



# Cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia: The roles of gender, age and Internet frequency



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent of young adults' ( $N = 393$ ; 17–30 years old) experience of cyberbullying, from the perspectives of cyberbullies and cyber-victims using an online questionnaire survey. The overall prevalence rate shows cyberbullying is still present after the schooling years. No significant gender differences were noted, however females outnumbered males as cyberbullies and cyber-victims. Overall no significant differences were noted for age, but younger participants were found to engage more in cyberbullying activities (i.e. victims and perpetrators) than the older participants. Significant differences were noted for Internet frequency with those spending 2–5 h online daily reported being more victimized and engage in cyberbullying than those who spend less than an hour daily. Internet frequency was also found to significantly predict cyber-victimization and cyberbullying, indicating that as the time spent on Internet increases, so does the chances to be bullied and to bully someone. Finally, a positive significant association was observed between cyber-victims and cyberbullies indicating that there is a tendency for cyber-victims to become cyberbullies, and vice versa. Overall it can be concluded that cyberbullying incidences are still taking place, even though they are not as rampant as observed among the younger users.

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## 1. Introduction

During recent years, a considerable amount of research has been done on cyberbullying, which refers to “any behaviour performed through electronic media by individuals or groups of individuals that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010). It is also described as deliberate and repeated harm performed via mediums such as mobile phones, e-mails, Internet chats, social media and personal blogs (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Olthof, Goossens, Vermande, Aleva, and van der Meulen (2011) defines cyberbullying as a strategic behaviour of an individual to dominate another individual or a group of individuals. Cyberbullying may take various forms, such as, sending mean messages to a person's mobile phone, e-mail or social media accounts, spreading malicious rumours online, and sexting, that is circulating sexually suggestive pictures or messages about a person with the intention to hurt or humiliate someone.

Due to the technology advancement, the traditional bullying has transformed from being physical to virtual. The Internet is now an attractive platform for social interactions, permitting

anyone to say and do things anonymously. As such, cyberbullying may have devastating consequences on the victims, ranging from depression, isolation, anxiety to more serious consequences such as suicides. For instance, a very recent case of cyberbullying resulted in a Canadian teenager committing suicide after her photos of being assaulted were circulated on the Internet (Popkin, 2013). Malaysia is of no exception and several news reports and surveys have indicated that cyberbullying is growing rampantly. As a matter of fact, according to the Microsoft Global Youth Online Behaviour Survey, Malaysia is ranked 17th highest in cyberbullying among the twenty-five countries surveyed. The study also reported that 33% (compared with a 25 country average of 37%) of children aged between 8 and 17 years old have been subjected to a range of online activities that may be considered as cyberbullying (i.e. teased, called mean names and unfriendly treatment) (The Star Online, 2013a). Cyberbullying is not only extended to children, for example, during the most recent election in May 2013, many students, artists and social activists became cyber-victims when they were abused with foul languages and threatened with sexual violence via the social media by unscrupulous parties who wanted to cause racial divisions, fear and anger among the Malaysian citizens (Shankar, 2013; The Star Online, 2013b).

Work on bullying and cyberbullying among school children are in abundance (Adams, 2010; Beckman, Hagquist, & Hellström, 2013;

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Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Li, 2006; Li, 2007; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009; Park, Na, & Kim, 2014; Popovic-Citic, Djuric, & Cvetkovic, 2011; Smith, Mahdavi, & Carvalho, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), however, very few focused on college students (Ang & Goh, 2010; Chapell et al., 2006; Macdonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010) whereas adult participants were only investigated by Coyne, Chesney, Logan, and Madden (2009), which confirms that the majority of studies on cyberbullying were carried out among the younger population, that is, children and adolescents who are less than 17 years old. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine if cyberbullying stops during the schooling years, or does it not.

Moreover, literature shows most of the published work on cyberbullying were conducted in Europe (Beckman et al., 2013; Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Li, 2007; Navarro, Serna, Martínez, & Ruiz-oliva, 2013; Smith et al., 2008) and the United States (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Kowalski & Limber, 2007), with very few focusing on the Asian countries (Ang & Goh, 2010; Huang & Chou, 2010; Park et al., 2013). Only a single published study was found conducted in Malaysia (Faryadi, 2011), in which the author examined the emotional and physiological effects of cyberbullying among a group of university students. It is important to examine if the existing evidences reported by fellow researchers from other countries are generalizable across other cultural samples. Furthermore, given the overwhelming growth of the Internet and the use of social media, research efforts toward a better understanding of cyberbullying and its correlates is warranted, particularly in developing countries such as Malaysia. The current study was therefore undertaken to extend the literature and to fill the gaps by specifically investigating the prevalence of cyberbullying among the young adults in Malaysia, and to examine the roles of gender, age and Internet frequency in cyberbullying incidences. Additionally, the study also intends to investigate the correlations between cyberbullies and cyber-victims.

## 2. Related work

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is rather new; hence there is little agreement about the diverse categories of this violence. However, studies generally categorize cyberbullying based on some common categories. According to Willard (2007), cyberbullying may include:

- Flaming – an online fight using profanities and hostile languages,
- Slandering or denigration – hurting someone by spreading malicious rumours.
- Harassing – repeatedly sending offensive messages to someone.
- Masquerading – pretending to be someone else and sending messages to make another person look bad.
- Exclusion – intentionally excluding a person from an online group.

In simple terms, cyberbullying generally encompasses non-physical attacks which may include harmful teasing, telling lies, making rude or mean comments, making fun of another, spreading rumours, or making threatening or aggressive comments towards another person (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

### 2.1. Prevalence rate

Statistics and studies around the world show cyberbullying is growing rapidly. For instance, Kowalski and Limber (2007) studied cyberbullying among 3767 middle school students in the United

States, and found that 11% of their respondents were cyber-victims, 7% were cyberbullies or cyber-victims, and 4% were cyberbullies at least once over the past couple of months. Similarly, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) surveyed 84 American adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 years old regarding their involvement in traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Their results show approximately 50% of their respondents reported being cyber-victims and 22% participated as cyberbullies. Another study was carried out among 177 middle school students in Western Canada, with results indicating approximately 25% of the students reported being cyberbullied and almost 15% reported having bullied others via electronic communication tools (Li, 2007).

As for Asian samples, Huang and Chou (2010) investigated cyberbullying frequency among 545 junior high-school students in Taiwan. Their findings revealed almost 64% of the students reported having witnessed cyberbullying, 35% were cyberbullied, and 20.4% had cyberbullied others. Although limited to 365 Malaysian students from a single university, Faryadi (2011) found 16.6% of them had bullied someone outside the university between 2 and 3 times a month. Other than the limited sample, the authors focused on the emotional and physiological effects on cyber-victims, particularly on their academic performances.

Overall, the statistics show that cyberbullying is becoming a pervasive problem around the world and increasing at an alarming rate, particularly among the school-going children and adolescents.

### 2.2. Cyber-victims and cyberbullies

In the real world traditional bullies can also become bully victims (Ma, 2001), therefore cyberbullies may become cyber-victims as well, or vice versa. The findings of Canadian studies among middle school students revealed that bullying, cyberbullying, and victimization are closely related (Beran & Li, 2005; Li, 2007). For example, approximately one-third of 264 middle school students who were bullied also reported to have become cyber-victims, and 16.7% of them also admitted to cyberbullying others. Moreover, almost 30% of students were found to be cyberbullies and 27.3% of them were cyber-victims as well, indicating a tendency for cyberbullies to become cyber-victims, and vice versa (Li, 2007).

A similar correlation was observed among the Taiwanese students (Huang and Chou, 2010) whereby bystanders were found to more likely to be victims and to be bullies. The authors also reported a correlation between victims and bullies indicating a bully-victim cycle as Li (2007) and Beran and Li (2005).

### 2.3. Gendered roles

Studies on traditional bullying found gender to play an important role (Borg, 1999; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Seals & Young, 2003). For example, Crick et al. (1999) examined bullying behaviours among pre-schoolers and found boys were significantly more physically victimized than girls, whilst the girls were more relationally victimized (i.e. spreading rumours, excluding someone etc.). However, research on cyberbullying suggests that gender differences do not consistently emerge. For instance, some studies reported no gender differences between males and females either as a cyberbully or cyber-victim (Calvete et al., 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2010; Macdonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Topcu, Erdur-Baker, & Capa-Ayidin, 2008; Varjas, Henrich, & Meyers, 2009) while others found females more likely to become cyber-victims (Adams, 2010; Beckman et al., 2013; Dehue et al., 2008; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; Li, 2007; Navarro et al., 2013; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012; Smith et al., 2008). For example, in a study involving 92 school students aged between 11 and 16 years old, girls were found to be more involved in most forms of being cyberbullied than boys, regardless of the mediums

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