

Cyberbullying Discourse among Nigerian University Students: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Language Practices and their Implications for English Language Education and Digital Citizenship

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ABSTRACT: The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered the social and communicative landscape of university campuses worldwide, giving rise to new forms of online aggression collectively described as cyberbullying. This article examines cyberbullying discourse among Nigerian university students through the lens of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), with the aim of uncovering the linguistic strategies, power relations and ideological assumptions embedded in online bullying interactions. Drawing on qualitative data collected from WhatsApp group conversations, Facebook posts, X (formerly Twitter) exchanges and Instagram comments among students at Nigerian universities, the study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model of textual analysis, discursive practice and social practice to interrogate how language functions as an instrument of aggression, exclusion and identity construction. The analysis reveals that cyberbullying discourse among Nigerian university students is characterised by derogatory labelling, strategic identity denigration, gendered insult patterns, ethnic stereotyping and the deployment of humour as a vehicle for indirect aggression. These discursive practices are shown to reproduce and reinforce broader social hierarchies and ideological tensions within Nigerian higher education. The findings carry significant implications for English language education, pragmatic competence development and digital citizenship curricula in Nigerian universities, underscoring the urgent need for critical language awareness programmes and institutionally embedded digital ethics education.

KEYWORDS: cyberbullying, critical discourse analysis, Nigerian university students, online aggression, digital citizenship, identity construction, English language education

1. INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed a dramatic expansion in digital communication technologies, with social media platforms becoming primary arenas of social interaction, community formation and identity negotiation for young people globally. Nigerian university students, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have embraced platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok as spaces for academic coordination, peer socialisation and self-expression. The Statista Research Department (2024) estimates that Nigeria has one of the highest rates of social media penetration in sub-Saharan Africa, with young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 constituting the most active demographic. This connectivity has undeniable educational and social benefits, yet it has simultaneously enabled the proliferation of hostile, aggressive and demeaning communicative practices that scholars have come to classify under the umbrella of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying, broadly understood as repeated, intentional harm inflicted through digital devices and platforms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014), has emerged as a pressing concern in educational settings worldwide. Unlike traditional face-to-face bullying, which is bounded by physical space and temporal constraints, cyberbullying is characterised by its pervasiveness, the potential anonymity it affords perpetrators, the permanent and publicly accessible nature of digital content and the vast and often unregulated audiences it reaches (Kowalski et al., 2019). These features render cyberbullying particularly pernicious in university environments, where students navigate complex social hierarchies, identity pressures and academic competition simultaneously.

Language lies at the very heart of cyberbullying. It is through language that aggressors demean, exclude, threaten and humiliate their targets; it is through language that victims are constructed as deficient, deviant or inferior; and it is through language that power relations are enacted, contested, and reproduced in digital spaces. The relationship between language, power and identity has long been a central preoccupation of critical linguistics (Fairclough, 1989, 2003), and the emergence of digital discourse as a domain of

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scholarly inquiry has extended this concern into new communicative contexts. Online aggression involves not merely incidental word choices but complex discursive strategies that index social ideologies, reinforce group boundaries and construct asymmetric relations between speakers.

Nigeria's higher education landscape provides a particularly compelling site for the study of cyberbullying discourse. Nigerian universities are characterised by significant ethnic, religious and socioeconomic diversity, and students bring to online spaces the tensions, prejudices and identity investments that animate Nigerian public life more broadly (Akanke, 2021). Issues of ethnicity, gender, religion and socioeconomic status intersect in complex ways within university campuses and their digital extensions, and these intersections are frequently visible in the language practices of cyberbullying. Despite the growing international literature on cyberbullying, African universities generally, and Nigerian universities in particular, remain underrepresented in empirical research on the phenomenon. This gap is not merely statistical; it reflects a deeper absence of culturally situated analyses that can account for the specific sociolinguistic conditions under which cyberbullying unfolds in Nigerian contexts.

From the perspective of language education, cyberbullying discourse presents both a challenge and an opportunity. As English remains the medium of instruction across Nigerian universities and serves as the dominant language of social media communication among educated young Nigerians, cyberbullying interactions frequently occur in English, often blended with Nigerian Pidgin English, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and other local languages. This multilingual and code-mixed dimension of online aggression is largely unexplored in existing scholarship, yet it carries important implications for how language educators approach pragmatic competence, language ethics and critical language awareness in their teaching. Equipping students with the analytical tools to recognise, critique and resist harmful language practices is increasingly recognised as a responsibility of English language education in the digital age (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

Despite growing scholarly interest in cyberbullying at the global level and increasing public concern in Nigeria about online harassment (Ojedokun & Eraye, 2019), there remain significant gaps in the literature. Most Nigerian studies on cyberbullying have been conducted from psychological or sociological perspectives, with comparatively little attention to the linguistic dimensions of the phenomenon. The application of CDA to cyberbullying in African educational contexts is conspicuously limited. Furthermore, the implications of cyberbullying discourse for English language pedagogy and digital citizenship education in Nigeria have not been systematically examined. This study addresses these three gaps.

The present article aims to examine cyberbullying discourse among Nigerian university students through a Critical Discourse Analysis framework. The study pursues four objectives: to identify and describe the linguistic strategies that characterise cyberbullying interactions among Nigerian university students; to analyse how power relations, identities, and social hierarchies are constructed through these discursive practices; to investigate the ideological assumptions embedded in online cyberbullying discourse; and to discuss the implications of these findings for English language education and digital citizenship development in Nigerian universities.

Four research questions guide the inquiry: (1) What linguistic strategies characterise cyberbullying discourse among Nigerian university students? (2) How are power relations, identities, and social hierarchies constructed through cyberbullying discourse? (3) What ideological assumptions are embedded in online cyberbullying interactions? (4) What implications do these language practices have for English language education and digital citizenship development?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualising Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has been defined and conceptualised in numerous ways across the scholarly literature, reflecting the heterogeneity of its forms and the disciplinary diversity of its researchers. The foundational definition offered by Hinduja and Patchin (2014, p. 11) describes it as wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones and other electronic devices. This definition emphasises three core elements: intentionality, repetition and harm, each of which has been contested and refined in subsequent scholarship. Kowalski et al. (2019) argue that the criterion of repetition requires reconsideration in digital contexts, since a single act of posting humiliating content may be viewed and reshared innumerable times, producing repeated harm without repeated action by the original perpetrator. Slonje et al. (2013) similarly observe that the power imbalance central to traditional bullying theory takes distinctive forms online, where technical skill, network size, and anonymity all function as sources of dominance.

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying share a family resemblance in their core dynamics of power asymmetry, intentionality and repetition, but they diverge in crucial respects. Physical proximity is irrelevant to cyberbullying, which can reach victims regardless of location or time. The anonymity afforded by digital environments lowers inhibitions and emboldens aggressors who might refrain from face-to-face confrontation (Suler, 2004). The audience for cyberbullying can extend far beyond the immediate social network of the victim, as content spreads across platforms with minimal friction. Tokunaga (2010), in a synthesis of early cyberbullying research, identifies these structural features as fundamentally altering the social dynamics of peer aggression. Common forms of

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cyberbullying documented in the literature include flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion and cyberstalking (Willard, 2007).

2.2 Cyberbullying in Higher Education

While early cyberbullying research focused predominantly on adolescents in secondary school settings, a growing body of work has examined the phenomenon in higher education. Watts et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of cyberbullying among university students and found prevalence rates ranging from 10% to 40% across different studies and measurement instruments. Schenk and Fremouw (2012) documented significant psychological consequences for university student victims, including depression, anxiety and academic disengagement. The social dynamics of university campuses, combining intense peer competition, emerging adult identity formation and relatively limited institutional oversight, create conditions conducive to cyberbullying.

African perspectives on cyberbullying in higher education remain comparatively underdeveloped, though the literature is growing. Chisanga and Maphalala (2020) examined cyberbullying among university students in southern Africa, noting that ethnic and linguistic differences frequently provided the raw material for online harassment. Abiodun-Eniitan and Babalola (2021) surveyed Nigerian undergraduates and found that WhatsApp was the platform most commonly associated with cyberbullying experiences, followed by Facebook and Instagram. Ojedokun and Eraye (2019) raised concerns about the inadequacy of Nigerian legal frameworks for addressing online harassment, arguing that victims often have little recourse when institutional reporting channels fail.

2.3 Language and Online Aggression

The relationship between language and online aggression has attracted considerable scholarly attention since the emergence of computer-mediated communication as a research domain. Herring (2007) identified flaming, defined as the use of hostile, insulting or profane language in online interactions, as one of the earliest documented forms of antisocial online communication. Subsequent research has expanded the taxonomy of aggressive online language to include verbal abuse, hate speech, mockery, humiliation, threatening discourse and exclusionary language practices. Each of these forms involves distinct linguistic mechanisms and serves different social and psychological functions.

Name-calling and derogatory labelling represent perhaps the most direct form of linguistic aggression in cyberbullying interactions. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) observe that identity categories invoked in derogatory terms function not merely as descriptors but as social weapons that position their targets as deviant, inferior or undeserving of respect. In Nigerian online contexts, derogatory terms frequently draw on ethnic, religious, gendered and socioeconomic stereotypes, indexing the multiple dimensions of social difference that characterise Nigerian society (Akande, 2021). Humour, sarcasm, and irony represent more indirect forms of linguistic aggression, sometimes described as indirect aggression (Bjorkqvist, 2018). These strategies allow aggressors to inflict harm while maintaining plausible deniability, claiming that their words were simply jokes when confronted. Threatening discourse in cyberbullying contexts, as Matsuda (2003) argues, constitutes a form of violence regardless of whether physical harm is ever enacted, because it creates fear and undermines the target's sense of security in shared social spaces.

2.4 Identity and Digital Communication

Identity construction in digital environments is a well-established area of inquiry in discourse studies and computer-mediated communication research. Turkle (1995) argued that the internet provided individuals with opportunities to explore and construct multiple identities, yet subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that online identity construction is constrained by social norms, platform affordances and peer surveillance. Georgakopoulou (2017) emphasises that digital discourse involves the strategic curation of self-presentation, in which individuals manage how they are perceived by different audiences across different platforms.

Within the Nigerian academic context specifically, Barkindo and Abdurashied (2026) extend this line of inquiry to non-interactive digital micro-texts, examining how identity, belief and stance are pragmatically constructed in WhatsApp "About" profile texts among members of an academic community at the Federal University of Education, Zaria. The study finds that identity is projected selectively through professional labels, moral positioning and aspirational self-representation, with religious belief functioning as a dominant pragmatic resource that signals communal affiliation rather than mere personal devotion. This work is directly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that identity construction in Nigerian digital spaces is deeply shaped by religious and socio-cultural values, suggesting that cyberbullying discourse operating in the same environments will readily exploit precisely these identity dimensions as vectors of targeted aggression.

In cyberbullying contexts, identity construction takes on a particularly consequential dimension. Aggressors actively construct the identities of their victims in degrading terms, positioning them as incompetent, immoral or socially inferior. Victims, in turn, may internalise these constructions or engage in identity repair work through counter-narratives. The gendered dimensions of cyberbullying discourse have been extensively documented: women are disproportionately targeted with sexual insults, body shaming and threats related to their appearance, while men are more commonly subjected to challenges to their competence, authority or masculinity (Citron, 2016; Jane, 2017). In the Nigerian context, Adegbiya (1994) noted the pragmatic significance of

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ethnicity in communicative practices and this observation extends to digital communication, where ethnic and religious identities constitute powerful fault lines along which online aggression frequently operates.

2.5 Digital Citizenship and Education

Digital citizenship has emerged as a central concept in educational policy and practice globally, encompassing the responsible, ethical and critically informed use of digital technologies. Ribble (2015) identifies nine elements of digital citizenship, including digital access, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, and digital health and wellness. Within this framework, responsible online communication and respectful engagement with others are understood as core competencies that need to be explicitly taught and cultivated.

Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) argue that digital literacy must extend beyond technical proficiency to encompass critical awareness of the social, political and ethical dimensions of digital participation. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) similarly contend that new literacies for the digital age require skills of critical evaluation, ethical reflection and participatory engagement that are not automatically acquired through technology use alone. In the Nigerian context, Adomi and Anie (2006) documented digital access challenges, but subsequent research has emphasised that the expansion of mobile internet access has not automatically produced digital citizens capable of ethical online engagement. Curriculum frameworks in Nigerian universities have been slow to incorporate systematic digital citizenship education, leaving a significant gap between students' extensive online activity and their capacity for ethical self-regulation in digital spaces.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study rests primarily on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which offers a rigorous and multidimensional framework for examining the relationship between language, power and social practice. CDA is not a monolithic methodology but a family of approaches united by the commitment to examining discourse as socially constitutive and as a site where power relations are enacted, legitimised and contested (Fairclough, 1989, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The choice of CDA is motivated by its capacity to move between the granular details of textual production and the broader social and ideological structures within which texts are embedded, a movement essential for understanding cyberbullying as simultaneously a linguistic phenomenon and a social problem.

Central to Fairclough's framework is the concept of discourse as a form of social practice rather than a mere reflection of pre-existing social realities. Language, in this view, does not simply describe the world but actively constructs social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 2003). This constructivist perspective is directly relevant to cyberbullying: the derogatory labels, threatening rhetoric and humiliating narratives deployed by cyberbullies do not merely report on social hierarchies but actively produce and reinforce them. When a Nigerian university student is publicly labelled with an ethnic slur in a WhatsApp group, that act of language does not simply reflect existing prejudice; it performs prejudice, calls the victim's identity into question and reproduces the ideological framework within which such slurs carry meaning.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model provides the operational structure for the analysis in this study. The first dimension, textual analysis, attends to the linguistic features of discourse: vocabulary, grammar, syntax, metaphor, modality and intertextual reference. At this level, the analysis examines the specific words, phrases, and syntactic structures through which cyberbullying is enacted, asking questions about lexical choices, semantic fields, pronoun use and the deployment of figurative language. The second dimension, discursive practice, examines the processes of text production, distribution and consumption. In digital contexts, this encompasses the platform affordances that shape how content is created and shared, the norms of genre and interaction that govern online communication and the intertextual chains through which messages are amplified, repurposed and decontextualised. The third dimension, social practice, situates discourse within broader social structures and cultural contexts, examining how discursive practices both reflect and reproduce the social relations, ideologies and power hierarchies of the society in which they occur.

The framework is complemented by insights from Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA, which foregrounds the role of social cognition in linking individual discursive acts to broader social ideologies (van Dijk, 2015). Van Dijk's concept of the ideological square, the systematic tendency to emphasise the positive attributes of the in-group and the negative attributes of the out-group, is particularly relevant to cyberbullying discourse that targets individuals on the basis of ethnic, religious or gendered identities. The discursive construction of victims as inferior, deviant, or deserving of contempt draws on and reinforces precisely these kinds of ideologically organised social cognitions.

Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of power as diffuse, relational and constitutive rather than solely repressive (Foucault, 1977) provides a further theoretical resource for understanding how power operates in cyberbullying discourse. Rather than locating power exclusively in institutional structures or dominant social groups, Foucault's framework draws attention to the micro-level power dynamics enacted in everyday communicative practices, including the capacity of apparently casual online exchanges to discipline, normalise and marginalise. Foucault's concept of surveillance is also directly relevant to digital contexts, where social media platforms create conditions of pervasive visibility that render individuals subject to the evaluative gaze of their peers. Digital

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discourse studies (Herring, 2007; Georgakopoulou, 2017; Zappavigna, 2012) further contribute methodological and conceptual tools for analysing computer-mediated communication, ensuring that the analysis remains sensitive to the distinctive features of digital interaction.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design guided by a Critical Discourse Analytical approach. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for the investigation of cyberbullying discourse because it enables the researcher to engage with the meanings, strategies and ideological dimensions of language use in their full complexity, rather than reducing them to quantifiable variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The CDA approach, as developed by Fairclough (2003), prescribes a methodology that moves iteratively between textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and social critique, and this iterative movement guides the analytic procedures adopted in the study.

4.2 Data Sources

The data for this study were drawn from multiple digital platforms to ensure representativeness across the diverse social media ecology of Nigerian university students. The platforms selected include WhatsApp group conversations associated with student cohorts and social clubs at Nigerian universities, Facebook posts and comment threads on student community pages, X (formerly Twitter) exchanges involving Nigerian university students, Instagram comment threads and posts on student online forums. The rationale for including multiple platforms reflects the recognition that cyberbullying discourse does not occur uniformly across digital environments; different platforms have distinct communicative norms, affordances and audience configurations that shape the forms and intensities of aggressive language use. A corpus of 87 cyberbullying interactions was assembled, representing a range of platforms, interaction lengths and thematic foci.

4.3 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed to select texts that explicitly contained cyberbullying content involving Nigerian university students. The selection criteria required that texts demonstrate at least one of the following features: derogatory labelling directed at an identifiable individual or group; threatening or intimidating language; deliberate humiliation or mockery; exclusionary discourse; or sustained patterns of hostile interaction. Texts were sourced through a combination of researcher observation of public platforms, referrals from student informants who encountered cyberbullying in their digital environments and the researcher's own records of publicly accessible posts. The corpus was reviewed and coded in three passes: an initial pass to identify broad thematic categories, a second pass to apply Fairclough's textual analytical categories and a third pass to situate the identified discursive patterns within their social and ideological contexts.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Data Collection

Ethical rigour was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process. All identifying information, including usernames, real names, institutional affiliations and any details that could enable the identification of individuals, was anonymised prior to analysis and presentation. Where data were drawn from private or semi-private platforms such as WhatsApp groups, the consent of group members was obtained through a group administrator, who circulated an information sheet explaining the study's purposes and procedures. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw their data at any time without consequence. For publicly accessible posts on Facebook, X and Instagram, the guidance of the British Psychological Society (2021) on internet-mediated research was followed, with texts treated as public discourse and anonymised accordingly.

4.5 Data Analysis

The analysis was guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model, applied in a systematic but interpretively flexible manner. At the textual level, the analysis attended to lexical choice, semantic fields, modality markers, pronoun use, figurative language and intertextual reference. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis examined patterns of text production and distribution, the genre conventions invoked by participants and the ways in which texts circulated and were repurposed across platforms. At the level of social practice, the analysis drew on contextual knowledge of Nigerian university culture, social hierarchies and ideological currents to interpret the broader significance of the identified discursive patterns. An inter-rater reliability check was conducted with a second trained discourse analyst, who independently coded a subset of 20 interactions. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until full agreement was reached, yielding a Cohen's kappa coefficient of .84, indicating strong reliability.

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5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Insults, Name-Calling and Derogatory Labelling

Perhaps the most pervasive linguistic strategy identified in the corpus is the deployment of derogatory labels and insults to demean, shame and marginalise targeted individuals. These labels draw on multiple semantic fields, including references to intellectual inadequacy, physical appearance, sexual behaviour and social status, and they frequently co-occur within single utterances, compounding their affective impact. The following extract, drawn from a WhatsApp group conversation among students at a Nigerian university, illustrates this pattern:

Extract 1: "You are just a local champion, no sense, no class. Go back to your village and stop disgracing us with your grammar." At the textual level, this utterance deploys the term "local champion" as a compound insult that simultaneously marks the target as geographically and culturally peripheral ("local"), delusionally over-confident ("champion") and socially unrefined. The phrase "no sense, no class" enacts a grammatical parallelism that intensifies the cumulative force of the denigration, while the imperative "go back to your village" spatially excludes the target from the university community. The phrase "disgracing us with your grammar" introduces a metalinguistic dimension, positioning the target's language use as a source of collective shame, a particularly cutting judgment in an academic context where standard English proficiency functions as a marker of social and intellectual capital.

Fairclough's textual analysis reveals here a constellation of ideological assumptions: that regional or rural origin is a mark of inferiority, that grammatical competence is a proxy for intelligence and social worth and that certain students are entitled to police the boundaries of linguistic belonging within the university community. These assumptions draw on and reproduce the broader socioeconomic hierarchies of Nigerian society, in which urban, educated and cosmopolitan identities are coded as superior. Van Dijk's (2015) ideological square is operative here: the in-group is constructed as possessing sense, class and proper grammar, while the target is positioned as lacking all three. This form of derogatory labelling, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005) observe, accomplishes identity work through categorisation, constructing social personas that carry enduring reputational consequences.

Theme 2: Identity Construction and Social Positioning

Cyberbullying discourse among the students in the corpus is systematically engaged in the construction of social positions and identities, assigning roles of aggressor, victim and bystander through discursive acts that exceed mere description. The data reveal a consistent pattern in which victims are constructed as figures of ridicule, contempt or moral failure, while aggressors position themselves as enforcers of group norms or defenders of collective standards. The following exchange, from a Facebook comment thread on a university student page, illustrates this dynamic:

Extract 2: "She posted her result thinking we'd congratulate her. Please, we all know how she got that A. Some people have no shame. Tag your sugar daddy next time."

This utterance constructs the target's academic achievement as fraudulent and her behaviour as shameless, simultaneously positioning the aggressor as a moral arbiter who sees through the pretence. The directive "tag your sugar daddy next time" invokes a stereotypical narrative about female students exchanging sexual favours for academic grades, a narrative widely circulated in Nigerian university culture that serves to police women's academic ambitions through sexual insinuation. The text is framed as addressed to a collective audience ("we all know"), interpellating bystanders into complicity with the denigrating construction and discouraging dissent through the assumption of shared knowledge.

At the level of discursive practice, this extract exemplifies what Citron (2016) terms "cyber harassment as silencing speech": the attack does not merely insult the target but works to discredit her voice and achievement, rendering her future contributions to the community suspect. Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power is illuminating here: the cyberbullying act functions as a mechanism of social regulation, warning other women that academic success without the appropriate credentials of modesty and conformity will be met with public shaming. The extract thus operates not merely at the level of individual interpersonal hostility but as a technology of gender regulation within the discursive community.

Theme 3: Power Relations and Symbolic Violence

The exercise of power through language is a defining feature of cyberbullying discourse and the data contain numerous instances in which linguistic dominance, intimidation, and the deployment of social capital function as instruments of symbolic violence. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic violence, the exercise of power through misrecognised and apparently consensual cultural forms, is directly applicable to contexts in which cyberbullying draws on shared cultural assumptions to inflict harm that is not always recognised as such by its perpetrators or audiences. The following extract, from a university X (Twitter) thread, illustrates the exercise of power through social positioning:

Extract 3: "Before you talk, ask yourself who you are here. We founded this department. Your scholarship cannot save you from knowing your place. Respect hierarchy."

This text constructs the speaker as belonging to a founding cohort with a legitimate claim to authority, invokes the target's scholarship as a marker of subordinate social position and demands deference through the imperative "respect hierarchy." The phrase

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"knowing your place" draws explicitly on hierarchical social logic, asserting that the target has violated an implicit social order by speaking without first acknowledging their position within it. At the textual level, the modality of the imperatives performs the authority it claims, enacting power through the grammatical form of command.

Van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive framework helps illuminate the ideological underpinning of this exchange: the cognitive schema that organises social reality into hierarchies of seniority and institutional privilege and that naturalises deference to those with longer institutional tenure. The reference to scholarship as a disqualifying marker reveals the class dimensions of this power performance, aligning financial need with social inferiority in a way that reproduces socioeconomic hierarchies within the academic community. Fairclough's (2003) concept of hegemony, drawn from Gramsci, is instructive here: the text works to naturalise a particular social order as self-evident and non-negotiable, rendering resistance to it a violation of common sense rather than a legitimate challenge to unjust hierarchy.

Theme 4: Gendered Cyberbullying Discourse

The data reveal markedly gendered patterns in cyberbullying discourse, with women targeted predominantly through sexual insinuation, body shaming and challenges to their moral reputation, while men are more commonly subjected to attacks on their competence, authority and masculinity. These patterns are consistent with international research on gendered online harassment (Jane, 2017; Citron, 2016) but take distinctively Nigerian cultural forms that reflect local gender ideologies and social expectations. The following extract, from an Instagram comment thread, illustrates the targeting of a female student:

Extract 4: "Why are you posting your picture here? Nobody asked. Not even fine, just cheap. Some girls really have no self-respect. Desperate for attention."

The vocabulary of this extract, particularly the terms "cheap" and "no self-respect," invokes a moral economy of female behaviour in which women's public visibility and self-presentation are subject to collective evaluation and regulation. The term "cheap" in Nigerian English carries specific connotations of sexual availability and moral laxity, rendering the attack simultaneously a judgment on the target's appearance and a challenge to her sexual reputation. The framing of the post as uninvited and unwanted ("nobody asked") positions the target's very act of self-expression as an imposition, effectively denying her the right to occupy the shared digital space without male approval.

From a CDA perspective, this extract enacts what Jane (2017) calls a form of online misogyny that combines contempt, sexual aggression and rhetorical dismissal. The discursive construction of the target as cheap and desperate reproduces a patriarchal ideology in which women's worth is measured by their appearance and moral conformity to prescribed standards of feminine behaviour. The gendered dimension of this cyberbullying is structural rather than incidental: it draws on and reinforces a gender ideology that circulates widely in Nigerian public discourse, lending it social legitimacy and cultural intelligibility.

Theme 5: Ethnic, Religious and Socioeconomic Representations

Ethnic and religious identities constitute significant axes of cyberbullying discourse in the Nigerian university context, reflecting the broader salience of these identities in Nigerian political and social life. The corpus contains numerous instances in which individuals are targeted through stereotypical ethnic or religious constructions, with the bullying serving to reinforce in-group solidarity at the expense of out-group members. The following extract, from a university WhatsApp group conversation, illustrates ethnic-based cyberbullying:

Extract 5: "That is a typical Northerner for you. No original thought. Just reciting what their sheikh told them. We are in a university not a madrassa."

This utterance deploys an ethnic and religious stereotype, constructing "Northerners" as intellectually passive, religiously doctrinaire and culturally incompatible with university education. The contrast drawn between "university" and "madrassa" invokes a binary opposition between modernity and tradition, secular reason and religious authority, that positions Islamic education as antithetical to academic inquiry. At the textual level, the generalising construction "typical Northerner" performs an act of categorisation that collapses individual difference into stereotypical essence, denying the target the status of a complex social actor.

Van Dijk's (2015) concept of the ideological square is particularly visible here: the in-group is implicitly constructed as possessing original thought and belonging naturally in the university, while the out-group is denied these qualities and implicitly excluded from the community of legitimate scholars. The political dimensions of this discourse are significant in the Nigerian context, where tensions between different ethno-religious communities have historically shaped patterns of privilege and exclusion in higher education. The cyberbullying act thus functions not merely as individual hostility but as a discursive reproduction of interethnic and interreligious ideology.

Theme 6: Humour, Sarcasm and Indirect Aggression

A distinctive feature of cyberbullying discourse in the corpus is the strategic use of humour, sarcasm and irony as vehicles for indirect aggression. These strategies allow aggressors to inflict harm while maintaining deniability, appealing to the social

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convention that humour should not be taken seriously. The following extract, from an X thread involving university students, illustrates this pattern:

Extract 6: "Congratulations to our distinguished coursemate on being nominated for the academic excellence award. We all know what excellence means these days, don't we?"

The surface form of this utterance is congratulatory, yet its meaning is entirely undercut by the ironic framing of "we all know what excellence means these days," which invites the audience to supply a sceptical interpretation of the target's achievement. The use of "distinguished" is transparently ironic, deploying elevated register to mock rather than to honour. This form of indirect aggression exemplifies what Bjorkqvist (2018) terms relational aggression, targeting the victim's social reputation and relationships rather than their direct emotional state. The deployment of irony allows the aggressor to claim innocence if confronted, yet the communicative impact on the target may be equally damaging as more direct forms of attack.

From a discursive practice perspective, ironic cyberbullying exploits the affordances of social media platforms, which preserve content for extended periods and allow it to accumulate additional meanings through likes, shares and comment threads. A sarcastically framed congratulation that receives numerous likes from mutual contacts communicates a powerful social message about the target's standing within the community, even if each individual act of liking might be explained away as trivial. This is precisely the kind of ambient harassment described by Citron (2016) that leaves victims unable to point to a single unambiguous act of aggression while experiencing the cumulative effect of a hostile social environment.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

6.1 Implications for English Language Education

The findings of this study carry significant implications for English language education in Nigerian universities. The cyberbullying discourse examined reveals that students possess varying degrees of pragmatic competence in English and that the absence of explicit instruction in the ethical and social dimensions of language use may contribute to the normalisation of harmful communicative practices. Pragmatic competence, understood as the ability to use language appropriately, ethically and with sensitivity to its social consequences (Kasper & Rose, 2002), is not typically foregrounded in traditional English language curricula, which have historically prioritised grammatical accuracy and rhetorical skill over the ethical and social dimensions of communication. This study underscores the need for a broader conceptualisation of pragmatic competence that encompasses the recognition of harmful speech acts, the capacity to evaluate the social consequences of language choices and the development of communicative empathy.

Critical language awareness (CLA), as theorised by Fairclough (1992) and developed by subsequent scholars, offers a particularly relevant pedagogical orientation for addressing cyberbullying discourse in English language education. CLA involves developing students' capacity to reflect on the ideological assumptions embedded in language, to recognise how language constructs power relations and social identities and to exercise informed choices about their own language use. Incorporating CLA into English language teaching at the university level would enable students to engage analytically with the kinds of discourse encountered in this study, understanding how derogatory labels construct social hierarchies, how ironic aggression operates through linguistic indirection and how gendered and ethnic stereotypes are reproduced through apparently casual language use.

Curriculum developers in Nigerian universities should consider integrating units on language, power and digital communication into existing English language and communication skills courses. Such units could draw on authentic examples of online discourse, including cyberbullying interactions, as teaching texts for critical linguistic analysis. This approach would serve the dual purpose of developing students' analytical skills and raising their awareness of the real-world consequences of harmful language practices. Additionally, language educators can play a role in promoting digital communication skills, equipping students with the rhetorical and communicative tools for constructive, respectful, and effective participation in online communities.

6.2 Implications for Digital Citizenship Education

The findings call for systematic attention to digital citizenship education within Nigerian university curricula. As the data demonstrate, students are highly active digital communicators, yet their online practices frequently reproduce harmful ideologies and contribute to hostile social environments. Digital citizenship education, as conceptualised by Ribble (2015) and extended by Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010), provides a framework for developing the ethical, critical and participatory competencies that responsible online engagement requires. In the Nigerian context, such education must be culturally responsive, engaging with the specific social tensions, identity categories and communicative norms that shape online interaction among Nigerian students.

Universities should establish clear institutional policies on cyberbullying that are communicated to students at the beginning of their enrolment and that are consistently enforced. Reporting mechanisms should be accessible, transparent and trusted, and responses to cyberbullying incidents should include educational components rather than being exclusively punitive. Training for academic staff in recognising and responding to cyberbullying is equally important, as is the provision of support services for students who have

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been victimised. The development of peer digital citizenship programmes, in which trained student ambassadors model and promote ethical online communication, represents a promising complementary approach.

At the policy level, the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Federal Ministry of Education should incorporate digital citizenship as a required component of the undergraduate general studies curriculum. Such a mandate would ensure that all Nigerian university students, regardless of their discipline or institution, receive structured education in responsible digital communication, online safety, digital empathy and civic responsibility in virtual communities. Collaboration with technology platforms operating in Nigeria to develop locally relevant educational resources and reporting mechanisms represents an additional avenue for institutional action.

The findings suggest that digital citizenship education in Nigeria must engage directly with the intersecting dimensions of ethnicity, religion, gender and socioeconomic status that structure online aggression. Generic programmes that address cyberbullying as an abstract phenomenon without attending to its specific cultural and social embedding are unlikely to achieve meaningful behavioural change. Contextually situated, critically informed education that names and analyses the specific forms of prejudice and power that operate in Nigerian cyberbullying discourse is more likely to cultivate the reflective, empathetic and ethically engaged digital citizens that Nigerian universities require.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has examined cyberbullying discourse among Nigerian university students through the lens of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, with the aim of uncovering the linguistic strategies, power relations and ideological assumptions embedded in online bullying interactions. The analysis identified six major themes: derogatory labelling and insult practices, identity construction and social positioning, the exercise of power through symbolic violence, gendered cyberbullying discourse, ethnic and religious stereotyping and the deployment of humour and sarcasm as indirect aggression. Across these themes, the study demonstrated that cyberbullying is not merely a matter of individual rudeness or interpersonal conflict but a discursive phenomenon through which broader social ideologies are reproduced, social hierarchies are enforced and the identities of marginalised students are constructed in demeaning and harmful terms.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in its application of a rigorous CDA framework to cyberbullying discourse in a Nigerian university context, demonstrating the productivity of Fairclough's three-dimensional model for illuminating the multiple levels at which online aggression operates: the textual, the discursive and the social. The integration of van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective and Foucault's conceptualisation of power enriches the analytical framework and enables a more nuanced account of the ideological dimensions of the data. The study also contributes to the growing, but still limited, literature on cyberbullying in African higher education, providing a linguistically grounded analysis that complements the predominantly psychological and sociological perspectives that have characterised existing Nigerian research.

The educational implications of the findings are substantial. English language educators in Nigerian universities are encouraged to adopt critical language awareness frameworks that engage students in analytical reflection on the social and ideological dimensions of language use, with digital discourse providing rich material for such reflection. Curriculum developers and university administrators should work toward the systematic integration of digital citizenship education into undergraduate programmes, developing locally relevant, culturally responsive frameworks that address the specific forms of online aggression that Nigerian students encounter. Policy makers at the national level should consider mandating digital citizenship components in general studies curricula and establishing clear institutional guidelines for the prevention and response to cyberbullying.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. Comparative analyses examining cyberbullying discourse across different Nigerian universities and across regional, ethnic, and gender lines, would extend the empirical base of the field. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in cyberbullying discourse in response to institutional interventions would provide valuable evidence for policy and practice. Research into the experiences of cyberbullying victims, including the psychological and academic consequences of targeted online aggression and into the perspectives of bystanders who witness but do not intervene in cyberbullying incidents, would complement the discursive focus of the present study. The development and evaluation of specific educational interventions designed to reduce cyberbullying and promote digital citizenship in Nigerian university settings represents a particularly important and practically consequential research agenda for future scholars in this field.

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