



# Cyberbullying perpetration and victimization among adolescents in Hong Kong



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## ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a growing concern worldwide. Using a sample of 1917 secondary adolescents from seven schools, five psychometric measures (self-efficacy, empathy level, feelings regarding a harmonious school, sense of belonging to the school, and psychosocial wellbeing) and five scales regarding bullying experiences (cyber- and traditional bullying perpetration and victimization; reactions to cyberbullying victimization) were administered to explore the prevalence of cyberbullying in Hong Kong. Findings indicated that male adolescents were more likely than female adolescents to cyberbully others and to be cyber-victimized. Cyberbullying perpetration and victimization were found to be negatively associated with the adolescents' psychosocial health and sense of belonging to school. Cyber- and traditional bullying were positively correlated. Multivariate analyses indicated that being male, having a low sense of belonging to school, involvement in traditional bullying perpetration, and experiencing cyber-victimization were associated with an increased propensity to cyberbully others.

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## 1. Introduction

Technology is advancing rapidly, and peer harassment and aggression are no longer limited to traditional bullying through physical contact. Over the past decade, information and communication technology (ICT) has become increasingly important in the lives of adolescents. In a report by Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005), it is estimated that close to 90% of American adolescents aged 12 to 17 years surf the Internet, with 51% of them using it on a daily basis. Nearly half of the adolescents surveyed have personal mobile phones, and 33% have used a mobile phone to send a text message (Lenhart et al., 2005). Such heavy use of the Internet is not novel among adolescents in Hong Kong. Many empirical studies have been conducted on Hong Kong adolescents on their excessive and/or addictive use of the Internet. Findings of recent studies indicate that a substantially high prevalence rate of internet addiction is reported among Hong Kong adolescents (range from 7% to 38%; e.g., Fu, Chan, Wong, & Yip, 2010; Leung, 2004; Shek, Tang, & Lo, 2008). In reality, the heavy usage of ICT such as instant messaging, e-mail, text messaging, blogs, and social networking sites not only allows adolescents to connect with friends and family, but at the same time also creates the potential to meet and interact with others in harmful ways (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Cyberbullying or online bullying is one such growing concern.

Traditional bullying is a widespread problem in both school and community settings, and has long been researched by scholars (Arora,

1994; Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Olweus, 1978, 1993; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004; Wong, 2004). Bullying, in general, involves an individual being exposed to negative actions by one or more individuals regularly and for an extended period of time (Olweus, 1978). This can take the form of physical, verbal, or nonverbal actions (Olweus, 1993, 1994). Today, most developmental psychologists and educational researchers agree that school bullying is a form of aggression in which one or more students physically, psychologically, or even sexually harass another student repeatedly over a period of time. The potentially serious negative consequences of being either a victim or a bully are recognized by most researchers (Farrington, 1993; Slee, 1995; Smith et al., 2004).

In recent years, technological advancement has led to a new form of bullying: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is generally defined as an individual or a group using ICT to deliberately and repeatedly harass or threaten another individual or group by sending or posting cruel texts or images (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a, 2004b). Broadly speaking, cyberbullying is a form of verbal or written aggressive or harassing behavior that takes place in a cyber-setting. Personal computers and mobile phones are by far the most common electronic devices favored by young bullies to victimize others. Cyberbullying behavior may consist of overtly aggressive harassment manifested through electronic text, such as sending abusive or threatening messages to the victim. Relational aggressive behavior may consist of denigration (i.e., posting embarrassing photos, rumors, or personal information on the Internet), impersonation (i.e., manipulating the victim's social relationships by sending messages to others through the victim's hacked electronic account), outing/trickery (i.e., divulging personal, sensitive, or embarrassing information that was shared in confidence in an electronic format to unintended recipients), or exclusion

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(i.e., the purposeful barring of the victim's entrance to an online social activity) (Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2009; Willard, 2007). At its most extreme, cyberbullying can be very serious and may involve stalking episodes, sexual harassment, and death threats (Katz, 2001; Li, 2005; Shariff, 2005; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

Cyberbullies, as with traditional school bullies, are malicious offenders who seek implicit or explicit pleasure or profit through the mistreatment of other individuals (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Cyberbullies, in general, are heavy Internet users and attach great importance to the Internet. According to Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a), over half of cyberbullies surveyed claimed to be expert Internet users, compared to just one-third of non-bully students (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). As reported by Hinduja and Patchin (2008), reasons frequently cited by American adolescents for engaging in cyberbullying behavior are "revenge," "he/she deserves it," and "for fun." There are three distinct categories of cyberbullies: the "vengeful angels," the "power hungry," and "revenge of the nerds" (the latter was coined by Aftab (2007) to label overtly intelligent adolescent cyberbullies). "Mean girls" is another fast-growing subgroup of bullies, whereby girls bond with each other by attacking those who are not part of their chosen group (Aftab, 2007).

The offender–victim relationship seems to be a unique feature of cyberbullying. A vast majority of cyberbullies (as high as 84%) know their victims (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). Cyberbullies were also found to be significantly older than their victims (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). Unlike traditional bullying, bullying via ICTs significantly reduces the likelihood of being recognized by victims, since there need not be in physical contact. Some studies found that a high percentage of cyber-victims had no idea who their cyberbullies were (Li, 2005, 2007; Wolak et al., 2007) or merely suspected that the cyberbullies were peers from school (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Other studies disagreed; for example, the National Children's Home (2005) indicated that nearly 73% of respondents reported knowing their cyberbully, while only the remaining 26% stated that their cyberbully was a stranger to them.

## 2. The present study

In Hong Kong, cyberbullying is an under-researched topic. However, some cases about cyberbullying have been reported by the Hong Kong mass media. In 2009, a 21-year-old adolescent, Hin, was falsely accused of pushing his pregnant girlfriend down the stairs and causing her to have a miscarriage. This scandal was widely spread on the Internet, resulting in a number of people searching for and disclosing Hin's personal information via the Internet. A group was set up on Facebook to blame and criticize Hin's misbehavior, and within four days, a total of 28,000 "netizens" joined the social group. Due to this fictitious charge against him, Hin became frustrated and skipped school. Eventually, his parents lodged a police report and even offered a reward of approximately US\$13,000 for the girl who started the rumor (Potagonist offers a reward of seeking innocence for an online attack, 2009). A more recent cyberbullying episode occurred in 2010 when a secondary school student who refused to offer his bus seat to an elderly man was video-recorded by a witness, who uploaded the clip on Youtube. More than 46,000 hits were recorded within a few days and many negative comments criticizing this student were documented (Bad marks as boy refuses to give up seat, 2010). These are but two of the many cyberbullying episodes reported by the mass media in Hong Kong.

Clearly, the high prevalence and severity of cyberbullying, especially among school-aged adolescents, underscores the need for further research and additional measures to determine effective and timely intervention and prevention strategies. Unfortunately, Hong Kong has limited abilities to systematically investigate the definition, prevalence, and characteristics of bullies and victims, or to tackle cyberbullying problems. This study aims to explore the prevalence, nature, and characteristics of bullies and victims of this under-researched and recently

emerging form of bullying behavior in Hong Kong. This study intends to explore the correlation between cyberbullying experience and reported psychosocial well-being.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants and procedures

Hong Kong is a special administrative region (SAR) of China, and about 95% of the population is of Chinese descent. The data collection for this study was conducted during the second half of 2010, surveying secondary one (6th–7th grade in the US) and two (7th–8th grade in the US) students in Hong Kong. This age group was chosen because Slonje and Smith (2008) asserted that cyberbullying rates were much higher for adolescents aged 12 to 15. In addition, these students were better able to complete self-report questionnaires than primary school students. The sampling frame was based on the standardized school list generated by the Education and Manpower Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR government. In order to minimize any possible confounding effect of academic achievement on participant behavior, only secondary schools in the middle band (i.e., schools with academic ratings in the middle 33%) were sampled using a computerized random sampling technique. Seven of the selected schools agreed to participate in this study.

A total of 1917 participants were recruited for this study, of which 99% provided valid gender data. Parental and participant informed consents were obtained; it was clearly stated that there would be no monetary reward for participation and that participation was entirely voluntary. The participants were assured that their questionnaire responses would be treated as confidential and used only for research purposes. Questionnaires were administered by three trained research assistants in an assigned classroom. On average, 20 min was required to complete the questionnaire. Overall, participants were between 12 and 15 years old ( $M = 13.36$ ), with nearly two-thirds of them (64.3%) aged either 13 or 14 years. Out of the total sample, 54.6% were boys and 45.4% were girls. Participants' educational level was distributed almost equally between secondary one (49.8%) and secondary two (50.2%).

### 3.2. Measures

A collection of psychometric measures was used to examine the psychological properties of interest: participants' perceived self-efficacy, empathy level, feelings regarding a harmonious school, sense of belonging to the school, and general psychosocial conditions. These psychological measures were found, in previous studies that sampled Hong Kong adolescents and children (Wong, Cheng, & Ma, 2010; Wong, Cheng, Ngan, & Ma, 2011; Wong, Lok, Lo, & Ma, 2008), to be important correlates in predicting and minimizing traditional school bullying perpetration and victimization. Therefore, these measures were adopted in this study to examine if such effects are to be found in cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Scales were used to assess a variety of bullying experiences: participants' general bullying perpetration and victimization, cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, and reactions to cyberbullying victimization. These selected measures were previously used to examine bullying behavior in Hong Kong, ensuring sufficient validity and reliability for the chosen context (see Wong et al., 2008).

### 3.3. Self-efficacy

The General Self subscale of the Chinese Adolescent Self-Esteem scales (CASES; Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, 2003; Cheng & Watkins, 2000) was used to assess participants' self-efficacy. Based on a six-point response format (1 = definitely strongly disagree; 6 = definitely strongly agree), this scale contains eight items (total score ranging from eight to 48) with a higher score indicating higher perceived self-efficacy. Sample items include, "I have full confidence in

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