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Potential Personality Traits that Explain Cyberbullying among Youth in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study aims to produce a comprehensive understanding on cyberbullying among youth from the perspective of personality traits. The conceptual understanding on cyberbullying was gained by analysing available documents and literature. Several personality traits namely loneliness, self-esteem and empathy were found to influence cyberbullying among youth. Additionally, cyber victim experience was found to be another influential factor for cyberbullying. This article attempts to provide a way forward and highlight the need for concerned parties to understand cyberbullying among youth in Malaysia.
Keywords: Personality traits, Youth, Cyberbullying

Introduction

This paper focuses on possible personality traits that influence cyberbullying among youth in Malaysia. It is a conceptual paper and its initial stage focuses on the related theories that can be associated with cyberbullying namely Social Norms Theory, Social Cognitive Theory and Social and Moral Theory. The later part of the paper focuses on the four personality traits that influence cyberbullying namely loneliness, empathy, self-esteem, and cyber victims experience. Bullying involves at least two people and it might be done physically or verbally (Harper, 2008). Bullying refers to one's effort to gain power and superiority and it might be direct or indirect. As technology evolved so does the bullying. The abundance of online channels such as Social Networking (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc), Instant Messaging Application (WhatsApp, Line, etc) and Email (Gmail, Ymail) has geared the emergence of another type of bullying – cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can be understood as a scenario where an individual is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another individual via online or using digital technologies or mobile phones (Li, 2007). Although bullying and cyberbullying portray similarity in form and technique, nevertheless, there are several major differences identified. First, the offender identity can be hidden which ease them to strike blows against a victim without having to see the victim's physical response. Second, the

distancing effect offered by technologies has driven people to say and do crueller things compared to what is typical in a traditional face-to-face bullying situation.

Cyberbullying has become a worrying situation across the globe. In official statistic produced by Ipsos (2012), Indonesia has come out with the highest percentage of youth been cyberbullied (53.0%), followed by Sweden (51%) and India (45%). Similar to the global scenario, the Malaysian youth are recorded to either cyberbullying others or being cyberbullied by others. In a recent study done by Balakrishnan (2015), confirmed that slightly more than 40% of youth have been cyber victims while slightly more than 34% are cyberbullies. Referring to The 2014 CyberSAFE in Schools survey, within the Malaysia context, the online harassment seems to be a major concern as more than two third of youths are involving in inappropriate online actions such as calling others with mean names, posting improper messages and inappropriate photos. Making things worse, nearly two third of youth feel that there is nothing wrong with sending improper instant messaging, posting inappropriate photos, and pretending to be someone else in the virtual world.

Cyberbully actions are confirmed to result in drops in academic grades and performance, skipping school, low self-esteem, complaints of illnesses, social exclusion and use of alcohol or drugs (Faryadi, 2011; Petty, 2012; Nixon, 2014). Victoria State of Government (2013) on the other hand has looked on impacts of cyberbullying on low levels of resilience, depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and isolation, have nightmares, feel wary or suspicious of others and in certain case lead to suicide.

As the cyberbullying in Malaysia are recorded to increase (Balakrishnan, 2015, The 2014 CyberSAFE in Schools survey, 2014) and result in serious impacts to the victims (Faryadi, 2011; Petty, 2012; Nixon, 2014), to plan a prevention program is seen as vital. Prior this, producing a comprehensive understanding of the influential factors of cyberbullying is vital as it can assist the concern parties to develop plan of actions that are in line with the need, ability and interests of the target groups.

In response to the needs, scholars across the globe has placed their efforts on examining the effects of several factors on cyberbullying namely social environment, traditional bullying, internet usage, parenting and media exposure (den Hamer and Konjin, 2015; Scharkow and Quandt, 2013; Robinson, 2012; Tanrikulu and Campbell, 2015; Randa, 2013). Despite these efforts however, personality traits are found to offer prominent explanations on cyberbullying (Postmers and Spears, 1998; Casas et al., 2013 Barlinka et al., 2013; Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011; Hinduja and Patchin., 2011, Ybarra, 2004; Cacioppo and Hawkley., 2003; Srabstein & Piazza, 2008; Åkerlind and Hörnquist, 1992; Gopalakrishnan and Sundram, 2014; Cenat et al., 2014; Brack and Caltabiano., 2014).

Unlike the global scenario where many completed studies on the impacts of personality traits can be found, for example, empathy (Postmers and Spears, 1998; Casas et al., 2013 Barlinka et al., 2013; Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011), cyber victims experience (Hinduja and Patchin., 2011, Ybarra, 2004) loneliness (Cacioppo and Hawkley., 2003; Srabstein & Piazza, 2008; Åkerlind and Hörnquist, 1992; Gopalakrishnan and Sundram, 2014) and self-esteem (Cenat et al., 2014; Brack and Caltabiano., 2014) scenario in Malaysia are far less agreed upon and clear which then results lack of understanding and rise few queries such as

1- Is there any theory that can explain cyberbullying among youth in Malaysia?
2- What are personality traits that influence cyberbullying among youth in Malaysia?

To response to these queries, the main aim of this study is to examine potential personality traits that can be associated with cyberbullying. To achieve this, comprehensive literature reviews had been done by referring to established journal databases such as Science Direct (http://www.sciencedirect.com/), Taylor & Francis (http://www.tandfonline.com/), Sage Publication (http://www.sagepub.com/home.nav) and Emerald Publisher (http://www.emeraldinsight.com/). Furthermore, the search for related documents was also made by using commercial search engines like google scholars. In addition to this, a number of hardcopy research articles, books, monographs, and project reports were also reviewed. The analyses performed resulted in a brief discussion with regard to related theories on cyberbullying and potential personality traits that affect cyberbullying among youth.

Related theories on cyberbullying
There are several theories that can be associated with cyberbullying and within the scope of this study, three related theories are discussed namely Social Norms Theory, Social Learning Theory and Social Moral Theory.

Social Norms Theory
Social norms theory is basically people's idea about acceptable attitudes and behaviours in a social environment. In most cases, their idea of these norms could lead them towards certain behaviour. When they started to mistook the norms of their peer group, - when they started to inaccurately think an attitude or behaviour is more or less common that it actually the case- they would choose to get involve with behaviour that sync with those false norms. Pluralistic Ignorance is a term to calculate social norms theory and refers to the incorrect idea that one's private attitude, judgement or behaviours are different from others. In relation to cyberbullying, certain individuals may think that name-calling, spreading rumours, teasing and other forms of social cruelty in a virtual world are accepted behaviors by others and they might decide to get involve or to take a stand against such behavior. Over time, these behaviors may become a common thing for that individual and they may care less about consequences that other might suffers because of their actions.

Social Learning Theory
Social learning theory accentuates that individuals learn behaviors via frequent and repeated modelling of particular actions. Within the scope of this study, repeatedly witnessing cyberbullying actions by their peers and siblings or perhaps their parents, might place much influence on the individual behaviour (Gleitman, 1981). For example, having witnessed peers who regularly bullying other person in the virtual world presents a model that the individual may imitate with peers whom they view as potential victims. Social learning theory denotes that dominance or social status can be gained via aggression. Proactive styles of aggression for example, can result in a greater popularity, power, social status, and other tangible rewards (Fite & Colder, 2007).

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Social and Moral Theory

Social and moral theory emphasizes on processing deficits among individual might result in rejection by the peer group (Monk et al., 2005). Rejection by peer group at school potentially limits room for individual to experience positive interactions and at the same time exacerbate processing difficulties (Nesdale et al., 2014). Furthermore, it gears towards a greater frustration and aggressive behavior. Understandably, limited chance to engage positively with peers might stimulate this individual to believe that bullying is a viable option through which to reach their desired goals (Prinstein et al., 2001). In relation to the influence of social and moral cognition on cyberbullying behaviors, there are two competing models. Drawing on the social skills deficit model, aggressive individuals are expected to face difficulties with some aspect of social information processing "at one or more of the following points in a five-stage process of evaluating and responding to social situations: social perception, interpretation of social cues perceived, goal selection, response strategy generation and response decisions" (Sutton et al., 1999). For example, within the scope of hostile attribution bias, the individual incline to understand ambiguous situations as having hostile intent while responding more aggressively than nonaggressive peers. Referring to the competing perspective, individual who bully may have adaptive skills and abilities, and hence it is vital not to assume that aggressive individual or those who bully have specific deficits. Understandably, aggressive individual or those who bully may be quite skilled and have highly developed qualities which are needed for building a relationship, and this comprises social skills and extroversion (Hawley et al., 2007). Such individuals may use this advantage for their own personal gain, for example, being a leader, forming a gang or dominating others (Sutton et al., 1999). Previous studies are seen to left gaps on the social cognitive skills of those who bully, including their capability to take social perspectives and to decode emotional information (Sutton et al., 1999), and their ability to choose who they want to bully in a manner that gears them to avoid detection and thus consequences (Monks et al., 2005).

Potential Personality traits that influence Cyberbullying

To examine what personality traits that affect cyberbullying are of great importance in conducting studies as it gears towards suggestion of measures and solutions. Based on the review, there are four personality traits that are commonly associated with cyberbullying namely loneliness, empathy, self-esteem and cyber victim experience.

Loneliness

According to Cacioppo and Hawkley (2003), loneliness is commonly perceived as social isolation and not physical separation and it might influence the individual decision to commit cyberbullying. Social and moral theory clarifies that loneliness might limit individual chance to engage positively with peers which eventually stimulate them to believe that bullying is a viable option through which to reach their desired goals. Individual who are lonely or rejected usually seeking and relying on social supports and to perpetrate cyberbullying may demonstrate their empowerment or aggression against those perceived to have rejected their advances (Srabstein & Piazza, 2008). Rejected or lonely individual tend to be aggressive and have quite skilled and

highly developed qualities which are needed for building a relationship, and this comprises social skills and extroversion (Hawley et al., 2007). Such individuals may use this advantage for their own personal gain, for example, being a leader, forming a gang or dominating others (Sutton et al., 1999).

Empathy
Empathy can be referred to the sharing and understanding of other people's emotional state. (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). It covers cognitive and affective aspects which correspond to the 'cold' and 'hot' aspects of empathy (McIllwain, 2002). Although both aspects confirmed to have an influence on cyberbullying, nevertheless, affective empathy are found to have a stronger influence on bullying behaviour (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011).

A number of studies have looked into the relation between those with low empathy and cyberbullying (Casas et al., 2013 Barlinka et al., 2013). Those with low empathy are seen to feel safer, comfort with the anonymous identity in the virtual world and reduce their sensitivity towards others which eventually affect their inclination to bully others in the virtual world (Brewer and Kerslake, 2015; Casas et al., 2013). It is also found that those with low empathy prone to aggression and eager to gain social status (Casas et al., 2013 Barlinka et al., 2013). Proactive styles of aggression, for example, can result in a greater popularity, power, social status, and other tangible rewards (Fite & Colder, 2007). These processes combined with degraded social and contextual cues may enable a dip in both affective and cognitive empathy which results in deregulated behavior for youth (Ang and Goh, 2010).

Self-esteem
Drawing on Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem can be understood as 'a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the self while Leary and Downs (1995) comprehend self-esteem as an internal representation of social acceptance and rejection, and a psychological gauge monitoring the degree whether a person is included or excluded by their peers. Self-esteem is a condition that hinders individual from realising their actual ability. An individual with low self-esteem is commonly associated with feelings of unworthy, incapable, and incompetent. Understandably, due to their poor feelings about him or herself, their self-esteem can be persistent.

There are diverse findings on the relationship between self-esteem and cyberbullying. Cenat et al. (2014) and Brack and Caltabiano (2014) confirmed on low self-esteem among those involved in cyberbullying while Patchin and Hinduja (2011) concluded that low self-esteem person prone to be a cyber victim than be a cyberbully, perhaps due to their low confident character. There are also previous findings that confirmed no significant difference between the self-esteem of bullies and non-bullies (Patchin and Hinduja, 2011; Egan and Perry, 1998) while some research has consistently signalled that the relationship to self-esteem, irrespective of its direction, is weaker among bullies than it is among victims (Jankauskiene et al., 2008; Patchin and Hinduja, 2011).

Cyber victims experience

Previous studies found that cyber aggression and cyberbullying can be caused by victimization, either experienced face-to-face or in the cyber context (Wright and Li, 2013; Hinduja and Patchin 2009; König et al. 2010; Sontag et al., 2011). Revenge might be the main reason why cyber victims decide to involve in cyberbullying. Referring to Patchin and Hinduja (2011), cyber victims experienced strain (resulted from the cyberbully) and eventually feel angry or frustrated and they are more at risk to engage in deviant behaviour – in the case of this study, cyberbullying. Strain places pressure for cyber victims to take corrective action; they want to do something so that they will not feel so bad. Obviously, one of strained youth choices is to bully others (cyberbullying can be one of the options).

With the availability of advance technologies such as smart phones, the internet, computers, and gaming consoles, it excludes the victim's concern which they might have if they demonstrate their anger and frustration out on someone else in the face-to-face context (Hinduja and Patchin 2009). These technologies may provide victim's unanimous virtual identity while at the same time offers them a quick and easy way to seek retribution.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding on cyberbullying among Malaysian youth. Several personality traits namely loneliness, self-esteem and empathy were found to influence cyberbullying among youth while cyber victim experience was found to be an additional factor. Awareness programs on cyberbullying must be conducted. Although there are existing programs such as Cybersafe by Digi, more similar programs should be exposed to youth. Having more awareness programs expose youth to the danger of cyberbullying and its bad impacts to them. Cooperation between government agencies (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission), private companies especially one related to telecommunication and education and NGOs can contribute towards success whereby their experience and knowledge on combating cyberbullying should be shared and disseminated to the youth.

This study's review was limited to four factors and obviously, other factors outside the discussed factors (or perhaps embedded within them) deserve depth and further inquiry for developing a better understanding regarding cyberbullying phenomenon among youth in Malaysia. Based on the four factors discussed namely loneliness, self-esteem, empathy, and cyber victim experience we can begin to explore how Malaysian youth get involve in cyberbullying. Arguably, the information discussed in this review can be applied to another context of the community as well, as there is a mounting need to explore other several angles and perspectives in relation to cyberbullying.

A connection between these four personality traits with cyberbullying has been explored and provide a basis for future studies. Towards this end, the authors are planning to use the discussed personality traits to conduct research in four areas in Selangor namely Petaling, Klang, Kuala Langat and Hulu Selangor. According to Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (2016) Selangor has the highest mobile internet subscriber (5.7 million) and broadband subscriber (0.96 million) in Malaysia which denotes higher cyberbullying risks in

this state. The study in Selangor will give a comprehensive picture of the ability of discussed personality traits namely loneliness, self-esteem, empathy, cyber victim experience on cyberbullying. In addition to potential practical outcomes of pursuing this line of research, understanding personality traits on cyberbullying can further extend our knowledge and application of influential factors on cyberbullying into new disciplines and cultures which then gears towards a better theory on cyberbullying.

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