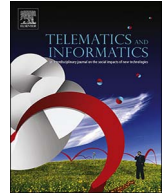


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# Actions, emotional reactions and cyberbullying – From the lens of bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders among Malaysian young adults

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examined the emotional reactions and actions involving cyberbullying, focusing on the cyber bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders. Gender analysis was conducted to examine if males and females behave and react differently. Self-administered surveys were used to gather data from a large sample of 1158 young adults, mostly university students in Malaysia ( $M_{age} = 21.0$  years;  $SD = 2.16$ ). Findings indicate the presence of cyberbullying perpetration after the schooling years, with 8% ( $N = 93$ ) bullying, 18.6% ( $N = 216$ ) victimization, 15.2% ( $N = 174$ ) bullying and victimization, and 53.4% ( $N = 675$ ) witnessing a cyberbullying incident in the past one year. Most of the bullies reported to be remorseful; however the majority did nothing after a perpetration. Most of the victims on the other hand, experienced anger, sadness and depression after a victimization with the majority claiming to have defended themselves (75%). The majority of the bully-victims regretted their actions, pitied the victims and felt angry after a cyberbullying perpetration/victimization. Bystanders mostly reported feeling pity for the victim and angry at the bullies, with the majority (61.5%) claiming to have defended the victims. However, 40% of them behaved indifferently out of fear retaliation. Finally, gender analysis revealed females to have significantly experienced more emotions than males whereas more males did nothing after a cyberbullying incident, both as victims and bystanders.

## 1. Introduction

Cyberbullying has been described in accordance with definitions of traditional bullying, as a harmful behavior that is intentional, carried out repeatedly and over time, and takes place in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). It is often regarded as a willful and repeated harm on an individual/group (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008), with the key distinctive characteristics being the use of technological mediums (i.e. email, smart phones, social media, instant messengers, blogs etc.).

Cyberbullying occurrences often involve multiple parties, with the prominent ones being the bullies, victims and bystanders (i.e. witnesses). Bullies are often referred to those who perpetrate a bullying incident; victims are those who have been bullied whereas bystanders are people who have witnessed a bullying/victimization incident online, regardless of them being passive (indifferent) or active (i.e. defended the victim, reported the incident etc.). There is a consensus across studies that cyber bullies fit the profile of being aggressive, manipulative, and exploitive, and lack empathic concerns as opposed to victims who are often associated with low self-esteem, inability to adapt coping mechanisms and susceptible to internalized psychological problems such as anxiety and

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depression (Brack and Caltabiano, 2014; Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Doane et al., 2014; Pettalia et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2015; Kokkinos et al., 2014). Bystanders on the other hand are often reported to be indifferent, citing reasons such as fear of retaliation (Kraft, 2011; Wong-Lo, 2009; Macháčková et al., 2013), low sense of responsibility or civic concerns (Runions and Bak, 2015; Weber et al., 2013), and lower empathic concerns (Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Both traditional and online bullying studies revealed relationships between bullying and victimization, and thus the emergence of another role, that is, bully-victims. Bully-victims are people with dual roles – they have bullied someone, and they have been bullied as well. Several studies have reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and hostility compared to the other roles (Kelly et al., 2015; Kokkinos et al., 2014).

Prevalence rates worldwide show variance in terms of samples (i.e. young children, adolescents and young adults) and timeframe (i.e. incident within past month, past three months and past one year). For example, a South Korean study found 34% of the middle and high school students were involved in cyberbullying as bullies (6.3%), victims (14.6%), or both bullies and victims (13.1%) (Lee and Shin, 2017). Kokkinos et al. (2014) reported 14% of bullies, 11% of victims and 33% bully-victims among 430 university students in Greece. In US, Schenk et al. (2013) classified 7.5% of college students as pure cyberbullies, with the remaining 2.4% as bully-victims among a sample of 799 students. Meanwhile, a study targeting young adults comprising of both university students and working adults between 17 and 30 years old in Malaysia found approximately 33.6% of cyberbullies, 39.7% of victims, and 61% of bystanders, measured within the last 6 months (Balakrishnan, 2015).

The extant of the literature revealed most cyberbullying studies to have focused on the prevalence rates of this behavior as a bully, victim, bully-victim and bystander (Barkoukis et al., 2015; Beckman et al., 2013; Park et al., 2014; Kokkinos et al., 2014), motives for cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2017; Doane et al., 2014; Kowalski et al., 2014), and the relationships between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010; Song and Oh, 2018; Yubero et al., 2017). Others have looked into self-esteem (Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Chang et al., 2013; Cénat et al., 2014; Kowalski and Limber, 2013) and empathy (Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Doane et al., 2014; Pettalia et al., 2013) as predictors of cyberbullying. However, studies reporting on the actions taken, and the emotional reactions experienced by bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders are scarce. Prevalence rates provide an idea to the severity of the cyberbullying phenomenon; hence it is important to examine the estimates for the actions taken and, emotional reactions experienced by the victims, bullies, bully-victims and bystanders so that appropriate interventions such as awareness and counseling programs can be designed accordingly, if need be.

The experience of cyberbullying (e.g. prevalence, causes and consequences) may vary widely according to context (e.g. school or the workplace) and individual factors (e.g. differences between children and older adolescents), therefore interventions require a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon in specific populations. Cyberbullying is prevalent among the young generations worldwide, however scant research has focused on the older cohort, i.e. university students and working adults (Crosslin and Golman, 2014; Gahagan et al., 2016; Kokkinos et al., 2014; Yubero et al., 2017). The present study aims to address the aforementioned gaps by investigating the prevalence rates of actions and emotions felt due to cyberbullying among the young adults in Malaysia, as recent studies have shown cyberbullying to still exists after the schooling years (Balakrishnan, 2015, 2017). Additionally, a gender effect is also examined in terms of these actions and reactions experienced among the bullies, victims and bystanders.

The remaining paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the background details pertaining to this study, including the actions taken and the emotional reactions experienced by the bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders, their prevalence rates and gender effect. The research design is presented in Section 3, followed by the results and discussion. The paper is finally concluded in Section 5.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Cyberbullying actions: bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders

The actions taken by bullies, victims, bully-victims and bystanders vary according to several factors, including personality traits, age and social influence, among others. For instance, school children reported blocking one's identity, telling someone, ignoring the incident, deleting the messages, and interestingly, bullying the bully among the methods for dealing with cyberbully victimization (Dehue et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008). On the other hand, an American focus group study among 54 college students (mean age of 19 years old) found 13.2% of the students to deal with cyberbullying on their own, citing independence and autonomy as the reasons for not reporting cyberbullying to others when it occurs (Crosslin and Golman, 2014). The literature however, revealed that majority of the studies that have explored the actions taken focused on cyber victims.

Recent studies have begun exploring the roles of bystanders in cyberbullying, which vary in levels of involvement such as ameliorating the victimization by positively intervening on behalf of the victim (i.e. defender/upstander, prosocial), reinforce or participate in the bullying (i.e. assistant, anti-social), or being passive by remaining silent (i.e. outsiders, indifferent) (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; DeSmet et al., 2014; Kraft, 2011). Estimates often indicate a high number of bystanders in cyberbullying perpetration regardless of the samples (Balakrishnan, 2015, 2017; Huang and Chou, 2010; Song and Oh, 2018). For example, studies targeting young adults ranging between 17 and 35 years old in Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2015, 2017), reported 61% and 70% of bystanders, respectively.

Despite the anonymity, wider audience and options for more discreet interventions provided by the cyberspace, most studies indicate low interventions (Barlinska et al., 2013; Song and Oh, 2018). What is more concerning is the bystanders are significantly more likely to reinforce the cyberbully in online as compared to offline settings (Barlinska et al., 2013; Hinduja and Patchin, 2013). Several reasons have been documented pertaining to their lack of involvement, including the presence of a large online audience (i.e. diffusion of responsibility) (Brody and Vangelisti, 2016; Fischer et al., 2011), fear of being tormented or ridiculed by the bully, fear of

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