



Relationship between Childhood Emotional Abuse, Parental Care and Cyber Aggression among undergraduates.

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ABSTRACT

*The study examined the relationship between childhood emotional abuse, parental care, and cyber aggression. One hundred and fifty-three (153) undergraduates participated in the study. They included 95 males and 58 females whose ages ranged from 18-31 years (mean age: 22.28; std: 2.91). A mixed sampling design involving simple random and incidental samplings was used to select the departments and undergraduates that participated in the study. Three instruments (cyber aggression typology questionnaire, parental care sub-scale of parental bonding and childhood emotional abuse subscale of childhood trauma questionnaire) were used to collect data for the study. The study adopted a correlational design and simple linear regression statistics for data analysis. The result of the first finding showed that childhood emotional abuse positively and significantly correlated with cyber aggression ($r = .68^{**}$, $P < .01$). The result further showed that childhood emotional abuse positively and significantly predicted cyber-aggression ($\beta = 1.39^{**}$, $p < .01$). The second finding revealed that parental care negatively and significantly correlated with cyber aggression ($r = -.28^{**}$, $P < .01$). The result further showed that parental Care negatively and significantly predicted cyber-aggression ($\beta = -.37^*$, $p < .05$). This indicated that childhood emotional abuse and parental care could contribute to the increase and reduction of cyber aggression. The results may instigate understanding, planning and designing programmes for the prevention of cyber-aggressive behaviours.*

Keywords: *childhood emotional abuse, parental care and Cyber aggression*

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Introduction

Cyber aggression is an endemic global challenge that affects all societies in the world. Cyber-aggression among the youth is on the increase daily but it can be managed. It has been observed that many youths and undergraduates at one particular time or the other are involved in cyber-aggressive behaviours while others may be the victims (Mardianto, et al., 2021, Vale, et al., 2018). This cyber aggression can be in the form of spreading hate messages through internet media and social networking sites, content creation through websites, blogs, and instant online messages through apps such as Facebook, and WhatsApp. Research evidence has shown that cyber-aggression seems more significant than traditional aggression attacks primarily because these online platforms are used for quick and efficient dissemination of damaging rumours, gossip, or attacks on others (Cassidy, et al., 2018). Researchers have shown also that perpetrators and victims of cyber-aggressive behaviours experience mental health problems (Elinoff, et al., 2017; Mishna, et al., 2018). In the field of psychology and education, the problem of cyber aggression has continued to raise concerns among professionals. The victims may also be re-exposed to the harassment because a one-time upload of a picture or post can be persistently viewed thereby resulting in endless humiliation and shame for the target (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Zhang, et al., 2022; Lo Moro, et al., 2023). The victims may be presented with problems like refusal to go to school, somatic issues, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Borg, 2018; Katiala-Heino et. al., 1999). However, undergraduates' perpetrators of cyber-aggressive behaviours may demonstrate poor psychosocial functioning along with poor school achievement, weaker prosocial skills, and diminished psychological wellbeing (Wang, et al., 2019; Lo Moro, et al., 2023).

Cyber-aggression is the deliberate harm to other internet users to assert one's significance (Gini, et al., 2017). O'Moore, and Minton, (2019) reported that cyber-aggression differs from "face-to-face" aggression significantly, determined by the peculiarities of the internet space. On the other hand, there are several psychological peculiarities of online communication such as anonymity and distorted feedback, which contribute to decreasing self-censorship and increasing the number of aggressive actions as well as underestimating the harm to a victim (Bochaver, & Hlomov, 2017; Pornari, & Wood, 2016). Moreover, cyber-aggression is less visible to parents and lecturers, and undergraduates feel freer to demonstrate aggressive actions on the internet (Goldstein, 2015; Soldatova, et al., 2017). Cyber-aggression manifests in various forms of online behaviour such as sending humiliating messages, public insults, spreading rumours and damaging personal photos (Corcoran, et al, 2015).

These actions could be aimed at causing the victim to have negative emotions (proactive cyber-aggression) or at responding to the victim's provocative behaviour (reactive cyber-aggression) (Dooley, et al., 2019). Runions, (2018), describes the cyber-aggression of undergraduates by clarifying their motivational goals (appetitive or aversive cyber-aggression) and abilities to behavioural self-control (impulsive or controlled cyber-aggression). This model suggests four forms of cyber-aggression in adolescence: rage (an impulsive-aversive form of cyber aggression), revenge (controlled aversive form of cyber aggression), rest (impulsive-appetitive form of cyber-aggression) and waiting for a reward (controlled-appetitive form of cyber-aggression) (Runions, et al, 2016). Impulsive forms of cyber-aggression probably decrease with undergraduates growing up, while controlled forms of cyber-aggression persist and obtain defensive functions (Soldatova *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, according to attachment theory by Bowlby, (1953), the theory asserts that the bond between a child and the caregiver heavily impacts the child's later relationships and developments. This implies that a child that is not properly taken care of may develop a relationship that is not cordial which may lead to aggressive behaviours later in life. There are many psychological and social factors (parental style, peer relationship, personality, violent computer games and neighbourhood disorder etc) that may cause cyber aggression and no single research can explore all the factors. Therefore, within the scope of this present research, two independent factors (childhood emotional abuse and parental care) which may be classified as environmental factors as suggested by empirical research (Wang et al., 2018) were considered as possible predictors of cyber-aggression

Childhood emotional abuse is a phenomenon that happens when a person who is responsible for raising and supervising a child accuses, threatens, despises, insults, or isolates the child and therefore fails to meet his/her emotional needs before the child becomes an adult (Silva et al, 2014). Studies have illustrated that the more emotional abuse experienced by an individual, the more aggressive behaviors the individual can engage in (Auslander, et al., 2016). Child emotional abuse can occur in conjunction with physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect and is one of the hardest forms of abuse to recognize. Often it is subtle and dangerous, slowly chipping away at the child's self-esteem and sense of security and belonging (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Lippard et al., (2020) reported that perpetrators of child abuse manipulate and control the child by using words and actions that are emotionally hurtful and damaging which includes increased rates of disease and mental health disorders. The experience of early childhood abuse is a serious menace to an individual's sense of safety, fulfillment, and self-reliance (Wang et al, 2018). It can delay the psychological development of a child and lead to an inability to properly develop their self-concept. Such experiences of abuse tend to be related to mood regulation disorders, in which social information cannot be processed accurately and properly, and hostile attribution bias in cognitive processing results in more aggressive behaviors during social communication (Wang et al, 2018).

Previously, many researchers have demonstrated that emotional abuse is the most significant high-risk factor that leads to individual aggressive behavior and is an effective index for predicting aggressive behavior (Gay, et al.; 2013; Wang et al., 2018). Studies have shown also that childhood emotional abuse has an impact on aggressive behavior; however, the mechanism by which it leads to individuals' cyber-aggressive behavior remains unknown and thus needs further research

Another variable of interest in this study is parental care. Parental care is an emotional experience of caring, nurturance, concern, or simply the love of parents for their adolescents (Rohner, 2007 as cited in Abege, 2014). Parental care is any form of parental behaviour or non-genetic contribution by a parent that increases the fitness of the offspring and can occur before or after birth (Stahlschmidt & DeNardo, 2011; Gonzalez-Voyer, 2010). Gonzalez-Voyer, (2010), explain also that parental care involves care of the young inside or outside the parent's body, provisioning of the young before and after birth and care of the offspring after nutritional independence. Okeke, and Anierobi, (2020) researched parental attachment and aggressive behaviours among in-school adolescents in Anambra state. The finding of the study revealed that secure parent-child attachment has no positive relationship with aggressive behaviours in adolescents. In another study, Lakhdir, et al.(2020) conducted a study with 5,192 Pakistani school-going adolescents on the effect of parent-child relationship on physical aggression among adolescents. The finding of this research revealed that male adolescents who have a poor bond with their parents had two times the prevalence of physical aggression than those female adolescents with strong parent-child bonding.

Muarifah, et al. (2022) examined the role of mother-child attachment and self-esteem against aggression with 730 high school students. The study showed that insecure attachment positively and significantly affected aggression and negatively and significantly affected self-esteem. Muarifah, et al. (2022) study revealed also that anxious attachment positively and significantly influenced aggression and negatively and significantly influenced self-esteem while self-esteem negatively and significantly affected aggression. Maalouf *et al.* (2022) investigated the association between attachment dimensions and anger expression (trait anger, hostility, physical aggression, and verbal aggression) among a sample of 1,810 Lebanese high-school students. The results showed that higher fearful and dismissing attachment styles and higher physical activity index were significantly associated with higher physical and verbal aggression. A higher fearful attachment style was significantly associated with more anger. A higher secure attachment style was significantly associated with less anger. Higher preoccupied and dismissing attachment styles were significantly associated with higher hostility. Studies on Parental care contributions to cyber aggression are limited and need further studies.

These reviewed works examined the relationships between emotional abuse, parent-child bonding, aggression and other related variables. Most of the works have been conducted in advanced countries, with limited research in developing countries like Nigeria where the cultural environment differs from what obtains in advanced countries. This present research begins to address this gap by exploring the relationship between childhood emotional abuse, parental care, and cyber aggression among undergraduates. First, it is

hypothesized that childhood emotional abuse will positively and significantly predict cyber aggression among undergraduates. Second, it is hypothesized that parental care will positively and significantly predict cyber aggression among undergraduates

Method

Participants

A Mixed sampling procedure which adopted a simple random sampling technique and incidental sampling method was adopted to collect data from 153 undergraduates (95 males, 58 females) from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria participated in this study. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 31 years with a mean age of 22.28 years (SD = 2.91).

Instruments

Three instruments were used for the study; the cyber aggression typology questionnaire (CATQ) developed by Runions, et al. (2016), the parental care subscale of the parental bonding inventory developed by Parker et al., (1979) and the childhood emotional abuse subscale of the childhood trauma questionnaire developed by Bernstein and Fink (1998).

Cyber-Aggression Typology Questionnaire

Runions, et al. (2016) developed and validated CATQ to measure cyber aggression. CATQ is a 29 items scale scored on four likert format - 1 (not at all true of me) to 4 (very true of me) The scale has four subscales: Impulsive-aversive (12 items), controlled-aversive (6 items), controlled-appetitive (6 items), and impulsive-appetitive (5 items). Runions, et al. (2016), reported internal consistency (cronbach alpha) of CATQ as follows; impulsive-aversive .91, controlled-aversive .82, controlled-appetitive 0.66, impulsive-appetitive 0.89. So, overall CATQ Cronbach alpha of 0.94 was obtained. So CATQ is reliable and valid for use in this study

Emotional Abuse subscale

This is a six item subscale of childhood trauma questionnaire developed and validated by Bernstein and Fink (1998). Emotional abuse subscale of childhood trauma questionnaire was used to measure emotional abuse. A sample item of emotional abuse is (e.g., "People in my family said hurtful or insulting things to me"). Emotional abuse is a six item subscale of childhood trauma questionnaire scored on five likert format – 1 (Never true when they were growing up) to 5 (Very often true when they were growing up). Bernstein and Fink (1998) reported internal consistency (cronbach alpha) of .79 for emotional abuse. The present researcher reported internal consistency (cronbach alpha) of .89 on emotional abuse. Therefore, emotional abuse subscale of childhood trauma questionnaire is reliable and valid for use in this study.

Parental Care subscale

Parental care is a subscale of parental bonding inventory developed and validated by Parker et al., (1979). Parental care subscale of parental bonding Inventory was used to measure parental care as perceived by the child. Parental care is a 12 item subscale of parental bonding inventory scored on four likert format 1 - very like, 2 - moderately like, 3 - moderately unlike and 4 - very unlike. Parker et al. (1979), reported internal consistency reliability estimates (cronbach alpha) of .76 on parental care. So, Parental care subscale of parental bonding inventory is valid and reliable for use in this study.

Procedure

Ethical clearance and approval for the study were obtained at Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State. A mixed sampling procedure which adopted a simple random sampling technique and accidental sampling was used for the study. Simple random sampling was used in selecting the departments while accidental sampling was used in selecting the participants. A total of one hundred and sixty-one (161) participants were incidentally selected from the departments but only one hundred and fifty-three (153) participants completed their measuring instruments, (questionnaires) accurately and were used for the analysis. Three sets of instruments; cyber- aggression typology questionnaire, emotional abuse subscale of childhood trauma questionnaire and Parental care subscale of parental bonding inventory were administered to the consented participants at their lecture halls and the administered instruments were collected immediately after about 50 minutes.

Design and Statistics

Survey research was used in the study. The study adopted a correlational design which permitted the use of linear regression statistics for data analysis.

RESULT

Table 1: Descriptive and Zero Order Matrix Coefficient Statistics of Cyber-Aggression, childhood emotional abuse and Parental care

Variables	Mean	Std.D	1	2	3
1. Cyber-Aggression	69.31	9.24	1.00		
2. Emotional Abuse	16.94	5.03	.68**	1.00	
3. Parntal Care	17.83	2.23	-.28**	.02	1.00

** P<.01, * P,.05

The results in table 1 indicated that a positive and significant relationship exist between childhood emotional abuse and cyber-aggression; r (N=153) = .68**, p <.01, while there is a negative significant relationship existing between parental care and cyber- aggression at r (N=153), -.28**, p <.01.

Table 2: Linear Regression Statistics of Cyber-Aggression, Childhood emotional abuse and Parental care

Variables	R ²	df1(df2)	F	SE	B	T
Model 1	.226	2(150)	21.95	8.18		
Emotional Abuse					1.39**	22.92
Care					-.37*	-5.01

Dependent variable: cyber aggression

** P<.01, * P,.05

The result of table two showed that childhood emotional abuse positively and significantly predicted cyber-aggression at β = 1.39**, p <.01 while parental Care negatively and significantly predicted cyber-aggression at β = -.37*, p <.05

Discussion

In the first finding in this research, table 1 showed that childhood emotional abuse positively and significantly correlated with cyber aggression. This shows that as childhood emotional abuse increases cyber aggression increases and as childhood emotional abuse decreases cyber aggression decreases. This finding revealed also in table 2 that childhood emotional abuse positively and significantly predicted cyber-aggression. This means also that as childhood emotional abuse increases cyber aggression increases and verse versa. This finding is in agreement with the finding of Odacı, and Çelik, (2020) which revealed that traumatic experiences (physical, sexual, emotional maltreatment and emotional neglect) predict risk-taking and aggression. Therefore a child that experienced emotional abuse is likely to engage in cyber aggression and other types of aggressive behaviour in adulthood. Bowlby, (1953) attachment theory is also in agreement with this finding. Bowlby, (1953) attachment theory asserted that the bond a child had with their caregiver early in life heavily affects the child's later relationships with people. This means that undergraduates that were not cared for as a child are likely to develop aggressive behaviours later in life as a result of trauma experienced from caregivers that supposed to care for him /her.

The second finding in table 1 showed that parental care negatively and significantly correlated with cyber aggression. This means that as parental care is decreasing cyber aggression will be increasing and as parental care is increasing cyber aggression will be decreasing. The finding revealed also in table 2 that parental care negatively and significantly predicted cyber-aggression. This means that as parental care decreases cyber-aggression increases, and vice versa. This showed that parental care is a good predictor of cyber-aggression in a negative direction. This finding is in agreement with Ufearo et al. (2022) finding which revealed that parental bonding and availability (communication and supervision) affect aggression. This finding is related also to the findings of Muarifah et al. (2022) which revealed that anxious and insecure bonding positively and significantly influenced aggression and negatively and significantly influenced self-esteem. Bowlby, (1953) attachment theory is also in agreement with this finding. Bowlby, (1953) attachment theory asserted that the bond between a child and their caregiver heavily impacts the child's later relationships, and behaviours (cyber-aggression). This means that undergraduates who were cared for in their childhood are much more likely not to engage in aggression or any form of aggressive behaviours while undergraduates who are emotionally abused as a child are likely to have abnormal social and emotional development that leads to cyber aggression and other related aggressive behaviours.

Implication of the study

This study implies that childhood emotional abuse positively and significantly predicted cyber aggression while Parental care negatively and significantly predicted cyber aggression. This finding also has implications for policymakers. This is because the results may have implications for understanding, planning and designing programs for intervention and prevention of cyber aggressive behaviours and other types of aggressive behaviours. Policymakers should take the variables (childhood emotional abuse and parental care) into consideration as one of the predictors of cyber aggression among youths and undergraduates.

Recommendations

Research efforts should focus in-depth on the issue of cyber aggression and find out other environmental factors that are likely to influence cyber-aggressive behaviours among the youth and undergraduates. Moreover, disciplinary measures should be implemented irrespective of who is involved in cyber-aggressive behaviours. It was recommended also that university management should institute workshops and symposiums yearly on childhood emotional abuse and parental care concerning cyber aggression. Finally, parents, guardians and caregivers should be informed of the dangers of abuse and not caring for children entrusted under their care.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of the study are that the sample size of this study is small due to the time frame for the conduct of this research. Another limitation is that experimental design was not utilized in data collection for this study. Owing to this it lacks temporality of measures and causality was not inferred.

Conclusion

The results have implications for policymakers who work in university management and the Ministry of Education. This implies that childhood emotional abuse and parental care are essential factors in predicting cyber aggression. Therefore, childhood emotional abuse and parental care should be encouraged as environmental factors that are likely to increase or reduce cyber-aggressive behaviours among youths and undergraduates. The findings in this research are hoped to encourage researchers to explore other possible predicting variables that may contribute positively or negatively to predicting cyber-aggressive behaviours. This is because understanding variables that are related to cyber aggression will be of help to those who are interested in solving cyber-aggressive behaviour problems.

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