

Suicidal Ideation: Self-Esteem and Cyberbullying as Predictors among Undergraduates in a Southwestern University in Nigeria.

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Abstract

Suicide is a significant community health concern and an intricate psychological phenomenon that is frequently evaluated using variables like suicidal ideation since completed suicide cannot be experimentally investigated. Researchers often conduct research on suicidal ideation and behaviour as a quantifiable predictor of suicide risk consequent upon the aforementioned submission. Suicidal behaviour has received growing attention in recent years, especially among undergraduate populations where, exposure to social and psychological stressors are prevalent. This research investigated the predictive roles of self-esteem and cyberbullying on suicidal ideation among undergraduates of Olabisi Onabanjo University. A cross-sectional survey design was employed. Structured questionnaires were administered to 398 students selected using stratified random sampling techniques, of which 389 valid responses were analysed. Standardized instruments including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Cyberbullying and Online Aggression Survey (victimization section), and the Suicidal Ideation Scale were used to measure the study variables. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The regression model was statistically significant [$F(2,386) = 138.73, P < .001$], indicating that self-esteem and cyberbullying jointly predicted suicidal ideation. The model explained 41.2% of the variance in suicidal ideation. Cyberbullying emerged as a significant independent predictor ($\beta = .65, P < .001$), whereas self-esteem was not a significant predictor. Cyberbullying showed a strong positive predictive effect on suicidal ideation. Cyberbullying appears to be an important risk factor associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates. Strengthening anti-cyberbullying policies and promoting mental health support services within universities may help reduce suicidal ideation among students. This study contributes to growing evidence on digital mental health risk factors among university students in developing countries.

Keywords: Aggression, Cyberbullying, Self-Esteem, Suicidal Ideation.

Introduction

Suicidal ideation, a critical public health concern and considered a leading indicator of suicide, is described as persistent thoughts, contemplations, or plans about ending one's life (World Health Organisation, 2022). Shrivastava (2025) noted that it emerges from prolonged emotional struggles, featuring feelings of hopelessness, rejection or isolation, which, if left unaddressed, may escalate into suicide attempts. On a global scale, suicide is regarded as the second main cause of death in people aged 15-29 years (World Health Organisation, 2019). Further discussion in relation to Sub-Saharan Africa, the likelihood of suicide might be conditional upon the inaccessibility of mental health services, cultural bias towards mental illness, and a potential absence of strong preventive measures, (Eshun & Bartoli, 2012, Umukoro & Adegoke, 2015). In the Nigerian case study, Ofole (2025), postulated that, 22.5% of tertiary students said that they had suicidal tendencies, and that these tendencies were due to academic pressures, financial difficulties, or interpersonal issues.

Suicidal daydreaming does not stand alone. Nigerian youths may be predisposed to suicidal ideation due to several risk factors, and unless they are properly addressed, can transition to suicidal attempt or suicide (Ngwu et al., 2023). Recent research indicates that certain risk factors, including cyberbullying and/or low self-worth, can influence the intensification of suicidal ideation in any group (Kowalski et al., 2014; Islam et al., 2022; Predescu et al., 2024). An example: according to Ezeonwumelu et al. (2022), cyberbullying victims often report worthlessness, humiliation, and emotional distress, which can substantially elevate the risks and opportunities of becoming suicidal in ideation or thoughts.

Low self-esteem also complicates the connection between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation (Agustningsih et al., 2024). Self-esteem, which is the perception of self-worth by an individual, is an important factor in shaping how individuals react to adverse situations (Zeigler-Hill, 2013). Poor self-esteem correlates with an increased vulnerability to the psychological influences of cyberbullying since those who perceive themselves negatively are more likely to internalize negative comments and develop feelings of inadequacy (Robins and Trzesniewski, 2005; Cinelli et al., 2025). Research has established that low self-esteem can make many people weak emotionally to overcome the victimization of cyberbullying, which predisposes them to suicidal thoughts (Chadwick, 2014; Yousif, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). The necessity to conduct this research is prompt, given the current occurrence of cases of cyberbullying-related suicides worldwide and locally. According to a report by Schonfeld et al. (2023), the data shows that 14.9% of American teenagers have been cyberbullied, and 13.6% of teenagers have seriously attempted suicide.

In Nigeria, a certain Ariyo Olanrewaju Taiwo, based in Ekiti state, took his life after he posted on his Facebook page about having a few hours to live. His post was met with taunts and bullying instead of empathy, which eventually led to his death (Punch Newspapers, 2017).

Section 14(1) of the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) provides legal sanctions against emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse, which may include forms of cyberbullying. Despite the existence of this legal framework, cyberbullying appears to be increasing, partly due to limited data on its prevalence and its connection to suicidal behaviours in Nigeria. This suggests that it has not even gained the required or appropriate attention within the Nigerian landscape.

Literature Review

For the sake of conceptual clarity, cyberbullying as defined by (Patchin & Hiduja, 2015), is the willful and repeated harm inflicted via the use of computers, phone devices and other

electronic devices. They further suggest that cyberbullying is intended to threaten, harass, embarrass and exclude others socially through the use of online technologies.

Similar to the above definition, UNICEF (2020) describes cyberbullying as a repeated behaviour aimed at scaring, angering or shaming those who are targeted with the use of technology and technological devices such as computers and phones. Numerous studies have established a strong link between cyberbullying and mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. For instance, research indicates that cyberbullying, characterized by repeated online harassment and demeaning comments, significantly affects victims' mental health, leading to emotional distress and heightened suicidal tendencies (Tokunaga, 2010).

In a related meta-analysis conducted by van Geel, Vedder & Tanilon (2014), they provided strong evidence linking experiences of peer victimization (physical bullying) to increased risk of suicidal thoughts among children and adolescents. Their review highlighted that children and adolescents who are victims of bullying are significantly at a higher risk of experiencing suicidal ideation when compared to their peers who are not targeted for victimization. The aftermath of cyberbullying transcends the immediate episodes that come with it. This standpoint is corroborated by the findings of (Sourander et al., 2010) and (Hawkins, 2023), who averred that the psychological impact of cyberbullying can be long-lasting, extending beyond the immediate aftermath of the bullying episodes. The assertion of these authors suggests about what happens behind the scenes after being cyberbullied. The bullies may assume it ends on the media platform, while the victims may become psychologically distressed, among other distresses.

Theoretically speaking, the above findings can be tied to Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (2005), which suggests that a sense of not belonging and the belief that one is a burden to others can drive suicidal ideation. Victims of cyberbullying often report feeling isolated and rejected, which may reinforce these destructive beliefs and contribute to increased psychological vulnerability. However, if cyberbullying has been fingered as a possible indicator of suicidal ideation, would it suffice to postulate that a diminished self-esteem may further exacerbate the chances of drifting into suicidal ideation and ultimately suicide? Some studies suggest that the feeling of rejection emanating from cyberbullying could be further complicated by a diminished or inadequate self-esteem. As opined by Albikawi, (2023), the study found that victims of cyberbullying were more likely to report depressive symptoms and a decline in self-esteem, leading to increased risk of suicidal thoughts.

Self-esteem, considered to be a reflection of an individual's sense of self-worth and confidence, is seen as a key determinant of emotional resilience and mental well-being (Orth & Robins, 2013). Consequent upon the above definition of self-esteem, it is assumed that individuals with high self-esteem would be at a lower risk of suicidal ideation when compared to those with low self-esteem. For instance, Buecker et al. (2025), conducted a meta-analytic review of existing studies and concluded that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to experience suicidal thoughts or engage in suicidal behaviours than those with higher self-esteem, thus supporting low self-worth to being a key psychological risk factor for suicide.

In one study by Manani and Sharma (2013), where they investigated the correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation among senior secondary school students in India, their results revealed a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation. By implication, adolescents who reported lower self-esteem scores were more likely to report

frequent suicidal thoughts than those who reported higher self-esteem, exhibiting a significantly lower risk of suicidal ideation. Further statistical analysis affirmed that self-esteem was a prominent predictor of suicidal ideation, suggesting that changes in the self-worth of adolescents directly impacted their vulnerability to suicidal thinking.

Theoretically, the study identified the processes by which self-esteem influences suicidal risk. Adolescents with low self-esteem were more prone to negative self-perceptions, hopelessness, and feelings of worthlessness, which are well-documented risk factors in the Cognitive Model of Psychopathology of suicidal ideation (Beck et al., 1985). It also seemed that these individuals do not have effective emotional control and coping skills, which exposes them more to stress, failure, or rejection. In contrast, students with higher self-esteem demonstrated greater emotional resilience, adaptive problem-solving, and positive self-regard, all of which functioned as protective factors against suicidal ideation.

Despite more recent literature on cyberbullying and suicidal ideation, there is a lack of literature in Nigeria examining whether cyberbullying and self-esteem are jointly predictive and drive factors of suicide ideation among University students. Furthermore, the existing evidence on the role of self-esteem is inconsistent, with some studies reporting high correlations and others reporting weak or no correlations. Such a difference implies that more empirical research is required, in particular among the students of the university in Nigeria, where the digital social interaction is rapidly increasing. Thus, this paper fills this gap by investigating the independent and combined predictive value of cyberbullying and self-esteem on suicidal ideation among undergraduates.

Hypothesis:

Self-esteem and cyberbullying will independently and jointly predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a survey research design with the aid of questionnaires partitioned into four sections. Section A was used to gather data on demographic variables, while the three other sections gathered data on self-esteem, cyberbullying and suicidal ideation in the order herein presented. The study population for the study comprised undergraduate students of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State. The research drew a sample size from an estimated population of 25,000 students within the institution's main campus. This research paper used a survey research design using questionnaires subdivided into four sections. Data were collected on demographic variables in Section A and self-esteem, cyberbullying and suicidal ideation in the three other sections, respectively.

The study sample of the research involved undergraduate students of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State. The study drew a sample size of an estimated population of 25,000 students in the main campus of the institution.

Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size calculator was used in determining the sample size. The minimum sample size of 379 was taken based on an estimated number of 25,000 undergraduate students. In order to account for possible non-response rate, incomplete data or attrition, a 5% allowance rate was applied thus, scaling up the sample size to 398 respondents. Three hundred and ninety-eight (398) questionnaires distributed from which, Three hundred and eighty-nine (389) were considered fit for analysis, providing a response rate of 97.74%.

Instruments: The research instruments were as follows: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), created by Morris Rosenberg (1965), to gauge the overall self-worth of an individual by evaluating both positive and negative attitudes toward the self. The scale includes 10 questions, rated on a four-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.88 have been reported as psychometric properties of the scale. The scale used in the current study in the current study, the scale showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's 0.84).

The Cyberbullying and Online Aggression Survey developed by Hinduja and Patchin (2010) was used to assess experiences of online aggression and cyberbullying. For this study, the victimization section of the scale was adopted because the focus of the research was on victims rather than perpetrators. The scale consists of nine items measuring the frequency of cyberbullying experiences within the past 30 days. Responses were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Many Times). Previous studies have reported Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .88. In the present study, the scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$)

The Suicidal Ideation Scale (SIS) used in this study was developed by David Rudd (1989) to assess the frequency and severity of suicidal thoughts. The 10-item version of the SIS was adopted to capture cognitive and emotional components related to suicidal thoughts. Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Previous studies have reported internal consistency of approximately $\alpha = .72$. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was $\alpha = .81$. The above scales were converted into questionnaires in the original language developed by the authors.

The research sampling methods included simple random sampling and stratified random sampling. In the stratified sampling, the population was subdivided into strata on the basis of pertinent variables like faculties where departments were recruited. These faculties were the Social Sciences, the Management Sciences, Education and Law. Subsequently, a simple random method was employed where participants were sampled to constitute 398 respondents, with 389 valid responses being analyzed.

The questionnaires were administered with the assistance of trained research assistants to the selected participants in a large lecture theatre during the university's general break period, usually between 12:00 pm and 1:00 pm (WAT). Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. A total of 20 minutes was allotted for the completion and return of the questionnaires. Upon retrieval, 389 questionnaires were found suitable for analysis, representing a response rate of 97.74%.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Department of Psychology, Olabisi Onabanjo University. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before questionnaire administration. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	120	31.0
	Female	269	69.0
	Total	389	100.0
Age Bracket	15-20 years	222	57.0
	21-25 years	155	40.0
	26-30 years	12	3.0
	31 years & above	0	0
	Total	389	100.0
Academic Level	100 Level	114	29.0
	200 Level	97	25.0
	300 Level	74	19.0
	400 Level	102	26.0
	500 Level	2	1.0
	Total	389	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The above table shows that the majority of the respondents are female, 269 representing (69%) of the sample, while 120(31%) were males. The table further showed that 222 (57%) of the respondents were 15 to 20 years old, 155 (40%) were 21 to 25 years of age, while 12 (3%) were 26 to 30 years of age. This indicates that respondents aged 15–20 years constituted the largest proportion of the sample. Furthermore, the table showed that 114 (29%) of the respondents were in 100L, 97 (25%) of the respondents were in 200L, 74 (19%) of the respondents were in 300L, 102(26%) were in 400L, while 2 (1%) were in 500L.

**Table 2:
 Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Joint and Independent Prediction of Self-Esteem and Cyberbullying on Suicidal Ideation.**

	R	R²	F	P	β	t	P
SE					0.04	1.08	>.05
	0.64	0.412	138.73	<.001			
CB					0.65	16.56	<.001

From Table 2, the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 386) = 138.73$, $P < .001$, indicating that self-esteem and cyberbullying jointly predicted suicidal ideation. The model explained 41.2% of the variance in suicidal ideation ($R^2 = .41.2$). Independently, self-esteem did not significantly predict suicidal ideation ($\beta = .04$, $t = 1.08$, $P > .05$).

However, cyberbullying was found to be a significant independent predictor of suicidal ideation ($\beta = .65$, $t = 16.56$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of cyberbullying were associated with increased suicidal ideation among undergraduates. The findings indicate that cyberbullying significantly predicted suicidal ideation, whereas self-esteem did not significantly predict suicidal ideation. However, the joint regression model was significant, indicating that the predictors collectively explained a substantial proportion of variance in suicidal ideation.

Discussions

The findings of this study revealed that cyberbullying independently predicted suicidal ideation, whereas self-esteem did not emerge as a significant predictor. However, both variables jointly predicted suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the regression model accounted for 41.2% of the variance in suicidal ideation, indicating that the predictors examined in this study explain a substantial proportion of suicidal ideation among undergraduates. These findings align with a part of the existing literature and deviate in others, indicating that the connection between these psychological variables and suicidal ideation can be complicated and context-specific.

Theoretically, this observation confirms the interpersonal theory of suicide, which argues that suicidal thoughts can be heightened by the presence of situational experiences that threaten a sense of belongingness (Joiner, 2005). Cyberbullying can act as a social rejection stressor that can further strengthen perceived isolation and psychological distress and, as such, augment suicidal ideation. This implies that interpersonal digital experiences are closer predictors of suicidal thoughts than intrapersonal influences like the global self-esteem.

The outcome of the current study, which reveals cyberbullying as a strong predictor of suicidal ideation, is consistent with the extensive amount of literature that highlights the detrimental psychological influence of online aggression. In particular, the meta-analytical study by van Geel, Vedder, and Tanilon (2014) provided strong evidence linking experiences of peer victimization (physical, including traditional forms of bullying) to an increased risk of suicidal thoughts among children and adolescents. Their review averred that children and adolescents who are victims of bullying are significantly at a higher risk of experiencing suicidal ideation when compared to their peers who are not targeted for victimization.

Similarly, the study by Adeyemi et al. (2024), who investigated determinants of bullying among public secondary school students, further corroborates the findings of this study. Their findings showed that bullying among the participants correlated positively with the four factors: school climate, peer influence, social competence and family cohesion. Though their research interest was on traditional bullying (not cyberbullying), their position still underscores the role of bullying, either cyber or traditional, as a key determinant of challenges of everyday living.

In another related study by Maurya et al. (2022), where they investigated the effects of cyberbullying victimization on depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents and young adults, they found that, as the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization increased,

females reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide in the last year when compared to males. They posited that adolescents who experienced cyberbullying victimization were two times more likely to have depressive symptoms compared to those who did not experience cyberbullying victimization. They further found that adolescents who experienced cyberbullying victimization were two and a half times more likely to have suicidal ideation than adolescents who had no experience of cyberbullying victimization.

Their findings opined that cyberbullying victims were at higher risk of depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts, and this further accentuates the findings of this current study. With respect to self-esteem, the present study found that self-esteem was not a statistically significant independent predictor of suicidal ideation. This outcome is at variance with what is obtainable in existing literature. In the works of (Ladi-Akinyemi et al., 2023; Udensi et al., 2024, Umukoro et al., 2019), it was reported that self-esteem had a strong inverse relationship with suicidal ideation among Nigerian university students. Their studies emphasized that students with high self-esteem reported lower on suicidal ideation compared to students with low self-esteem. The studies further asserted that self-esteem functions as a psychological buffer that mitigates the effects of adverse life experiences, such as academic failure or social rejection.

Likewise, Maduka et al. (2020) examined the relationship between self-esteem, stress, and suicidal ideation in undergraduates and reported that self-esteem was statistically significant and negatively related to suicidal ideation. Their findings reported that low self-esteem students tended to internalize negative life experiences, which intensified their desperation and heightened their vulnerability to suicide. They found self-esteem to be a significant predictor of suicidal ideation. Such differences in the current research could be explained by other factors when people might be in more serious psychological states, like hopelessness or emotional suffering, which can prevail over the role of self-esteem. This could be because self-esteem could be a distal protective factor instead of a direct predictor when other, more immediate psychosocial stressors like cyberbullying exist. This can be an indication that situational interpersonal stressors are more decisive in influencing suicidal cognition, rather than overall self-assessments of self-worth.

The present study was not completely contradictory to other studies. For instance, the findings of Nwankwo-Nkwuda et al. (2020) were in consonance with the current study's findings. They opined in their study that self-esteem was not a significant independent predictor of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in Ebonyi State University, Abakiliki. Their study suggested that academic stress was a stronger predictor of suicidal ideation. They argued that while self-esteem plays a role in emotional regulation, it is insufficient on its own to determine suicidal behaviours without considering situational stressors. This study contributes to the growing literature on student mental health by demonstrating that cyberbullying may represent a stronger predictor of suicidal ideation than self-esteem among Nigerian undergraduates. The findings also extend existing research by providing evidence from a Sub-Saharan African university context where empirical data on digital psychosocial risk factors remain limited.

Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions between cyberbullying, self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. Second, the use of self-report measures may introduce response bias such as social desirability. Third, the study was conducted in a single

university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other student populations. Future studies may consider longitudinal designs and multi-institution samples to improve generalizability.

Recommendations with Practical and Clinical Implications

This study has valuable practical and clinical implications. Practically, the role of cyberbullying in predicting suicidal ideation cannot be overstated, which implies that Universities should revise their anti-bullying policies and digital behavior codes. The University management should also promote digital literacy programmes to inform students on responsible use of social media, online empathy and psychological impacts of cyberbullying. Moreover, awareness programs and peer support services can be introduced to student affairs departments, which are expected to recognize vulnerable students at an early stage.

The clinical implications of the findings are that mental health support services should become accessible in universities. Counselling centres given during the psychological assessment process should prioritize screening of cyberbullying experiences and provide tailored interventions to counteract the influences of cyberbullying, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, resilience and self-esteem improvement programmes. Early psychological intervention among victims of cyberbullying should be carried out to reduce the shift of emotional distress into suicidal ideation. The findings also underscore the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between counsellors, clinical psychologists, and university administrators in developing preventive mental health interventions among students.

Conclusion

This research examined the predictive validity of self-esteem and cyberbullying as predictors of suicidal ideation among college students. Regression analysis showed that cyberbullying was a significant predictor of suicidal ideation, but self-esteem had no statistically significant independent predictor. The results indicate that the presence of online harassment is also a significant psychological risk factor of suicidal ideation among students and highlight the increased impact of digital social environments on the mental health of the young population. Though self-esteem is traditionally linked to emotional well-being, the predictive relationship between self-esteem and suicidal ideation seems more complicated and may be clarified by other factors, including depression, social support, and psychological distress. This indicates that self-esteem may exert a composite influence on emotional health, but is unlikely to be a unilateral determinant of suicidal tendencies within such a population.

Based on these findings, the relevant stakeholders are advised to intensify efforts to counter cyberbullying by implementing policies related to it and sensitizing students on the use of social media and digital empathy, and the psychological impacts of cyberbullying.

Moreover, universities should also take into account giving students access to psychological support services, including counselling and mental health interventions, to help mitigate the risk of suicidal ideation and support students.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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