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Understanding Cyberbullying on Social Media: A Case Study of Public Office Elections

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ABSTRACT

In less developed and developing nations, the unchecked threat of cyberbullying during elections remains largely unexplored in current information systems literature. Addressing this gap, we present the "Intention to Understand Cyberbullying on Social Media During Public Office Elections," investigating citizens' motives for engaging in cyberbullying during political campaigns and elections. Building on the Sociotechnical Model of Collective Trolling, our study focuses on Nigeria, examining how technological factors influence cyberbullying intent. Inspired by the 2023 Nigeria general elections, where cyberbullying was employed for political advocacy, our research collects data from eligible voters on Facebook and Instagram. The proposed model aims to shed light on cyberbullying dynamics in developing countries during electoral processes, offering practical strategies to effectively combat such behavior on social media platforms.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, Social Media, Nigeria General Elections, Electoral Process

INTRODUCTION

Our civilization now heavily relies on electronic devices (Abraham, 2015 & Stadlober et al., 2019). Our daily lives are made much more convenient by these technologies (Wang et al., 2016 & Hine, 2015) which give us rapid access to a plethora of knowledge and the opportunity to connect with anyone ubiquitously (Wright, 2018). The public has enthusiastically embraced a wide range of networked applications brought about by the Internet, arguably none more so than the websites that enable social networking (Wist Vromen et al., 2015).

Social media refers to internet-enabled technology that facilitates the creation, sharing, and transfer of content over a network. These platforms are designed to facilitate communication, collaboration, and information sharing among individuals or groups. Social media allows users to interact with each other by posting text, images, videos, and other multimedia content. The advent of social media has had a profound impact on the landscape of cyberbullying, amplifying its reach and intensifying its effects (Abbas et al., 2021; Aldwairi & Alwahedi, 2018 & Cookingham & Ryan, 2015). The anonymity and perceived online disinhibition fostered by social media platforms (Srivastava et al., 2020) can embolden individuals to engage in aggressive and hurtful behavior (Santostefano et al., 2016 & Andalibi et al., 2017) towards others. The constant connectivity and instantaneous nature of social media enable cyberbullying to occur around the clock (Lowry et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2017), making it difficult for victims to escape or find respite. The viral nature of social media also allows harmful content to spread rapidly (Blum, 2023), increasing the potential harm inflicted on victims (Venegas-Vera et al., 2020). Moreover, the wide audience and lack of physical cues on social media can dehumanize the target (Mathew et al., 2019), further fueling the cruelty of cyberbullying. These factors contribute to the profound emotional, psychological, and even physical consequences experienced by victims of cyberbullying, highlighting the urgent need for effective measures to prevent and address this issue in the digital age.

Cyberbullying is the use of the internet to hound, pressurize, shame, or pursue another person. It can take different forms ranging from cyberstalking, flaming, collective trolling, and impersonation (Abaido, 2020). Cyberbullies have been encouraged to participate in collective trolling on social media (Leung et al., 2018), in which they organize cyberbullying campaigns to harass other users and interfere with their online experiences (Li et al., 2023 & Jin et al., 2023). When someone is harmed, harassed, or intimidated using technology, such as social media, instant messaging, and other digital communication platforms (Bin Naeem & Kamel Boulos, 2021), this is known as cyberbullying. It can manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as

disseminating rumors or false information, posting disparaging remarks or pictures, or sending threatening messages. Victims of cyberbullying may experience severe and protracted effects, such as mental distress, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts (Zhao et al., 2022 & Wright, 2016). Additionally, it may have an impact on their social life, academic achievement, and general well-being.

Nigeria, a nation with 220 million citizens (Anyanwu et al., 2020 & Duru et al., 2019), recently held general elections, numerous instances of cyberbullying on social media were experienced before, during, and after the elections (Camara et al., 2023; Bassey-Duke & Etta, 2023 & Afolaranmi, 2023). How to deal with cyberbullying is one of the issues that must be resolved to create a Bright ICT Society (Oh et al., 2018 & Okpako et al., 2023). Although social media users in Nigeria in the beginning of 2023 represented 14.3% of the population (Aina, 2023 & Wan Mokhtar et al., 2023), it's crucial to keep in mind that they might not all be representative of specific people. According to information found in the ad planning tools of the biggest social media platforms (Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, and Instagram), there were 28.20 million users in Nigeria who were 18 years of age or older at the beginning of 2023 (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2023 & Noreen et al., 2023), which is equal to 25.3 percent of the country's entire population of those age groups. In general, 25.8% of all internet users in Nigeria (regardless of age) were active (Ogunkuade & Kenku, 2023 & Almasi et al., 2017) on at least one social media platform in January 2023 (Data Report Portal, 2023).

More public and academic attention is urgently needed to address the harmful effects of the rise of cyberbullying on social media on both people and society (Li et al., 2022; Sun & Fichman, 2018 & Ortiz, 2020). Literature reviews also identified research gaps that warrant further scholarly attention most especially as it relates to developing countries like Nigeria (Flores-Saviaga et al., 2018 & Kirkwood et al., 2019). Investigating the idea of "Intent vs Intention" (Cao et al., 2020 & Luo et al., 2022) is necessary to comprehend the collective nature of this type of online aberrant behavior. This study advances the Information Science literature by testing the socio-technical model in cyberbullying on social media (Chan & Cheung, 2022 & Tahmasbi & Fuchsberger, 2018) in light of the increasingly significant issues experienced by Nigerian citizens during the just concluded 2023 general elections. Due to the rise of social technologies with strong connectedness, the Intent vs Intention concept is extremely pertinent to IS study today. We seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What role does intention play in cyberbullying on social media during elections in Nigeria?

RQ2: Does the SMCTVC model help to explain cyberbullying on social media during elections in Nigeria?

The findings of this study will provide information about how to create and maintain a secure and healthy online environment for social media users. Considering this, we tend to ask the overarching research question; How does the sociotechnical model help to explain cyberbullying on social media? This captures the various elements of cyberbullying and its effects.

THE SOCIO-TECHNICAL MODEL OF COLLECTIVE TROLLING IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Collective trolling in virtual communities (Cruz et al., 2018 & Massanari, 2019) can be understood through a sociotechnical model (Kaluarachchi et al., 2021) that considers both the social and technological factors that contribute to this phenomenon. The sociotechnical model of collective trolling (Lombardo et al., 2021) in virtual communities highlights the importance of considering both social and technological factors in understanding this phenomenon (Li et al., 2022). Effective interventions to prevent or mitigate collective trolling (Forssell, 2019) may require changes in community culture, as well as modifications to the technological infrastructure of virtual communities, such as improving moderation practices and implementing user verification systems.

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS

The constructs of SMCTVC developed by Li et al., 2022 fulfill the need of the study and are appropriate for investigating online collective trolling and cyberbullying. However, We-intention to participate in collective trolling is replaced with intention. The proposed research model is presented in Figure 1. This model includes several key components:

Social dynamics: Collective trolling often arises in virtual communities (Nekmat & Lee, 2018) where there is a culture of online anonymity (Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016 & Barlett, 2015), lack of accountability (Cohen et al., 2023 & Amelia & Dewi, 2021), and a low level of social cohesion (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). This can create a sense of detachment and deindividuation that allows individuals to engage in behaviors they would not typically engage in face-to-face interactions.

Psychological factors: Collective trolling can also be linked to social identity theory (Trepte & Loy, 2017), where individuals who share a common identity or belief system may engage in collective behaviors to reinforce their sense of belonging and superiority over those who do not share their views

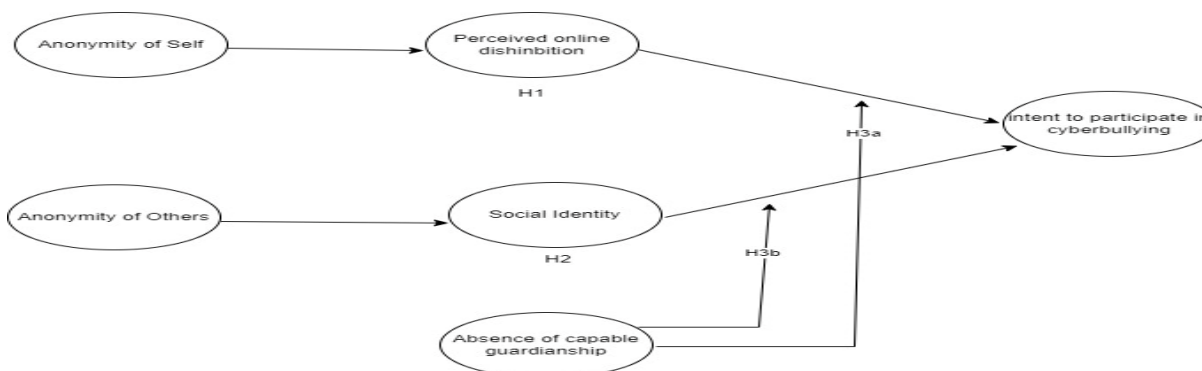


Figure 1: Proposed Research Model

Technological affordances: The architecture of virtual communities (Adu-Kankam & Camarinha-Matos, 2018) can facilitate collective trolling by enabling users to hide behind anonymous or fake identities (Tucker et al., 2018), post-inflammatory content (Morgan, 2022), and engage in coordinated attacks on individuals or groups.

Moderation practices: The effectiveness of moderation practices (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017) can also play a role in the occurrence of collective trolling. Poorly designed or poorly enforced moderation policies can create a permissive environment where trolling is tolerated (Myers West, 2018), while effective moderation can help prevent trolling behaviors from escalating.

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED ONLINE DISINHIBITION

Research in the field of cyberbullying (Henshaw, 2023) has highlighted the role of perceived online inhibition as a mediating mechanism between the self's anonymity and the intention to engage in such harmful behavior on social media. From a socio-technical perspective, studies have shown that an individual's psychological state, particularly in relation to their use of information technology, significantly influences how they internalize technological aspects and form behavioral intentions (Yang & Gong 2021 & Sarker et al., 2021). These findings shed light on the complex interplay between personal factors, technological affordances, and online behavior, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying dynamics in the digital age. We therefore hypothesize:

H1: Perceived online disinhibition plays a mediating role in the relationship between the anonymity of self and the intention to engage in cyberbullying on social media during elections in Nigeria.

MEDIATING ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Recent research suggests that the development of the Intent vs Intention (Forssell, 2019) to participate in group trolling within online communities is primarily facilitated by social identification rather than the mere presence of anonymity. In this context, social identity (Trepte & Loy, 2017) plays a pivotal role in transforming the anonymity of others into a collective intention to engage in group trolling. These findings align with the sociotechnical approach, which posits that technology shapes human behavior by influencing individuals' motivations and psychological states (Sarker et al., 2019; Yang & Gong, 2021). Understanding the interplay between social identification, anonymity, and group behavior in online communities is crucial for comprehending the underlying dynamics of group trolling and its implications in the digital realm. We therefore hypothesize:

H2: Social Identity mediates the effect of the anonymity of self on the Intention to participate in cyberbullying on social media during elections in Nigeria.

MODERATING ROLE OF THE ABSENCE OF CAPABLE GUARDIANSHIP

In virtual communities (Wellman & Gulia, 2018), individuals who strongly identify with the community are likely to reduce their participation in collective trolling if there is an effective system of guardianship in place. This is because the presence of capable guardians discourages such behavior, reducing the perceived likelihood of facing negative consequences. Consequently, when members perceive that their motivations, such as social identity (Harwood, 2020), are less likely to translate into collective trolling behaviors (Kirkwood et al., 2019), the indirect impact of others' anonymity on their inclination to engage in collective trolling is diminished. Therefore, we propose that the level of capable guardianship in the context of collective trolling (Fichman, 2022) determines the indirect influence of others' anonymity on individuals' propensity to participate in collective trolling through the mediation of social identity. These insights highlight the significance of

guardianship mechanisms in mitigating negative online behaviors (Silic & Lowry, 2021) and shaping the dynamics of collective trolling in virtual communities (Gannon et al., 2022). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3a: The absence of capable guardianship moderates the mediating effect of perceived online disinhibition between the anonymity of self and the Intention to participate in cyberbullying on social media during elections in Nigeria.

H3b: The absence of capable guardianship moderates the mediating effect of social identity between the anonymity of others and the Intention to participate in cyberbullying on social media during elections in Nigeria.

RESEARCH METHODS

To validate our model, we plan to enlist eligible voters in Nigeria who possess Facebook and Instagram accounts (Wan Mokhtar et al., 2023) presence to participate in an e-survey. The survey will consist of demographics, likert scale, and open ended questions. Researchers will focus on Facebook and Instagram Users because those are the top social media platforms (Statista, 2023). Online surveys have proven effective in studying various forms of deviant behaviors, including cyberbullying and cyber harassment. By leveraging this methodology, we aim to gather data that will contribute to the understanding of these online phenomena. The participation of individuals who are active on Facebook and Instagram will provide valuable insights into the prevalence, motivations, and potential mitigating factors associated with these deviant behaviours within the Nigerian context (Chan et al., 2019; Harrison 2018). Researchers will use SMART PLS to analyze the data.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cyberbullying on social media remains a pressing issue with far-reaching consequences. The interplay between perceived online inhibition, anonymity, and psychological factors plays a significant role in shaping individuals' intentions to engage in such harmful behavior. Understanding the complexities of cyberbullying requires a comprehensive approach that considers socio-technical perspectives, acknowledging the influence of technology on human behavior and motivations. Efforts to combat cyberbullying must focus on fostering a sense of social identification, promoting capable guardianship mechanisms, and encouraging responsible online behavior. By addressing these underlying factors and promoting a culture of empathy and respect, we can strive towards creating a safer and more inclusive digital environment for all users.

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