Confronting online social aggression in Hong Kong: A wake-up call

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ABSTRACT

Online bullying as a form of online aggression is an increasingly growing phenomenon that is experienced by all age groups. Apart from the use of technology, online bullying shares the same attributes as conventional bullying. This includes a power imbalance vis-a-vis the bully and the victim and the victims' feeling of helplessness. Its impact however, is greater resulting in severe psychological, social and mental health problems. Because online bullying presents a new type of challenge for lawmakers, educators and parents, there may not be a single solution to this social problem. The paper examines the existing laws in Hong Kong that may apply to online bullying, assessing its effectiveness as a means in redressing the power imbalance. It also looks at non-legal measures that can be adopted in Hong Kong to tackle the problem.

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1. Introduction

Fear entered Ah Chung's life one day in 2005. Recounting the event five years ago at the age of 17, Ah Chung typed his name into a search engine and discovered that five online groups were bent on ostracizing and humiliating him. Fellow students had denounced Ah Chung as a 'shoe-polisher' and gleefully shared how they had abused him. There is even a YouTube video recording of his classmates bullying him after intentionally crashing into his bicycle on an outing. Ah Chung carried an iron bar to school every day. He hid in the school's chapel room during recess, shed tears and could not sleep at night. He said "I was so scared because I did not know who wrote about me and hated me as they were anonymous. I started to feel that anyone would attack me. I carried iron bars and scissors with me to school. I felt it was so unfair that I couldn't fight back, as I was afraid this would provoke them to attack me more on the Internet" (Lee, 2010).

In October 2014, amidst the Occupy Central campaign, a man posted on Hong Kong Golden Forum, the city's Reddit, stating that heard 'rumours' that HK$600,000 (U·S$76,923) had been offered to chop off the limbs of a police officer's 14 year-old daughter. The officer was a sergeant who had been stationed in an area separating the Occupy protestors from their opponents. Internet users and users of the forum have been urged to upload personal information and photos of the police officers involved in the Occupy Central campaign with that of their families where they were made targets of personal attack on social media. Users even called on others to bully the officers' children at their schools (Chan & Sung, 2014).

Although conventional school bullying has always been a major concern in many economies, online bullying is fast becoming a social concern that is receiving increasing attention worldwide. It is clear that a significant contributory factor to the global phenomena is the prevalence of the use of information and communication technologies. Ah Chung and the police officer's instances are but two instances of online bullying in Hong Kong. Far from the 2006 tragic and heart wrenching suicide of U.S. teenager, Megan Meir which directed global attention to the devastating effects of online bullying, it cannot be said that the online bullying incidents in Hong Kong has less impact on the psychological and mental well-being of its people. In Hong Kong, condensed living environment, keen competitiveness, societal and family expectations for outstanding academic performance and stressful working conditions could be seen as the main drivers for online bullying in children, young people and adults.

Hong Kong has approximately 5,751,357 Internet users as at March 31, 2017 with an overall penetration rate of 80.2% (World internet usage and population statistics, 2017). 90.9% of the Internet usage is by non-mobile web device and 77.4% is via mobile web device (i.e., mobile phone/smart phone, computer via Wi-Fi and tablets). The demographics of Internet users have been reported to be 99% for age groups under 25, 25–34 and 35–44. Only in the age group 45–54 was the percentage of users at 95% (Statista, 2017).

The mobile subscriber penetration rate at the end of November 2016 was 234.7% with 17,241,608 subscribers registered (Office of the Communications Authority, HKSAR, 2017). According to a 2013 Nielson Report, Decoding the Asian Mobile Consumer, Hong Kong has the highest smartphone penetration rate in the Asia Pacific region at 87%. This could be due to the fact that it is common for Hong Kong people to own multiple mobile handsets (Media Research Asia, 2013). 96% of Hong Kong smartphones users have browse the Internet on their smart phones on the move. This is reported to be the highest in Asia (StartupsHK, 2013). Social media penetration rate is at 64% with

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Facebook, WeiBo and WhatsApp topping the list (GO-Globe, 2015). Not surprisingly, there is an increase of Facebook users. In 2013, there were approximately 3 million active Facebook visiting the social media platform daily in the second quarter of 2013. Of these, more than 2.4 million (82.7%) used their mobile devices to visit the social networking site each day (Lam, 2013). 4.3 million users visit at least once a month with more than 3.5 million visiting using their mobile phones (Lam, 2013). In 2015, the number of registered users was 4.4 million. 3.1 million visitors access the platform each day spending an average of half an hour each visit (GO-Globe, 2015).

Ah Chung and the police officer's story are not unusual. With the increasing use of the various communication platforms, online bullying occurs in many forms and contexts. The breadth and severity of this form of online social aggression demands a response from the communities, parents, schools and legislatures. Although lower than many jurisdictions, rudimentary data and the online bullying incidents reported by the mass media in Hong Kong strongly suggests the problem is one that is on the rise and one that cannot be ignored. The main thrust of the paper is its examination of legal and non-legal measures in Hong Kong that may apply to online bullying, and assessing the effectiveness of such measures in an attempt to redress the power imbalance.

The paper has a four-fold purpose. It first examines online bullying, focusing on its impact on young people and adults and explores a legislative response to the problem. Second, the paper identifies the need for legislation by surveying the current laws and highlighting its inadequacy. Third, it examines non-legal measures such as whole school approach and finally, concludes by offering recommendations about the need for a multi-level multi-disciplinary approach to a global yet local problem.

2. What is bullying?

The accepted baseline definition of bullying is that bullying is an aggressive, anti-social act that is (a) intentional, (b) involves a power imbalance between the bully and the victim and (c) is repetitive in nature and occurs over time (Olweus, 1994). Because the act must be intentional, acts that are meant to tease in a "friendly or playful way" would not amount to bullying (Finkelhor, Turner, & Hanmby, 2012). An imbalance of power can include differences between the bully and the victim that makes it difficult for the victim to defend himself. These differences can be physical, social, financial differences and according to Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, and Tanigawa (2011), can be seen in terms of strength, popularity and smarts (Felix et al., 2011). Notwithstanding the various differences in the imbalance of power, what is crucial is that the intentional aggressive act must recur over a period of time; hence an occasional conflict is not sufficient.

Following Olweus's baseline definition of bullying, multiple types of aggression can be present in bullying situations. These can be physical contact, words or obscene gestures; "proactive" aggression which is usually unprovoked, instrumental, and goal directed – for example, where the bully wants to gain power, social status or property (Griffin & Gross, 2004); reactive aggression where there is a defensive or angry response to a threatening, angering or frustrating event (Griffin & Gross, 2004); or "indirect" or "relational' aggression where rumours, gossips, secrets and social exclusion are often used to harm and humiliate the victim (Felix et al., 2011; Low, Frey, & Brockman, 2010).

The definition of online bullying often refers to Olweus's baseline definition with the addition that the act is perpetrated via the use of information and communication technologies. Because there is no research-based consensus on the precise definition of online bullying, various studies on online bullying have yielded divergent results. Notwithstanding, there is agreement that the characteristics of off-line bullying do exist in the online realm. For instance, the imbalance of power can be seen in the bullies' anonymity. By comparison with traditional bullying, the anonymity of the Internet not only facilitates

bullying, it exacerbates it as a result of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004).

2.1. Anonymity, online disinhibition effect and online bullying

The online disinhibition effect is how people change and behave differently when they are not in the real world. Clinician and researchers have observed that people loosen up, feel less restrained and express themselves more openly on cyberspace (Suler, 2004). Psychologist Suler suggest six factors that combine to change people's behavior online. These factors are (a) dissociative anonymity ("my actions cannot be attributed to my person"), (b) invisibility ("nobody can tell who I am, what I look like or judge my tone"), (c) asynchronicity ("my actions do not occur in real time"), (d) solipsistic introjection ("I cannot see these people, I don't know who they are, I have to guess at who they are"), (e) dissociative imagination ("this is not the real world these are not real people"), and (f) minimizing authority ("there are no authoritative figures here, I can act freely") (Suler, 2004). Disinhibition can work in opposite directions. In a positive direction, disinhibition can encourage reserved people to share personal details and emotions about themselves. However negatively, it can be seen in the forms of revenge porn, hate crimes and death threats. Another form of negative disinhibition is online bullying.

Dooley, Pyzalski & Cross suggests that anonymity heightens the threatening nature of the online bullying act or the victim's resultant sense of powerlessness (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). Indeed, with anonymity, online bullies require neither the physical nor the social prowess that is normally seen in face-to-face bullying; instead online communication technology allows for continuous onslaught unrestrained by physical boundary (Sticca & Perren, 2013). Dissociative anonymity and minimizing authority emboldens the online bully. Ybarra and Mitchell aptly describes it in the following quote (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004),

> "the anonymity associated with online interactions may strip away many aspects of socially accepted roles, leading the Internet to act as a potential equalizer for aggressive acts."

Further, given the fact that online bully does not instantly see his victim and the effect his actions have on the victim it is difficult to decipher the intention of the online bully as to the extent to which he actually meant to cause harm (the solipsistic introjection). Despite the extensive research findings on anonymity as a prerequisite for online bullying, it has been found that many victims know the identity of their online bully. Juvonen & Gross for example, suggests in a survey conducted of over 1400 teens aged between 12 and 17 year-old showed that 73% of participants who were victims of online bullying knew the identity of their bully (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). This was supported by a nationally representative survey in the U.S. that notes a lower percentage of 54% of victims knew their bully's identity (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Espelage, 2012). This indicates that there is an overlap between online and offline lives of those involved such that online victims often know their bully from the offline world (Levy et al., 2012).

Langos suggests a distinction must be made between direct (private communications such as a text message) and indirect (public communication such as a social networking site) forms of online bullying (Langos, 2012). He argued that the repetitious nature of the behavior is more evident in direct private bullying where the online bully "directs the electronic communications directly at the victim by way of instant messaging, text or multimedia messaging, or email". "Repetition" as a requirement in conventional bullying therefore is more easily complied with in online bullying as compared with that of offline bullying since aggressive emails or threatening text messages can be sent repeatedly and expeditiously via modern technologies.

It is also possible for a victim to be bullied by being the recipient of voluminous aggressive online comments and disparaging remarks. In