Cyber-Bullying: Assessment of its Awareness and Threats to Social Media Development

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Abstract

The wake of new media has turned the world into a global village. The internet in recent times, has opened doors for users to connect with people across other parts of the globe. Few can deny the huge technological advancement that are constantly taking place in the modern world. However, this advancement have brought a dramatic shift from what it means to 'chat' and 'socialize' with other people to a whole gamut of development spinning off from cyber related contingency. This study is aimed at assessing cyber-bullying in the context of undergraduate students in Nigeria, their awareness of cyber-bullying and its threat to social media development. A further aim is to establish whether the respondents have been exposed to bullying on any of the social media platforms. Drawing 396 respondents from a population of 38,000 running across four faculties randomly selected from the fourteen faculties in Nnamdi Azikiwe, University, Awka, the study found out that a majority of the respondents own internet-enabled devices, have access to social media sites through their devices and have been exposed to cyber-bullying on these sites at one point in time. The Computer Mediated Communication theory was the basis from which this study drew its framework.

Keyword: Cyber-Bullying; Threats; Social Media Development; Internet-Enabled Devices

Introduction

Over the last few years, the development of the cyber-bullying phenomenon has had a growing impact on the world's media. Scholars such as Ring has referred to it as a shift in behaviour whereby school children employ mobile phones instead of notes to send threatening messages to their fellows. With two out of every three children between the ages of 14 and 16 years having mobile phones, the trend continues to thrive. Although, there are undisputed benefits of the internet and modern communication technologies for young people, it still remains unhealthy if the technological milieu is malignant. The driving belief that engendered this study was the quest to empirically assess cyber bullying, establish undergraduate students' awareness of cyber-bullying, to ascertain their access to social media, whether they have experienced cyber-bullying and whether it poses a threat to the development of social media.

Literature Review

In an article published by the Irish Independent newspaper in 2002, Mr. Murray Smith of the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at Trinity College was asked to comment on the growing issue of 'flaming mail', also known as electronic hate mail. Smith asserted that e-mail was being used as a platform to target victims.

Lisante (2005, p.5) suggests that two main reasons for the rise in online bullying are: (1) the comfort level children and youth have in using the Internet, and (2) the anonymity of the Internet. Students enjoy e-mailing, text messaging, using instant messages, joining chat rooms, and setting up Web sites.

A large number of studies have been conducted to determine the prevalence of cyber-bullying. When asked about their experiences with the internet and related technologies, most young people rate their experiences positively (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008, p.59). Unfortunately, cyber-bullying is "... the by-product of the union of adolescent aggression and electronic communication." (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006, p.131). Consequently, cyber victims are often loathe to report incidents for fear, not of the cyber-bully's retaliation, but of the fear that their access to the technology will be withdrawn as a safety measure (Shariff, 2009).

Patchin and Hinduja (2006, p.152) defined cyber-bullying as 'willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text'. However, one of the most widely accepted definition of

cyber-bullying is that of Bill Belsey (2004) which says that 'Cyber-bullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, which is intended to harm others'.

Cyber-crimes have become as complex as the technology that allows them to be committed, and the sense that one is safe from crime in the privacy of one's home can no longer be relied upon. Cyber-crimes are crimes committed within the ambits of social media and social networking. The risk of cyber-crime is hence extremely prominent; its frequency and the losses that it brings can be huge. Since it is characterized by an inability to detect, punish and prevent offenders, the huge risks that it poses cannot be overemphasized. In other words, cyber-crime is crime committed in a virtual space and a virtual space is fashioned in a way that information about persons, objects, facts, events, phenomena or processes are represented in mathematical, symbol or any other way and transferred through local and global networks. With the assistance of the new media, a criminal would be able to commit his or her crimes with relatively little effort through his or her technological gadgets with an Internet Service Provider.

Percentages of the extent of cyber-bullying victimization vary between 6 (Finkelhor *et al.,* 2000, p.5) and 72 (Juvonen and Gross, 2008, p.496). The lowest percentage found for cyber-bullying perpetration is 4 percent (Kowalski and Limber, 2007, p.23) and this points to the fact that the variety of terms used in measuring and the lack of a standardized operational definition make it extremely difficult to pool results and draw conclusions across the limited studies.

A recent study conducted by Kowalski and Limber (2008, p.129) with students found that 11% of students had been cyber-bullied, 7% had been involved in both bullying and being bullied using cyber methods, and 4% had cyber-bullied another person in the last two months. These results suggest that this type of bullying may be on the rise as 50% of the teenagers in their sample owned a mobile phone, and 97% of students had access to the internet, with a large proportion of these students using electronic devices daily. Li (2007, p.2) also investigated cyber-bullying with 177 grade seven students and found 54% were both bullied and targeted with traditional methods, and a quarter of this group had also been subjected to cyber-bullying. Furthermore, one in three students had bullied another by traditional styles; and 15% had bullied others via technological communication sources.

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Cyber-bullying is not only among school children and adolescents, adults also avail themselves the pettiness of using their phones to appeal to the psyche of a fellow, by sending threats to cause fear and exert negative influence.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical basis for this study is the Computer Mediated Communication theory which analyses various phenomena that arise from the use of the internet for human communication. An interactive definition of Computer Mediated Communication is given as a process of human communication via computers involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes.

This theory focuses on interaction which involves exchange of information in textual, audio and/or video formats that are transmitted and controlled through the use of telecommunication technology and this interaction occurs through the social media sites where users can connect using the computer or mobile devices via the internet.

A theoretical model that can possibly explain cyber-bullying is *online disinhibition effect* (John Suler, 2003). People in cyberspace behave in a way they do not in real life because of the effects of disinhibition, which is a restraint from the normal behaviour due to fear, defense or a need to fit in.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey to examine cyber-bullying, its awareness and threat to social media development. A 19-item questionnaire collected over a 4-week period was structured for the gathering of data on respondents' access to social media networking sites, their awareness and exposure to cyber-bullying and their perception of cyber-bullying as a threat to these social media sites. This research was conducted amongst undergraduate students in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The choice was aimed at generating diverse kinds of data from a population of respondents who are most exposed to the use of social media. However, from the population of about 38,000 split across fourteen faculties, a study sample of 396 was arrived at using Taro Yamane's formula for computing sample sizes. This formulae stipulates $n=N/1+N(e)^2$.

The multistage sampling procedure was used for the first stage selection of faculties and had four faculties randomly selected using the table of random numbers. These faculties were Biological Science, Arts, Engineering and Education. The second stage involved the random selection of departments from the four faculties that have been chosen. Randomization was achieved using the table of random numbers. From the Faculty of Biological Science, Industrial Chemistry Department and Microbiology Department were chosen. From the Faculty of Arts, English language/literature Department and History Department were randomly selected. Also for the Faculty of Engineering, Electronic/Computer Engineering and Civil Engineering were picked randomly while for the Faculty of Education, Educational Foundation and Adult Education were chosen. In all 396 undergraduate students were issued copies of the questionnaire.

Presentation, analysis and discussion

Out of 396 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 390 were filled and returned, while 6 was unaccounted for. The response rate was adjudged well enough for the study to provide the necessary data for this study. The results from this study gave rise to the following discussion.

The respondents were exposed to questions that sought to ascertain their ownership of internet-enabled devices, access to social media sites, awareness and experience of cyber-bullying on these sites, as well as whether cyber-bullying poses a threat to the development of social media. From the data analysed using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS), on ownership of internet-enabled devices, it shows in figure 1 that 386 respondents which is a majority (99%) of the respondents owned internet-enabled phones and an infinitesimal number of 2 respondents (0.5%) did not own an internet-enabled phone, while 0.5% (2) of the respondents did not provide any data. The inference from figure 2 shows that 34.6% representing 135 of the respondents have internet-enabled computer, while 64.5 percent representing 255 of the respondents do not. This implies that majority of the study unit do not have internet-enabled computer. According to the information in figure 3, 81.7 percent (318) of the respondents have internet-enabled iPad, and 18.3 percent (71) of them do not while 0.3% is missing data.

On exposure to social media sites via these devices, the result showed that a majority (387) of the respondents visit social media sites with their internet enabled devices. Figure 4 presents that 99.2% (387) used their devices to interact on social media while 0.5% (2) do not. 0.3 percent was

recorded for missing data. The data in figure 5 shows that a greater number of the study population, 51 percent visit social media sites always, and 44% visit these sites occasionally, while the lesser percentage of the population 4% do not. A percentage of the data was unaccounted for. Also from figure 6, 287 respondents representing 73.6% are aware of the use of social media sites as avenues for cyber-bullying while 68 representing 17.4% are not aware of the use of social media sites as avenues for the practice of cyber-bullying. Therefore it can be determined that majority of the respondents are aware of the use of social media sites as a conduit for cyber-bullying.

On experience of cyber-bullying, according to the information in figure 7, 61.5 percent (248) of the respondents have experienced cyber-bullying at one time or the other while 26.7 percent (104) of the respondent have not been bullied on social media sites. 9.7% of the respondents represents missing data. In figure 8 above, the frequency of this experience is measured. 19.5% of the population have been bullied on regular basis, 46% of the study units have been bullied occasionally, 26.8% of the study population cannot determined how often they have been bullied on social media sites. 7.7 percent represents missing data. This implies that majority of the respondents who have experienced cyber-bullying have been bullied occasionally.

When cyber-bullying was measured with social media platforms, it was inferred from the data in table 1 that a larger percentage 41.0% (160) of the sample size have been bullied on Facebook followed by 21.8% (N=85) on twitter, while a smaller percentage 2.6 percent (10) have been bullied on LinkedIn. Others include 3.1% on IM, 4.6% have been bullied via text messages, 6.2% via Chat rooms, 9.2% on blogs, and 4.4% via other media sites. 7.2% represents missing data.

To ascertain whether individuals bullied online restrained or exhibited other attitudes towards the use of social media, figure 9 reveals that 51.3 percent (200) of the respondents asserted that cyber-bullying has affected and affects their use of social media sites while 47.1 percent representing 164 of the study population do not. 1.6 percent represents missing data. It can therefore be concluded from the chart that cyber-bullying affect respondents' use of social media sites in whatever purpose they are being used for.

From figure 10, 56.2% of the respondents affirmed that cyber-bullying poses a great threat to the further development of the social media while 41.3% of the respondents do not convinced that cyber-bullying can threaten the social media development. It can be concluded from the above that

majority of the respondents in the study unit believe that cyber-bulling is dangerous to the development of the social media.

Conclusion

This research employed selected survey questions to establish whether social media users are aware of and have experienced cyber-bullying on social media sites as well as determining that cyber-bullying can affect the development of the social media generally.

The major finding of the study suggests that a majority of the target audience have knowledge of cyber-bullying, are aware that social media sites are avenues for it. Whether they have experienced it or not was represented in figure

Also it can be seen that social media sites like Facebook, twitter and blogs are majorly sites where respondents have been bullied while online harassment, misinformation, cyber-stalking and sexting are to a larger extent the means through which respondents have been bullied. This information further proves the majority of respondents have in one way or the other been bullied, and invariably, it affects their use of these social media sites.

However, the correlation analyses show that respondents are of the view that cyber-bullying can indeed threaten the development of the social media though a few of the respondents who disagreed were a bit skeptical about giving reasons why they do not think cyber-bullying can threaten the development of the social media.

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# Appendix

Figure 1

Respondents' who have internet-enabled phone

0.5%   0.5%

No
Yes
Missing data

99%
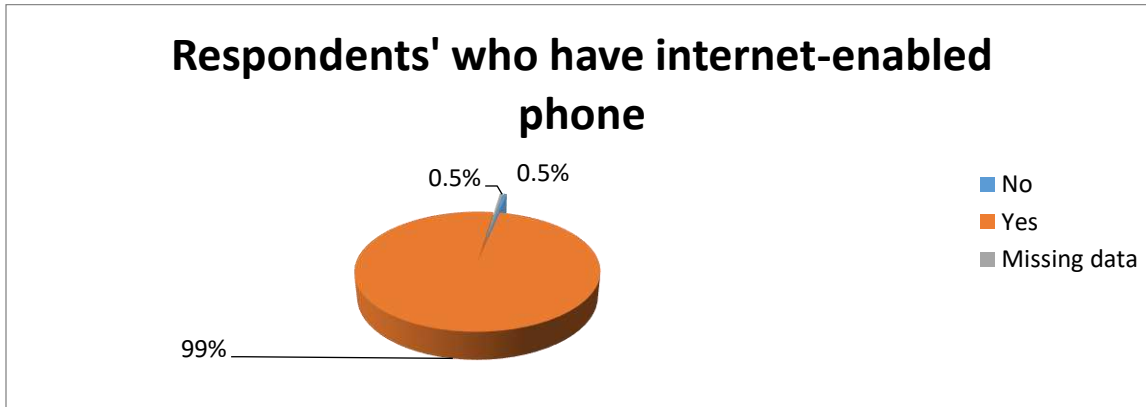
The information in figure 1 indicates that 99% (386) of the respondents own internet-enabled phone, 0.5 percent do not own an internet-enabled phone while the remaining fraction of 0.5% did not provide any data.

Figure 2

Respondents' who have internet-enabled Computer

34.6%

65.4%

No
Yes
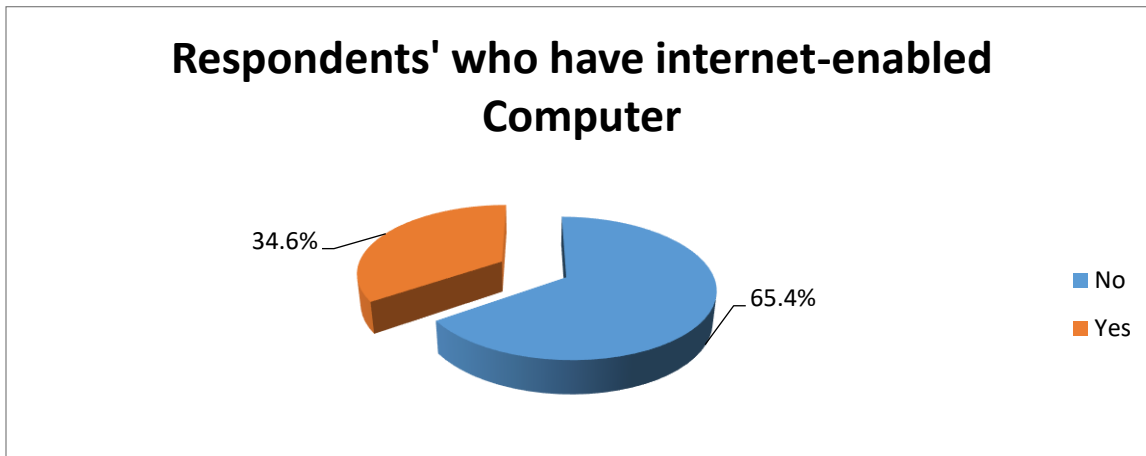
The inference from figure 2 is that 34.6% representing 135 of the respondents have internet-enabled computer, while 64.5 percent representing 255 of the respondents do not. This implies that majority of the study unit do not have internet-enabled computer.

Figure 3
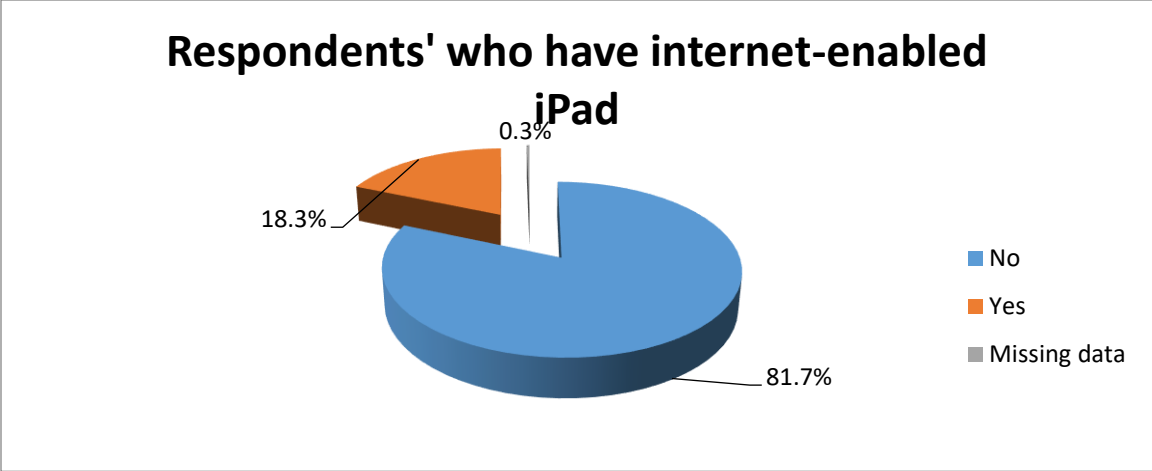
Respondents' who have internet-enabled iPad

0.3%

18.3%

81.7%

- No
- Yes
- Missing data

According to the information in figure 3, 81.7 percent (318) of the respondents have internet-enabled iPad, while 18.3 percent (71) of them do not.

Figure 4

Respondents who visit social media sites

0.5%   0.3%

99.2%

- No
- Yes
- Missing data
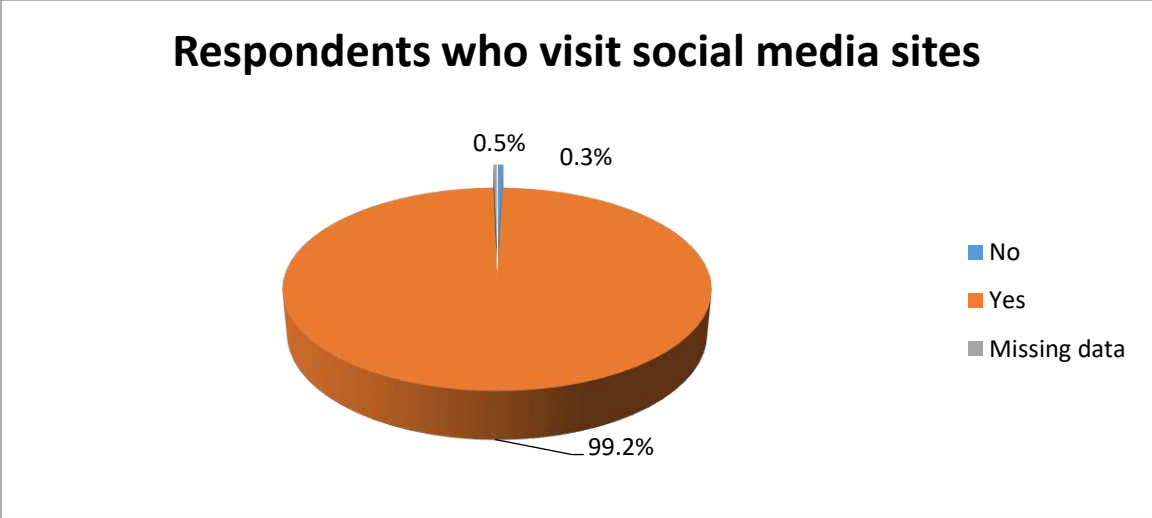
Out of the 390 respondents, only 387 of them visit social media sites, according to figure 4, thus forming the greater percentage of 99.2% as against 0.5% (2) or the entire populace who do not while 0.3 percent represents missing data.

Figure 5
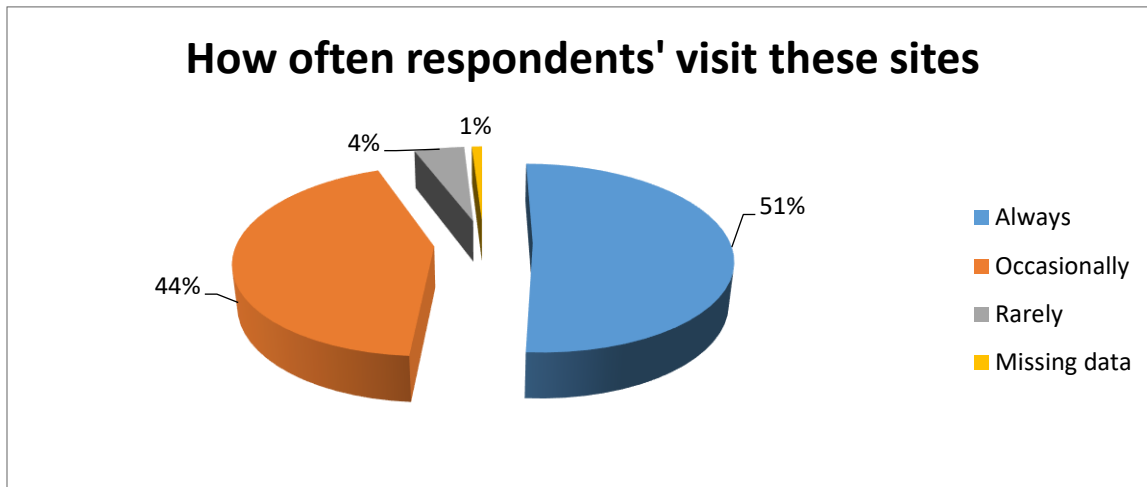
How often respondents' visit these sites

- 51% — Always
- 44% — Occasionally
- 4% — Rarely
- 1% — Missing data

The data in figure 5 shows that a greater number of the study population, 51 percent visit social media sites always, and 44% visit these sites occasionally, while the lesser percentage of the population 4% do not. A percentage of the data was unaccounted for.
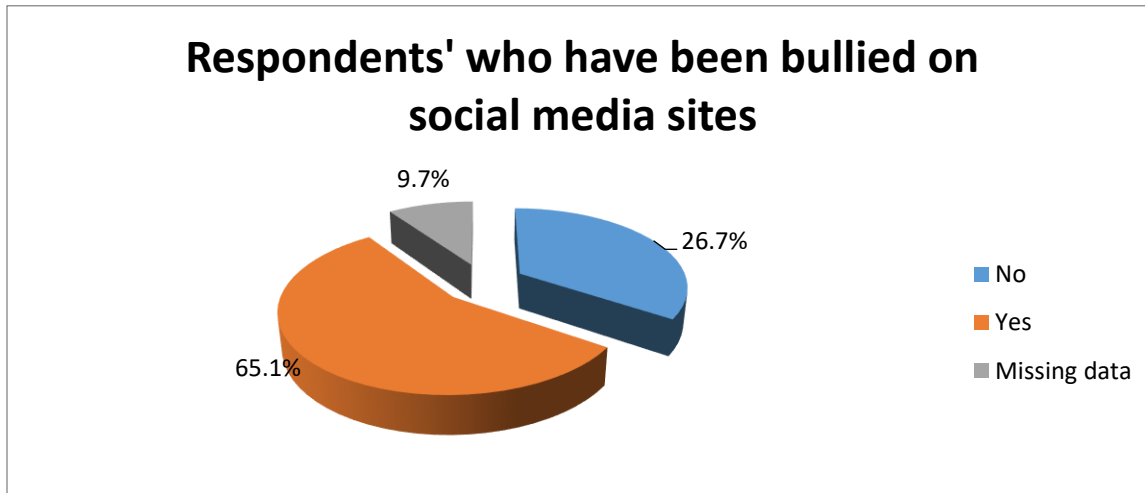
Figure 6

Respondents' Awareness of Social Media sites as avenues for Cyber-bullying

- 17.4% — No
- 73.6% — Yes
- 9% — Missing Data
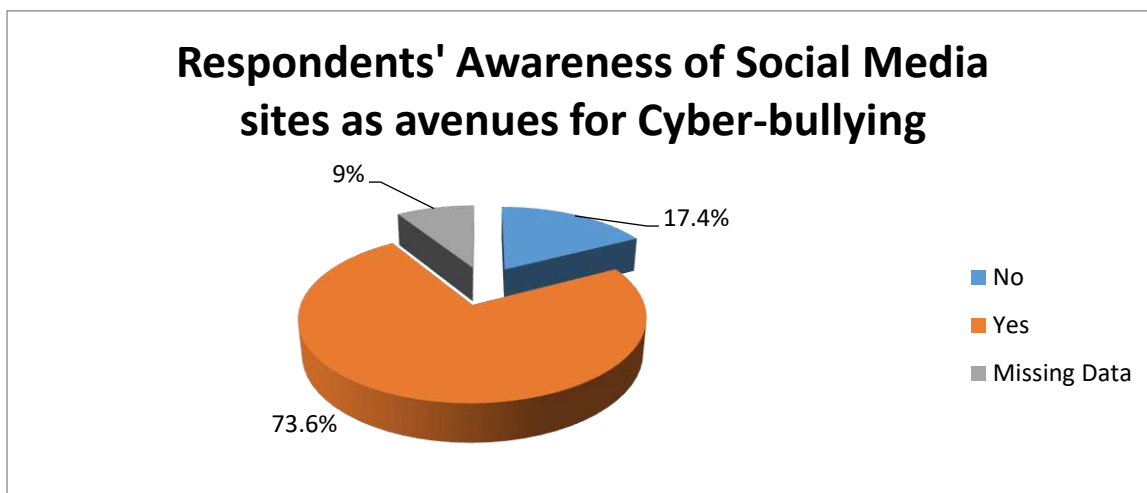
From the chart above, 287 respondents representing 73.6% are aware of the use of social media sites as avenues for cyber-bullying while 68 representing 17.4% are not aware of the use of social media sites as avenues for the practice of cyber-bullying. Therefore it can be determined that
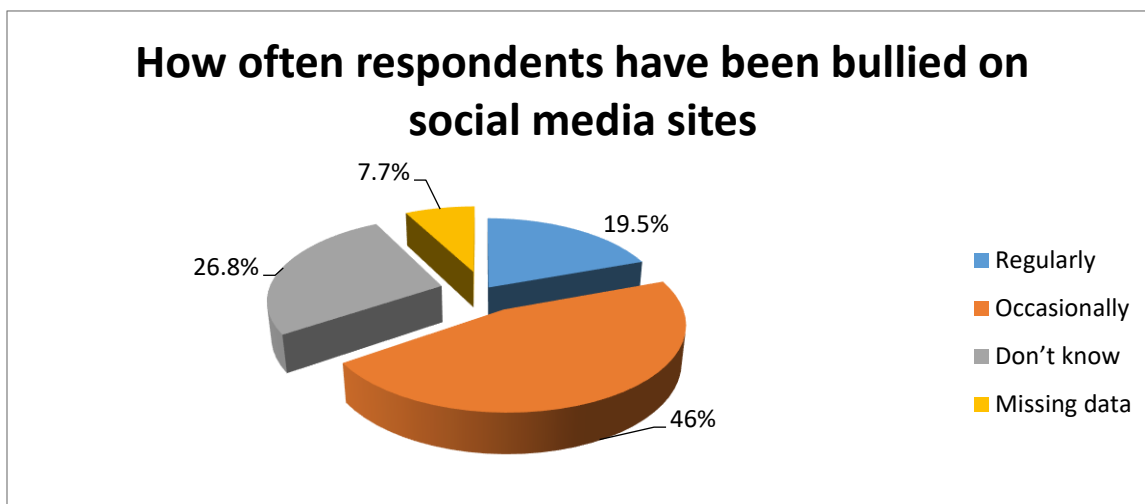
majority of the respondents are aware of the use of social media sites as a conduit for cyber-bullying.

Figure 7

Respondents' who have been bullied on social media sites

9.7%
26.7%
65.1%
- No
- Yes
- Missing data

According to the information in figure 7, 61.5 percent (N=248) of the respondents have experienced cyber-bullying at one time or the other while 26.7 percent (N=104) of the respondent have not been bullied on social media sites. 9.7% of the respondents represents missing data.

Figure 8

How often respondents have been bullied on social media sites

7.7%
19.5%
26.8%
46%
- Regularly
- Occasionally
- Don't know
- Missing data

In figure 8 above, for respondents who have been bullied on social media sites, 19.5% of the population have been bullied on regular basis, 46% of the study units have been bullied
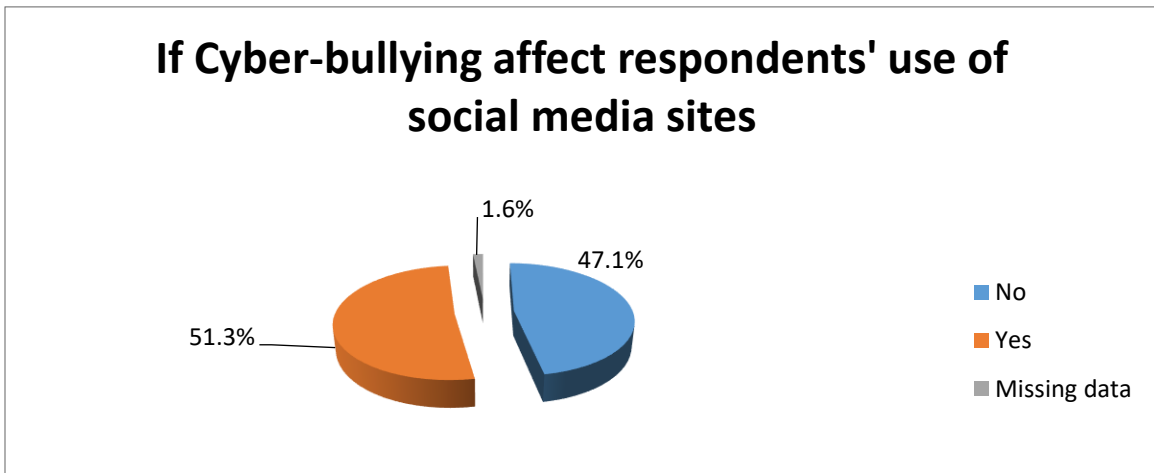
occasionally, 26.8% of the study population cannot determined how often they have been bullied on social media sites. 7.7 percent represents missing data. This implies that majority of the respondents who have experienced cyber-bullying have been bullied occasionally.

Table 1 Sites on which respondents have been bullied

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	160	41.0
Twitter	85	21.8
Instant messaging IM	12	3.1
LinkedIn	10	2.6
Text messages	18	4.6
Chat rooms	24	6.2
Blogs	36	9.2
Others	17	4.4
Missing data	28	7.2
Total	390	100.0

The inference from the data in Table 1 above shows that a larger percentage 41.0% (N=160) of the sample size have been bullied on Facebook followed by 21.8% (N=85) on twitter', while a smaller percentage 2.6 percent (N=10) have been bullied on LinkedIn. Others include 3.1% on IM, 4.6% have been bullied via text messages, 6.2% via Chat rooms, 9.2% on blogs, and 4.4% via other media sites. 7.2% represents missing data.

Figure 9

If Cyber-bullying affect respondents' use of social media sites

1.6%

47.1%

51.3%

- No
- Yes
- Missing data

According to figure 9, 51.3 percent (N=200) of the respondents asserted that cyber-bullying has affected or affect their use of social media sites while 47.1 percent representing 164 of the study population do not. 1.6 percent represents missing data.

It can therefore be concluded from the chart above that cyber-bullying affect respondents' use of social media sites in whatever purpose they are being used for.

Figure 10

Respondents' view on cyber-bullying as a threat to social media development

2.5% 41.3%

56.2%

- No
- Yes
- Missing data
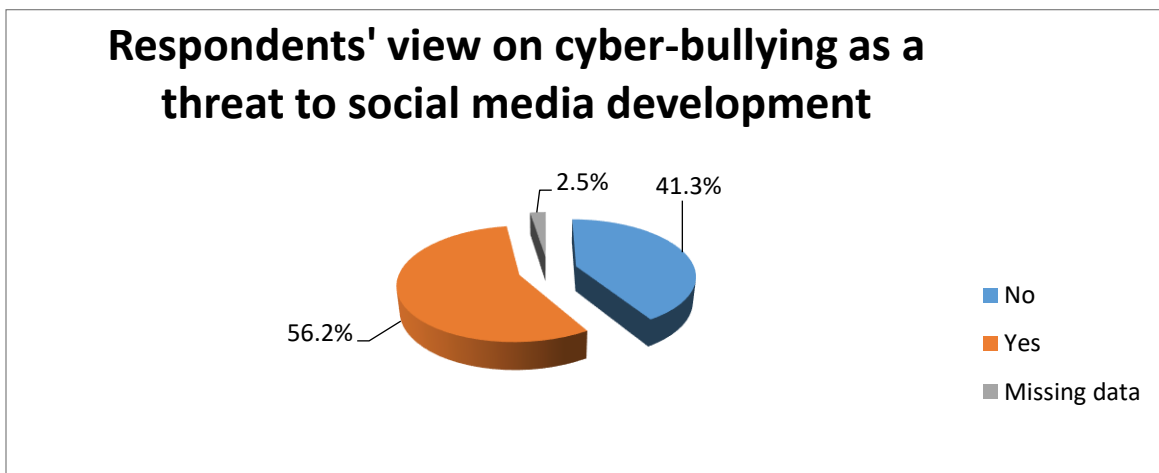
From the chart above 56.2% of the respondents reveals that cyber-bullying poses a great threat to the further development of the social media while 41.3% of the respondents do not believe that cyber-bullying can threaten the social media development. It can be concluded from the above that

majority of the respondents in the study unit believe that cyber-bulling is dangerous to the development of the social media.