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**Effects of Cyberbullying among Tertiary Students in Ghana: A
Study of Two Universities in the Northern Region**

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of cyberbullying among two universities in the Northern region of Ghana using multiple data collection procedures. The qualitative study adopted indepth interviews, focus group discussions and observations to understand the phenomenon among the youthful respondents. Findings were analysed along the research questions and thematically interpreted to give meanings to the dense data collected. It emerged that cyberbullying is very high among the respondents with some bullies adopting threats, video calls and commenting negatively on text and pictures as means of preying on their victims. Respondents reported suffering from psychological, physical and academic effects. The study recommends a holistic strategy from stakeholders to deal with the phenomenon.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Effects, Universities, Northern region, Bullies, Victims

1.0 Background of Study

The use of social media is increasingly becoming a common phenomenon among the youth in Ghana and more so among tertiary students. It is a common spectacle to see university students in Ghana carrying mobile phones in hand and busily browsing of what is suspected to be chatting with friends, colleagues and the general public. It is obvious that these users of the new device are utilizing the technology to their advantage but little do they know that beneath their proclivity to the mobile phones, internet and all that is related to the new media lies cyberbullying which analysis believe is becoming common in recent times.

Tokunaga (2010), defined cyberbullying as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile and aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others”. This definition implies that cyberbullying occurs through the digital and technological space. This means that any act by word or action on the internet or cyber space that is intended to denigrate, humiliate, insult, disrespect, discredit, defame and abuse the rights, privileges and personalities of any individual could be considered as cyberbullying.

Researchers acknowledged that bullying is not a new phenomenon in human history as the term ‘bullying’ can be traced as far back as 1530s involving two persons, a bully or intimidator and a victim. Cyberbullying is therefore any bullying that takes place through electronic or by use of technology. “While bullying and cyberbullying are often similar in terms of form and technique they also have many differences. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying allows the offender to mask his or her identity behind a computer. This anonymity makes it easier for the offender to strike blows against a victim without having to see the victim’s physical response” (Donegan, 2012).

Sam et al (2018) indicated that cyberbullying in Ghana appears to be higher than what studies have suggested in the USA and the UK stressing that majority of the participants studied are victims of cyberbullying. “The cyberbullying is widespread, but it does not appear to affect the victims’ psychological wellbeing. This makes us to speculate that cyberbullying, just like traditional bullying, is seen as a normal behaviour among Ghanaian youth, and as a way of disciplining errant behaviours of young peers, or for the amusement of older youth. It is unclear what characterises the victims of cyberbullying in Ghana” (Ibid: 14) and recommended more studies on the subject to get clearer answers.

Agbeko and Kwa-Aidoo (2018), concluded in their studies of cyberbullying among teenagers in Southern Ghana that majority of them accessed internet at home using mobile phones with frapping and harassments being major forms of cyber bullying that the adolescents had experienced. The researchers adopted a descriptive study to conveniently sample the views of 233 respondents aged between 10 and 18. The study was an exploratory research using inferential statistics to organise, summarise and describe measures of the population. Since this research was limited to Southern Ghana, it is imperative to understand the perspective of cyberbullying from the Northern regions of Ghana. This makes the current study particularly significant because it is conducted using respondents from two Northern region’s universities. It is also adopting a qualitative approach to explore the phenomenon from another perspective.

Being one of the first researches to understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying in tertiary learning institutions in the Northern parts of Ghana, this paper’s objectives are to understand the strategy used by perpetrators of cyberbullying on students of the University of Development Studies (UDS) and the Tamale Technical University (TaTU). It is also to explore the effects of cyberbullying on students of the UDS and TaTU and as well, investigate coping mechanisms against cyberbullying among UDS and TaTU students. Among the guiding questions of this study are; 1. What are the strategies if any used by perpetrators of cyberbullying on students of

UDS and TaTU? 2. What are the effects of cyberbullying on students of TaTU and UDS? 3. What are the coping mechanisms against cyberbullying on UDS and TaTU students?

2.0 Literature Review

In a related study, Sam et al (2018), conducted an elaborate study of cyberbullying among some students in the basic, secondary and tertiary levels in Ghana using a sample of 844 respondents. Of the sample, 140 were JHS; 224 SHS and 476 being university students while four others did not indicate their level of education. The sample for the study was drawn for the Greater Accra region with participants from ten regions of the country belonging to diverse religious faiths.

A questionnaire containing a battery of scales was developed for that study with some adapted from previous studies on cyberbullying. The questionnaire was administered to two Junior High Schools, three Senior High Schools and three universities, all based in the Greater Accra region of Ghana.

The study found that cyberbullying is common among the study population. “The most common form of cyberbullying is receiving a nasty text message. Over two-thirds (73.2%) of all the participants had received such a message at least one in the course of the last six months, with as many as 83% of the university students having experienced it at least once” (Sam et al, 2018). Nasty emails constituted the least of cyberbullying with 31.3 % of the respondents having experienced it at least once in the course of six months.

The study concludes that cyberbullying in Ghana appears to be higher than what studies have suggested happens in the US and the UK stressing that majority of the participants to that study are victims of cyberbullying. “Cyberbullying is widespread, but it does not appear to affect the victims’ psychological wellbeing. This makes us to speculate that cyberbullying, just like traditional bullying, is seen as a normal behaviour among Ghanaian youth, and as way of disciplining errant behaviours of young peers, or for the amusement of older youth. It is unclear what characterises the victims of cyberbullying in Ghana” (Sam et al, 2018).

Agbeko and Kwa-Aidoo (2018) concluded in their studies of cyberbullying among teenagers in Southern Ghana that majority of them accessed internet at home using mobile phones with frapping and harassments constituting major forms of cyber bullying that the adolescents had experienced resulting in them refusing to use computers and the internet. This invariably can affect their usage of the cyberspace for educational and other lifetime purposes.

The researchers adopted a descriptive study to conveniently sample the views of 233 respondents aged between 10 and 18 from four Southern regions of Ghana namely; Western, Eastern, Central and Greater Accra regions. A questionnaire comprising of a multi-choice questions as well as scaled questions on Likert scale was administered to the sample. The study was an exploratory research using descriptive and inferential statistics to organise, summarise and describe measures of the population.

Results show that 98.7% of the teenagers are frequent users of the internet with most of them accessing it through their mobile phones and computers. They used the internet to study, chat with friends and access social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Frapping and harassments are very common cyberbullying experienced by the respondents resulting in some of them closing their accounts. “Public education in schools as effective way of controlling cyberbullying, talking to trusted adult or teacher, not responding to cyberbullies, not retaliating to cyberbullying and providing damage control through counselling and internet safety training sessions are effective means of curbing cyberbullying” (Agbeko & Kwa-Aidoo, 2018:227).

Antiri (2017), examines the effects of bullying on students of senior high schools in Ghana, using the descriptive research design. A purposive and snowball sample of 400 respondents were selected from four senior high schools in Ghana. The results showed that some students became dropouts, others developed low self-esteem while others developed characters that could affect them in future stressing that bullying had affected the academic performances of the students in school and called on Ghana Education Service to stop bullying entirely in schools. Cyberbullying is therefore an extension of traditional bullying which researchers indicate has serious effects on the victims.

3.0 Methodology

The qualitative case study was adopted in studying the effects of cyberbullying among tertiary students in Ghana using the Tamale Technical University (TaTU) and the University for Development Studies (UDS) as the case. Neuman (2014), points out that case study examines individuals, organisations, movements, events and geographic units through a detailed, varied and extensive studies. It can be used to examine for instance the students of two tertiary institutions and the effects cyberbullying have on them. As a qualitative study, Yin (2011), indicates that it can be used to study social phenomenon under real world conditions by representing the views and perspectives of participants.

Data was collected through indepth interviews, focus group discussions and observations. When data is triangulated from different sources, it adds to the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Yin, 2011). An indepth interview was conducted with two victims and two perpetrator of cyberbullying using snowballing. Snowball sampling also known as reputational and chain referral uses analogy which begins small and becomes larger as additional snow is pick on. It is a multistage technique which begins with one or few people or cases and spreads out based on links to the initial cases (Neuman, 2014).

Additionally, two focus group discussions; one each from UDS and TaTU comprising of seven respondents per group were organised to understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying better. The students in the focus group were randomly picked to participate in discussions of cyberbullying and its effects where they freely shared their views and experiences on the subject.

The researcher used observations to study the reactions of all respondents as they chat and exchange communication on social media platforms using their mobile phones. The use of multiple sources in data collection is justified in a sense that Baxter and Jack (2008) state that in a case study, data can be collected using multiple sources and then converging them into the analysis process rather than handled individually.

Inductive data analysis procedure as one of the features of qualitative data analysis was adopted to analyse the large volume of data collected. By using this procedure; patterns, categorisation of data and thematic analysis were used to interpret the data collected. As indicated by Creswell (2009), patterns, categorisations and themes are built from the bottom up through organising data into abstract units. This process demonstrates effective working relationship between the themes and database until a comprehensive set of themes are arrived at. This enables the researcher especially this researcher to make sense of the entire data collected since as responses were subjected to good analysis after inductive analysis without any bias or manipulation of any data.

This study narrowed the sample to university students because they represent a youthful population that is prone to the use of the internet and social media. According to UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2018), majority of the youths are in this cohorts. Merriam (2002) indicates that convenient sampling enables researchers to sample key informants rich with information to be studied. The selection of university students as sample for this study is convenient in principle.

Findings of this study were analysed along the research questions which flowed from the objectives of the study. Some themes emerged from the data and have duly been discussed thematically to make sense of the large volume of data collected. Text and image data are too dense in qualitative research that they need to be themed. “In the analysis of the data, researchers need to ‘winnow’ the data....to aggregate data into a small number of themes, something like five to seven themes”, (Creswell, 2014:245)

4.0 Findings

For ease of interpretation, the findings of this study have been analysed in accordance with the research questions which flowed from the objectives of the study.

RQ1: What are the strategies if any used by perpetrators of cyberbullying on students of UDS and TaTU?

Respondents in this study have experienced cyberbullying in various social media platforms including Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram. Attacking people’s posts and pictures is a common strategy used by bullies. Many victims received negative comments from social media users when they posted pictures or posted something about themselves on their page or status hoping to receive favourable likings and comments from friends but not everyone is enthused with other’s pictures or posts as they received bashings from the public. A respondent remarked that, “I posted a picture about myself on Facebook thinking I will get people to comment positively on it but instead someone asked why I have frowned my face like that and asked whether it was force to post a picture. The fellow went further to insult me and even told me my picture looked ugly. I felt so bad that I didn’t want to post anything again”.

Bullies use video calls as strategy or tool of attack. In a focus group discussion, it emerged that some perpetrators through video calls are able to see their victims and identify their sex and target them as sex preys. Some of them recounted encountering weird experiences from some virtual friends. “I accepted a friendship request from an Arab on Facebook and he started video calls with me. At a point, the caller stripped naked and masturbating and demanded that I should send my nude pictures to him but I decline. He then threatened me that if I don’t send him my nude pictures, he will photoshop my pictures and make it appear online as if I was having sexual intercourse with him. I became confused and traumatized and blocked him, closed my account for three years without being on Facebook”. This appears disgusting but that is the sad reality of cyberbullying people are facing in this era.

Another mechanism used by bullies is threat. Threats are the common tool of most of the perpetrators of cyberbullying as they use that often to get their innocent and naïve victims to commit to whatever they wish done. The common threats that victims go through is a request to do the wishes of the perpetrators else your naked pictures will be exposed. This is a common threat which victims indicate are sometimes carried out if victims refused to comply or take smart strategies. They complained that even when the account is reported, nothing seems to be done against the perpetrators of the act thus making them to attack more victims.

RQ2: What are the effects of cyberbullying on students of TaTU and UDS?

As students, respondents belong to some academic platforms where they share views and contribute to academic discussions with colleagues. It is not all the discussions that end well as some take advantage of such platforms to insult and vilify their mates. Some of the respondents received negative comments so much that it has made them become afraid of themselves. A respondent said “We had an academic discussion on the platform and I contributed to the discussion but some of my mates insulted me and belittled my contributions and since that time, I have decided not to contribute or say anything on that platform again. Sometimes, I don’t even read what people have posted on that platform because of what I went through”.

A focus group discussions also revealed that cyberbullying is a common experience where people take revenge on each other. When people have personal problems with their colleagues, they take advantage of group platforms to get at their targets. “Cyberbullying can be demoralizing especially when it happens on academic platform or groups. It has made me timid and prevents me from giving all my efforts especially on topics or issues that I have much knowledge about. You say something and somebody instead of contributing to the issues, begin to tell you something different from what is being discussed. A mate once referred me to my poor background and how worthless I am when in fact nothing of such discussions were on the table”.

There are emotional and psychological effects of cyberbullying on the victims while the perpetrator feels happy and gratified. “I had a strong emotional feelings after receiving negative comments on my picture I posted. I thought people would have liked my picture and told me how nice and beautiful I looked but ‘nooo’, they said I looked like a whore, a prostitute and husband snatcher and sought of bad names. That day, I felt like crying and even studying was a problem for me. I could not concentrate on my studies for a very long time”. Kowalski and Limber (2013), argued that cyberbullying has significant negative physical, psychological and academic effects from electronic bullying than traditional bullying and suggest the need for intervention efforts to be extended to both bullies and victims. This study has a logical similarity with previous findings of psychological and physical effects.

Some experiences make the victims demoralized and made them to feel inferior. Sharing her experiences on cyberbullying, a lady explained that she had problems with her boyfriend but instead of them ironing out their differences amicably, the boyfriend took to social media to discuss the issue for the whole world to see, a situation she claimed made her demoralized and felt inferior as human beings. “I even contemplated committing suicide because at a point I couldn’t bear the rate of disgrace and insults heaped at me by his new girlfriend who called me ugly and low class girl”, explained a discussant.

RQ3: What are the coping mechanisms against cyberbullying on UDS and TaTU students?

Some respondents have decided to focus more on their personal goals and as such are able to block the negative feedback received on social media. They simply do not take anything serious on social media and as such are not affected by the negative comments made against them stressing that not minding negative comments on their platforms does not imply weakly but a sign of maturity and a mechanism of fighting the effects of cyberbullying. Respondents indicated that they have learnt to be very vigilant on the virtual media in order to prevent and avoid being victims of cyberbullying arguing that experiences have taught them not to trust people especially on social media. “I didn’t know people can be that wicked towards their fellow humans”. This is a remark of a victim of cyberbullying. This raises a lot of questions about the harmful effects victims of cyberbullying go through and have simply adopted self-saving mechanisms of not to trust people so as to be free from further abuses.

Victims of cyberbullying complained that Facebook is reluctant to take action against users when bullies abuse others on the platform adding that “I reported the abuses to Facebook but the account is still being used by the abuser. I even screenshot the insults and nasty comments against me to Facebook but nothing happened to him so I blocked the account”. It appears the best method of dealing with cyberbullying is the individual account holder blocking the account instead of waiting for action to be taken. This is not fair to innocent victims.

Checks from Facebook help center indicates that there are three basic alternatives to deal with sexual abuses which are; (1) unfriend the person so that they cannot chat you or contact you (2) block the person to prevent the person from adding you as their friend or viewing what you share on your timeline (3) report the abuser to Facebook with evidence. These are the basic advice given to users of Facebook as way of helping victims deal with bullies but a more punitive measure could be used such as taking legal action against the bullies provided

they could be contacted and reach with a suit. Odartey-Wellington (2014), argued that there is the need for a domestic legislation to be enacted to deal with cybercrime of which cyberbullying is included stating that, “a dedicated and comprehensive Ghanaian cybercrime legal regime is virtually no-existent. There is the need for parliament to consider the implications of new digital communication technologies for individual privacy, and to originate legislation accordingly”.

4.1 Discussions

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is common in online communication because people can hide their real identities to molest their victims at will. Some of respondents recounted encountering weird experiences from some virtual friends. “I accepted friendship from an Arab on Facebook and he started video calls with me. At a point, the caller stripped naked and masturbating and demanded that I should send my nude pictures to him but I declined. He then threatened me that if I don’t send him my nude pictures, he will photoshop my pictures and make it appear online as if I was having sexual intercourse with him. I became confused and traumatized”.

In another instance, a male student recounted how a Colombian who was his Facebook friend requested him (victim) whether he wanted to be rich and he responded in the affirmative. The perpetrator then told him he will make all necessary traveling arrangements for him to travel to Colombia but will make him a porn star where he will have sexual intercourse with many women and be paid hugely. These are indications that sexual harassments and molestations are very common on social media, a phenomenon which has the likelihood of corrupting the morals of society given that the youth dominates social media.

Sam et al (2018) expressed the view that cyberbullying is widespread, but it does not appear to affect the victims’ psychological wellbeing. They indicate that cyberbullying, just like traditional bullying, is seen as a normal behaviour among Ghanaian youth, and as a way of disciplining errant behaviours of young peers, or for the amusement of older youth. The contrary is the case in this study as many of the victims complained of serious effects on their lives and studies as a result of cyberbullying. The exposure to pornographic materials by these respondents have not only psychological but emotional effects on them as they keep on seeing images of such acts in their minds eye. The effects of cyberbullying are therefore dare to the victims.

Cyberbullying demoralizes victims

Deviants take advantage of virtual media and the vulnerability of people to prey on them especially on pornographic and monetary demands. Some experiences make the victims demoralized and make them to feel inferior. Sharing her experiences on cyberbullying, a respondent explained that she had problems with her boyfriend but instead of them ironing out their differences amicably, the boyfriend took to social media to discuss the issue for the whole world to see, a situation she claimed made her demoralized and felt inferior as a human being. “I even contemplated committing suicide because at a point I couldn’t bear the rate of disgrace and insults heaped at me by his new girlfriend who called me ugly and low class girl”.

A study by Duverge (2015), confirmed the effects of cyberbullying. It indicates that cyberbullying has a long term effects on victims. “Being bullied can lead to a lifetime of low self-esteem. This may cause chronic fatigue, insomnia and poor performances in school or at work. Depression is not uncommon, with some victims feeling an overall sense of hopelessness and worthlessness about their lives. Unfortunately, the long-term effects of cyberbullying can become life-threatening problems. Several high-profile suicides have been blamed on cyberbullying. These tragic events have led to increasing attention on the issue, with prevention efforts becoming a priority”.

Perpetrators feel gratified

Perpetrators of cyberbullying never regret carrying out their actions. They after all feel gratified that they have been able to carry out their actions. A perpetrator who intentional posted intimate conversation and pictures of a popular female friend on a group Whatsapp page feels gratified and justified his actions. He explained that “this lady is very broad of herself and insults people anyhow. I smartly private chat her using a fake identity and told her I love her and she agreed. We had a lot of romantic conversations and she even sent half naked pictures of herself to me. After I have gathered enough information to silence her, I posted them all on the group page for everybody in the group to see how cheap she could be. Since then she has exited the platform and this makes me feel happy”.

Cyberbullying is very common among university students

The act of taking into online attack, insulting, insinuating and blackmailing people is as common as social media itself. It is also common among university students though Agbeko and Kwa-Aidoo (2018), equally found cyberbullying among teenagers in Southern Ghana as alarming stating that frapping and harassments are major forms of cyber bullying that the adolescents had experienced. The researchers in their descriptive study, conveniently sampled the views of 233 respondents, aged 10 to 18. Both studies give an indication of perhaps a worsening phenomenon of cyberbullying in this country. It was found that almost all the respondents in this study have incidentally been victims or perpetrators (bullies) of cyberbullying. Using social learning theory, Lucas (2018) indicates that cyberbullying is a social behaviour which occurs within a context of relationships where there exists an imbalance power between the bullies and the perpetrator without fear of reprisal.

It appears that most victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying are in the youthful brackets thus making them to see the phenomenon as normal. Some do not see anything wrong in insulting and writing any nasty messages against their friends and love ones. They simply damn the consequences of their actions. The fact that people can hide under different identities to comment such acts makes it easier for perpetrators to carry out their actions despite the existence of a law prohibiting that. In Ghana, the Domestic Violence Act (737), section 1 (b), (iv) and section 3 (2) could be used against perpetrators of cyberbullying, although the term ‘cyberbullying’ is not used in the Act. Odartey-Wellington (2014), claimed that involuntary pornographic materials have physical, emotional and lasting effects on victims to the extent that people can even lose their lives and therefore must be punishable.

4.2 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study confirms an alarming rate of cyberbullying among students of two universities in the Northern region of Ghana. The study incidentally found that virtually all the respondents in the study have either been a victim or a perpetrator of cyberbullying leaving a concomitant psychological, physical, emotional and academic effects on the victims while the bullies in some cases appeared gratified for their actions. While the study cannot establish the causes of cyberbullying, it can speculate that the easy accessibility and ubiquitous nature of mobile phones and the internet as well as the inability of identifying the true identities of people on virtual media creates conducive opportunity for cyberbullies to clamp their preys. It appears that the country lacks clear legal code to address cyberbullying and cybercrime in general and even in cases where the legal regime can be applied, the bullies cannot easily be traced or arrested. These bottlenecks beg for answers from policy makers, governments and the global community to design strategies to address the phenomenon. While waiting for long lasting empirical solution to deal with cyberbullying, it can be recommended that helpless victims should simply block bullies from accessing victims account. Minors and students who cannot handle cyberbullying should report such cases to school authorities and guardians for solutions. Again, cases of sexual harassments can be handled by the law enforcement agencies and the courts hence victims should not be hesitant when need be.

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