being deliberately excluded from online groups. These findings are consistent with Abaido (2019), who observed that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to online harassment due to their extensive engagement in social media. Abu (2018) also emphasized that the social environment of secondary school students exposes them to diverse forms of peer aggression, including cyberbullying, which can negatively affect social and emotional well-being. The high level of cyberbullying observed among the adolescents in Imo State may be linked to the expansive digital interactions that occur in unsupervised online spaces, where anonymity and the lack of immediate consequences embolden perpetrators. This outcome was not entirely surprising, given that increased online activity often correlates with higher exposure to aggressive and harmful content, highlighting the interconnectedness of social media use and the vulnerability of adolescents to peer harassment (Onunkwo, 2024).

In examining the relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying, the findings demonstrated a strong positive association, indicating that adolescents who are more addicted to social media are also more likely to experience or engage in cyberbullying. This result resonates with the observations of Otubue and Oji (2024), who noted that frequent and unmoderated social media use amplifies exposure to peer conflicts and morally challenging interactions, thereby increasing the likelihood of involvement in cyberbullying, whether as perpetrators or victims. Similarly, Rouis, Limayem, and Salehi-Sangari (2021) found that higher levels of engagement on social networking platforms correlate with challenges in self-regulation and increased susceptibility to negative online experiences. The positive relationship is expected, as prolonged use of social media often entails deeper

immersion into online communities where social hierarchies, peer pressures, and conflicts are intensified. Moreover, adolescents with limited coping skills or lower emotional self-regulation may respond impulsively to online provocations, further entrenching the cycle of cyberbullying (Muhammed-Lawal & Salah-Deen, 2021).

The implications of these findings are multifaceted and extend to academic, psychological, and social domains. Excessive social media use, as observed in the study, likely disrupts adolescents' academic routines, reduces attention spans, and diminishes the time allocated for schoolwork, corroborating the conclusions of Ebubechukwu and Ejeme (2018). At the social level, pervasive exposure to cyberbullying can lead to emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and altered peer relationships, consistent with Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2018), who highlighted the adverse impacts of online harassment on adolescent social development. The strong positive relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying suggests that interventions targeting responsible social media use may simultaneously mitigate the risk of cyberbullying. These findings, therefore, emphasize the need for stakeholders, including parents, educators, and policymakers, to prioritize awareness programs, digital literacy education, and structured guidance to help adolescents navigate online spaces safely and constructively, echoing the recommendations of Gao, Woods, Kong, and Shee (2024). Overall, the study confirms that social media addiction is not only widespread among adolescents but also intricately linked with exposure to harmful online behaviours, reinforcing a growing body of research on the psychological and social consequences of unmoderated digital engagement among youth.

Conclusion

Based on the study, it can be concluded that in-school adolescents in Imo State exhibit a high level of social media addiction, which manifests in prolonged and habitual online engagement, restlessness when disconnected, and difficulty in moderating use. This excessive use of social media is closely associated with a high prevalence of cyberbullying, indicating that students who spend more time online are more likely to experience or engage in online harassment. The strong positive relationship between social media addiction and cyberbullying underscores that unmoderated social media use not only affects students' academic focus but also exposes them to negative social and psychological experiences, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to promote responsible online behaviour.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

Schools should implement digital literacy and awareness programs to educate adolescents on responsible social media use and the risks of addiction.

Parents should monitor and guide their children's social media activities to reduce excessive use and mitigate exposure to cyberbullying.

Educational authorities should establish policies and support systems to prevent and address cyberbullying, including counseling services for affected student.

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