

Cyberbullying Experiences And Reactions Among University Students In Malaysia

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is not uncommon or unheard of with the vast advancement of technology and the popularity of social media engagement. Previous studies do show in contrast to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is as detrimental (if not worse) towards one's social being. However, the types of cyberbullying experienced as well as mode of managing cyberbullies do differ across locality. Hence, this current study aimed to explore the types of cyberbullying experienced as well as the reaction of Malaysian students towards cyberbullies. This study employed semi-structured interview with 30 university students, who have social media accounts and are currently residing in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Based on the data collected, it was found that the majority (more than 80%) of the respondents experienced flaming and stalking types of cyberbullying. Such experience they claimed caused emotional, social and psychological distress. The action taken upon experiencing cyberbullying as well as emotional reaction that they experienced do differ across the type of bully experienced. These effects can be argued to be exacerbated due to the fact that a sizeable number of respondents chose to keep bullying experience to themselves instead of sharing with others, especially adults. In terms of their reaction towards the perpetrator or the situation, it was found that both active and passive reactions have been employed. The details of the experiences as well as reactions are further discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Social media, cyberbullying, types of cyberbullying, reactions to cyberbullying, negative effects, Malaysia

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Background of Study

The issue of cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon in Malaysia (Vimala Balakrishnan, 2015). Cyberbullying can be defined as the act when the perpetrator “repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don’t like” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014, para1). According to previous studies, Malaysia has been ranked 17th out of twenty-five countries on cyberbullying (Microsoft News Center, 2012). In another findings, 27% of the researched students admitted that they have been bullied online, while 13% of the students said they were still being bullied online during the period of research. About 50% of the students know at least one cyberbully victim (Cyber Security Malaysia, 2013). Similar to traditional bully, cyberbullying have been associated with various negative impacts – physical, social, emotional and psychological impacts. This is coupled with previous findings that students prefer to remain silent about such experience, especially with other adults. Hence, this study is an important one as it seeks to explore the type of experiences and reactions of university students towards cyberbullying in Malaysia.

Literature Review

The use of technology and social media have been argued to be one of the essentials of individuals’ daily lives. Users claimed that the use of technology and social media is a convenient way to keep in touch with their loved ones (67%) (Heimlich, 2011), especially for

those living hectic lives (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). Some users also argued that due to the advancement of social media and technology, they now are able to reconnect with their old friends (50%) (Pew Research Centre, 2011) and can constantly meet whoever they want virtually despite being geographically distant (Baruah, 2012; Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

Besides the importance of social media in managing and maintaining social relationships, social media has been reported to be an effective educational tool and platform to supplement conventional teaching. Teachers now use social media to send reminders, share materials, engage in interactive discussion as well as uploading videos (Seaman & Kane, 2013). In fact, with the innovative pedagogical style of ‘flipped classroom’, social media, technology and applications are now being used to do most of the ‘teaching,’ leaving the classes mainly for discussion and to carry out tasks at hand.

However, the easy access and heavy engagement of social media also makes bullying an easier process. Bullying can be defined as treating others in a “cruel, insulting, threatening, or aggressive fashion” often onto smaller or weaker persons (Merriam-Webster, 2017, “Bully”). Traditionally, bullying can be categorized into physical, verbal, psychological and social types. Physical bullying refers to causing physical harm onto another person deliberately such as pushing, hitting, kicking, tripping and the like. Verbal bullying include name calling, teasing, saying harsh / rude words, using degrading labels and so forth. Another common form is social bullying for example gossiping, spreading rumors, excluding individuals from the group.

The effects of bullying on victims can include physical injuries, social trauma and maladjustment as well as psychological distress and even suicide (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2016).

Now, bullying is no longer confined to traditional face-to-face setting but has transcended into the cyber world – hence the term, cyberbullying. Since most people have access to electronic devices and uses various social media platforms, it is easier for the perpetrator to engage in cyberbullying anonymously and beyond boundaries (Aune, 2009; Donegan, 2012; Ikuko Aoyama, Saxon & Fearon, 2011; Sticca & Perren, 2012; Vimala Balakrishnan, 2015).

Willard (2005) identified and categorized eight different types of cyberbullying, namely, flaming, denigration, harassment, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking,. Flaming refers to sending of rude, vulgar and hurtful messages to others. This can be contrasted with denigration through which perpetrators share rumors about others that can affect their image or reputation. Harassment refers to unwanted physical, social or sexual threat posed by perpetrators to victims. Impersonation refers to bullies who pretend to be someone else while engaging in cyberbullying activities such as sending rude messages or false messages. Outing refers to the release of victim's personal or familial information, secrets, photos, videos and the like without victim's permission. Trickery is that cyberbullies trick the victim to reveal some secrets to them and then cyberbullies will next share and disclose these secrets online with others. Exclusion is intentionally

singling out someone from an online group. Cyberstalking refers to the act of perpetrators who would follow, like, comment the victim's social media.

Data from studies in the United States indicated that 70% of young people have experienced bullying at least once and about 25% of the students have been involved in bullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Based on the Annual Bullying Survey 2013, it was found out that 7 out of 10 (69%) of UK teens had experienced cyberbullying, among which 20% of UK teens had experienced very extreme cyberbullying and 21% of them are bullied online frequently (Ditch the Label Anti-Bullying Charity, 2013). National Crime Prevention Council (2007) in their study found that about 4 out of 10 teens had experienced at least one of the forms of cyberbullying in 2006 (National Crime Prevention Council, 2007). The statistics also showed that 46% of high school and 35% of middle school students have experienced cyberbullying before (National Crime Prevention Council, 2007).

Among the effect of cyberbullying that have been found in previous studies were depression, anxiety (Sameer Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Wang, Nansel & Iannotti, 2011) sadness and frustration (Sameer Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Scholars have also highlighted that bullied individuals are at higher risk of involving in social problems and being emotionally unstable in their adulthood. Cyberbullying has also been argued to have resulted in poor academic performance, inability to focus in class and high absenteeism (Beran & Qing, 2007).

Socially, victims of cyberbully tend to have lower self-esteem or would withdraw themselves socially (NoBullying.com, 2017).

There were also evidences of self- harm and increased suicidal tendency (thinking and attempting) among cyberbully victims (Sameer Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Cyberbullies have been reported to also experience physical symptoms such as headaches, recurrent abdominal pain to the persons being cyberbullied (LiveScience, 2010).

It has been found that victims of cyberbully tend to not report their experiences to their parents or administrators (Aune, 2009). This may be due to a few reasons such as to avoid embarrassment, fear of retaliation, to continue having access to social media (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interview was employed on 30 university students residing in Klang Valley. The urbanite population was chosen as the social media usage pattern is a norm. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify the respondents who uses social media and who has experienced cyberbullying. This is imperative to ensure receiving rich data on the experiences and reactions of the respondents. The data were transcribed and analyzed using constant comparative method to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the types of cyberbullying experienced by university students?

RQ2: How did the students react to cyberbullying?

Findings and Discussion

The basic demographic statistics of the 30 respondents is as per outlined in Table 1 below.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	13	43.3
Female	17	56.7
Age Group		
19 – 20	5	16.7
21-22	16	53.3
23-24	7	23.3
25-26	2	6.7
Race		
Malay	9	30.0
Chinese	12	40.0
Indian	7	23.3
Others	2	6.7
TOTAL	30	100

Table 1. Demographic Statistics

There were slightly more female than male respondents in this study with a percentage of 57% and 43%, respectively. The majority of the respondents (53%) were between 21 to 22 years old followed by those between 23 to 24 years old (23%) and 19 to 20 years old (17%). In terms of race, 40% of them are Chinese, followed by 30% Malay and 23% Indian respondents.

The data obtained supports previous categorization of types of cyberbullying by Willard (2005), namely 1) denigration, 2) outing, 3) exclusion, 4) harassment, 5) flaming and 6) stalking. As outlined in Table 2, more than 80 % of the respondents have experienced stalking and flaming at least once to date. More than 50% of them has experienced denigration (63%) and exclusion (57%) while 50% of them have experienced outing.

Types of Cyberbullying	Yes Frequency (%)	No Frequency (%)	TOTAL Frequency (%)
Denigration	19 (63)	11 (37)	30 (100)
Outing	15 (50)	15 (50)	30 (100)
Exclusion	17 (57)	13 (43)	30 (100)
Harassment	8 (27)	22 (73)	30 (100)
Flaming	26 (87)	4 (13)	30 (100)
Stalking	24 (80)	6 (20)	30 (100)

Table .2 Statistics of Respondents who have experienced the Different Types of Cyberbullying

Since flaming refers to rude and unpleasant comments / messages that were received by the respondents, hence it is not surprising that this category was rated the highest (87%). The flaming experienced were mainly on the physicality of the respondents. Some of the respondents said:

I got hateful comments from my Instagram photos a lot before, saying that “You are ugly.” (Jasonal)

Sometimes I experienced bad comments like “Why does your face look so chubby?” (David)

My friend, a Chinese girl, posted all of her pictures ... and I commented on one of her pictures stating that “You are pretty!”

something like that and ...One guy ... tagged my name and commented “Hey Stupid.” (Jessie)

I get comments like “Why do you look like a girl?” “Why do you dress that way?” (Jason)

Social media users tend to share their OOTDs (outfit of the day), selfies, wefies and the like, therefore those pictures can be argued as the source of “invitation” for comments – on their physicality. Besides how they look and wear, two of the respondents also highlighted that they were cyberbullied by racially and ethnically prejudiced bullies. In the own words they said:

They condemned me because I am an Indian. (Sara)

So, the guy thought I’m Indonesian, they commented like “Shut up, nasty Indonesian maid”. (Tessie)

Flaming arguably the easiest way for bullies to affect others. Bullies know that any picture posted is considered ‘good’ for social media and is often done to receive feedback and/or attention by the social media owners. Hence, bullies know that any negative comments given by them would definitely affect the social media owners. The effect is also exacerbated as the comments can be viewed by a huge audience.

Interestingly, the majority of the respondents reported to have employed various active and empowered strategies namely to 1) unfriend / block, 2) confront 3) discuss with authorities and significant others on next actions and 4) retort with negative comments. Only two respondents chose to no longer upload pictures or delete post and comments and six others claimed to just ignore the bullies.

The second highest category was cyberstalking which accounts for 80% of the reported cyberbully experiences by the respondents. The respondents claimed to have known about the stalking behavior by looking at the number of likes, followers, viewers and comments given by strangers. When asked their feelings towards such experience, 2 of the respondents said that they felt uncomfortable, 3 felt disturbed, 1 felt irritated and 1 was scared due to the stalking experience. However, the remaining 77% of the respondents claimed that it is normal to receive 5-6 photo likes or comments from stranger and one actually claimed that it is indeed something to be proud of to be stalked. In fact the majority of them claimed that they were not disturbed by the fact that they have stalkers since the ‘stalkers’ did not harm their lives in any way. The respondents reasoned that by having strangers to just like and look at their social media platforms is nothing to be concerned of.

The finding on this type of cyberbullying is counter intuitive. Cyberstalking often viewed as a source of criminal intimidation, harassment, and fear done through the internet and electronic communication devices. And the effect can be similarly compared to traditional stalking whereby the victims often feel intense fear and helplessness (Pittaro, 2007). However the data clearly shows that social media has changed the mentality of these young social media users. The “success” on social media is often measured by the number of followers, likes and engagement regardless of whether or not these followers and commenters are known to the social media owner. In

fact, these social media strangers can be synonymously compared to celebrity fans, hence making them an instant social media celebrities. In contrast, for denigration, or the act of others spreading rumors and bringing down the reputation of others, most students interviewed have reported to experience negative feelings which include sadness, feeling of betrayal, angry, surprised, insecure, hurt, ashamed, traumatized and depressed. 63% of the respondents claimed to have experienced this type of cyberbullying. Only three respondents who find denigration experience hilarious and took it lightly. Their feeling tend to also depend on what “story” that was created and shared as well as the extent of the shared “rumors”. Rumors on relationship and dating were among those that can be laughed off by the respondents who would then merely ignore the comments made. Another type of rumor that is lightly taken is name calling i.e. someone is a “bitch” or “using someone”.

There was this girl who spread rumors about me and this guy on social media. It sounded so ridiculous and I just laughed it off (Mary)

Someone showed to me before that this girl was telling everyone what a b*tch I was. I just ignored her because other people knows me better (Terra).

In contrast, spreading of rumour about sexual orientation or family related stories tend to not be easily shaken off by the respondents. Quoting some of them:

I can't believe it when I found out that my close friend said that I was gay online. I was so angry and felt betrayed (Tim).

I don't mind if people wants to make stories about me. But once I encountered rumours people made about my family – that was really hurtful and I was so angry! (Dan)

Those experiences tend to lead to negative emotional reaction, which in turn leads to the victims confronting the “bully”, replying them in a harsh and threatening manner, blocking or deleting the perpetrator as well as informing authorities, educators as well as significant others. Denigration was also commonly experienced perhaps due to the fact that it is easier to be shared with others and can be spread faster than traditional means of spreading rumors. The rumours are merely a click away and the effect can be detrimental not only for one's personal reputation but also professional standing. This is why most people experience denigration are affected negatively and tend to take proactive measures to manage the perpetrators.

Another type for bully that more than half of the respondents claimed to have experienced is exclusion (57%). The respondents said that their exclusion include them being blocked from viewing the profile and page of others, not invited in a group as per other peers or being literally kicked out from a group. This form of cyberbullying tend to evoke the feeling of sadness, surprise and curiosity among respondents because they are not accepted as the in-group. As a reaction, none of them confronted the perpetrator and the majority of them said that they did not do anything as they believe that is the right of the social media owners to do so. In fact, only one of them did a

triangulation – sent an intermediary to speak to the group leader to query while another four spoke to their significant others as an outlet. Others, said that they did not do or say anything after the exclusion experience.

Thus, exclusion can be argued as one of the most troubling type of cyberbullying as the victims were negatively affected and yet felt unable or not at ease in taking proactive actions against the perpetrators. Of course technical glitches may have contributed to one being blocked or removed from a social media group, but the fact that the victims do not confront, seek clarification and the like, unnecessary stress, intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict may stem from such experience.

At least half of the respondents said that they have in fact been “betrayed” by their peers, who shared some of their personal information, pictures, and stories of the family on social media without their consent -what is termed as outing (50%). The respondents claimed that they were angry, sad, shocked, and lost trust in the people around them. Their reactions also tend to be more confrontational and they questioned those people who “leaked” the information out. Respondents also claimed that they learned from such experience and no longer share much information with others as well as limit what they share on social media to minimize the likelihood of these “betrayal” from happening again.

I had my nude photo posted by my ex-boyfriend, then he shared with everybody. (Quan Xin)

Once I told my family problems to a friend who I thought was a good friend. To my surprise every single details of it was shared with others on social media. That really taught me a lesson to really be aware of who I can trust. (Lim)

The least type of cyberbullying that was experienced by the respondents was harassment which accounts to 27%. Though the percentage is relatively low, all of the respondents highlighted negative emotional reaction experiencing this – fear, disturbed, scared and disgusted. Only two of the respondents confronted the bully while others chose to block or delete them.

My cyberbullying experience is regarding a lot of sexual harassment online. I sometimes am scared to open my social media accounts (Harga)

A guy always send me obscene photos showing his d*ck! Yeah, it is very disgusting and I am very disturbed by it. (Kelly)

Though through the interview some negative emotions have been invoked, none reported a clinical psychological state of mind as what have been reported in previous studies on victims of bully (Sameer Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Wang, Nansel & Iannotti, 2011). There is also no evidence leading towards its relation with poor academic performance, attendance as well as low self-esteem among these respondents, unlike previous reports (Beran & Qing, 2007; NoBullying.com, 2017). Instead this study showed that for most types of cyberbullying, proactive measures such as lash back, block, unfriend and confrontation are often the approaches taken by the respondents. Perhaps this due to the fact that these students too are

behind their keyboards and hence it is easier to carry out the abovementioned approaches. The keyboard warriors behavior can be applicable to both the perpetrators and the victims. Though cyberbullying often compared to traditional bullying – one clear aspect that is often overlooked at is the ability for the ‘victims’ to also have more courage and ‘voice’ in handling such experience.

Types of Cyberbullying	Yes Frequency (%)	No Frequency (%)	TOTAL Frequency (%)
Denigration	12 (40)	18 (60)	30 (100)
Outing	6 (20)	24 (80)	30 (100)
Exclusion	5 (17)	15 (83)	30 (100)
Harassment	5 (17)	15 (83)	30 (100)
Flaming	13 (43)	17 (57)	30 (100)
Stalking	0	30 (100)	30 (100)

Table 3. Statistics on Respondents who Shared their Experiences with Others

From Table 3, it is evident that the large majority of the respondents mentioned that they did not share most of their experiences with anyone, especially for outing, exclusion, and harassment. In fact, none of the respondents who experienced stalking confided into anyone – even those who felt fearful, disgusted, scared and disturbed. Most of them reasoned that this is due to the fact that the issues they faced were personal or that they were able to manage it by themselves. And the data also revealed that they did in fact take matters into their own hand in most of the cases. This data is important to be highlighted as the students may underestimate the long term effect of cyberbully or the unseen psychological effects of bully namely lack of self-esteem, confidence and self-worth. Some students may also think that they are

able to “handle” the bullies but their actions may invoke more intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts instead of minimizing the reoccurrence of such unpleasant experience.

Types of Cyberbullying	Friends Frequency (%)	Family Frequency (%)	TOTAL Frequency (%)
Denigration	9 (75)	3 (25)	12 (100)
Outing	4 (67)	2 (33)	6 (100)
Exclusion	4 (80)	1 (20)	5 (100)
Harassment	5 (100)	0	5 (100)
Flaming	11 (85)	2 (15)	13 (100)
Stalking	0	0	0

Table 4. Statistics on Respondents’ Confidant

For those who did share, it was always with their friends or their family members. Based on Table 4.4, it is shown that the majority (> 67%) of the respondents shared their experiences with their peers, rather than family members for each types of cyberbullying. The peer category includes classmates, boyfriends/girlfriends, best friends, and groupmates. As for family members, this category includes mother, cousins and sister. It is interesting to note that none of the harassed respondents informed their family members about it. This may be due to a few reasons namely 1) to maintain their privilege access to social media, 2) to avoid discussing tabooed and uncomfortable topics with their family members (i.e. sexual harassment, rude words, sexual orientation), 3) due to cultural factors of not revealing personal shame or problem, 4) to avoid being scolded for ‘putting themselves out there’ via sharing pictures and information online.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The case of cyberbullying is an important one to be studied and discussed as it can happen to anyone, anytime and anywhere. The interview data with 30 respondents showed that more than 50% of the respondents have experienced stalking, flaming, denigration, outing and exclusion. Their reaction differ based on the type of bullying that they encountered and emotional response invoked. These data painted a slightly different image than those previously found in other studies. On one hand, cyberbullying can be viewed as more potent than traditional one as it is easier for the perpetrators to engage in cyberbullying hiding behind their technological machines, at any time of the day and across boundaries. The fact that the respondents chose not to share with others, especially family members make it more difficult for parents and adults to be aware on the bully experience that these students are facing, let alone to assist them. The sharing of information with friends may serve as a strong support system but they too may engage in more bullying activities such as retorting back to the perpetrator using Flaming, Denigration, Outing and Exclusion. However, the researcher do not rule out the fact that the impact may not only be unobservable (psychological one) at present but it may be experienced overtime.

On the other hand, cyberbullying can also be viewed as less potent than traditional bullying as it is easier for ‘victims’ to take proactive measures behind their keyboards. Just like the keyboard warriors or perpetrators find it easier to bully others, victims find it also easier to be more daring and act proactively as a response. Blocking and unfriend is indeed a click away and retorting back to the perpetrator

can be done in writing and virtually. Some of them may even have their friends with them while writing the response or have others to draft for them.

Thus cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon as the different types of cyberbullying invoke different response and reactions. The impact may also not be uniform and measures to overcome them have to be uniquely assessed and developed.

Future researchers may explore experiences and reactions of students located outside of Kuala Lumpur as well as students of younger age group. The current researchers believe that the mindset and belief system may be different and hence may affect how they interpret and react to their cyberbully experiences. It is still recommended that interview is a better approach for this type of study as probing and conversations will ensure that the respondents really understand the different types of cyberbullying and assurance as well as confidence given by interviewer can motivate the respondents to share their experiences. Larger sample size will also be useful to enable readers to have a better understanding of experiences and reactions to cyberbullying in Malaysia.

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