Cyberbullying: Why Children do not tell?
Jaslina bt Mohd Tajuddin\textsuperscript{a*}, Wan, Puspa Melati\textsuperscript{b}, Priyadarshini Muthukrishnan\textsuperscript{c},

SEGi University, Faculty of Communication and Creative Design
SEGi University, Centre for Teaching and Learning
HELP University, Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, Education and Languages
Corresponding author: JaslinabtMohdTajuddin, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Communication and Creative Design
SEGi University, B2-01 Block 2, JalanTeknologi 2/1, Kota Damansara, PJU 5, 47810 Petaling Jaya, Selangor

*Corresponding author Email: jaslina@segi.edu.my

Abstract

Cyberbullying dialogue within the academia, policy makers and socially concern citizens have been ongoing for decades. Researches and discussions have been done to understand the cyberbullying phenomena itself – the definition, types and prevalence; the effects of cyberbullying – socially, psychologically and at times physically when the cyberbullying is brought to the real physical world; its contributing factors to cyberbullying – the hours spent on social media, role of schools, socioeconomic status, personality, bully-victim role, coping styles, among others. Though there are some that studied family as a contributing or mediating variable, there are still gaps in regards to the role of family in cyberbullying. Previous researchers have argued that children who are victims of cyberbullying often do not share such experiences with adults namely their teachers, counsellors and parents. Hence this paper aims to provide the frame to answer the question of why children generally do not speak up on their experiences even with their family members. The discussion is based on PusPA Model that looks at the push and pull factors of speaking up at micro and meso level analysis. Findings of this research are divided into two parts; agency and social institution. As for the agency level, the push factors include the feeling they deserve to be bullied and the act is harmless. As for the pull factor, the children choose to tell people when they think the act would affect them negatively and for some, it is part of their personality to open up. For the social institution, the push factors are fear of cyberbully consequences, afraid of being blamed by family members and do not want to reveal their secrets. As for pull factors, the children choose to tell as the family members are non-judgmental and supportive.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; experience sharing; pull factors; push factors; family; PusPA Model; agency level; social institution level


1. Introduction

On May 15, 2019, Malaysia was in shocked by an incident involving a 16-year-old teen who committed suicide after her Instagram poll. She was believed to have taken her own life after putting up a vote on Instagram to decide on whether or not she should live or die. A total of 69 percent of those polled chose ‘die’ and the teen eventually took her life (The Straits Times, 2019). According to Gobind Singh Deo, the Minister of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia, the incident is a serious one as the use of social media can indeed endanger people’s lives. This is among hundreds of cases among children which coincide with the rise of cyberbullying via social media. Such claims have been supported by statistics put forth by experts for example one out of ten parents stated that a child in their homes were being cyberbullied in 2009\textsuperscript{1} and at least 34\% of young people have experienced cyberbullying in the U.S.\textsuperscript{2}. These figures are believed to increase annually around the world.

To be more specific, Willard\textsuperscript{3} has outlined eight typology of cyberbullying namely denigration, harassment, flaming, impersonation, trickery, outing, stalking, and exclusion to provide a more holistic view on the types of actions that can be considered as cyberbullying.

Young users are a concern as they seemed to rely much on technology and hence may be more susceptible to cyberbullying. Statistics from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (in Lenhart et al.\textsuperscript{4}) reported that 77\% of teenagers own a cell phone, 95\% utilize the Internet and 80\% hold a profile on social networking. Cyberbullying thus is also defined as a deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technology by an individual or group to threaten or harm others\textsuperscript{5}.
The prevalence is worrisome as the effect of cyberbullying is staggering. Among the established psychological effects of being cyberbullied are depressed and anxiety\textsuperscript{6-7} sad and frustrated\textsuperscript{6}, low self-esteem, angry as well as experiencing suicidal thoughts and tendencies\textsuperscript{6-9}. There are also evidences of physical effect suffered by cyberbullied individuals such as headaches and recurrent abdominal pain\textsuperscript{10}. Social effects of cyberbullying include inability to develop healthy social relationships, anti-social behaviors and withdrawal from social settings. There were also evidences that cyberbullying also affect victims'academic performances, inability to focus in class and high absenteeism\textsuperscript{11}. In addition, substance abuse and delinquency\textsuperscript{6,12-13} are not uncommon among those being bullied. The effects may also not be immediate which resulted in emotional instability and social issues for cyberbullied victims in their adulthood. In fact, there has been evidence of more pessimistic future orientation among bullied individuals than adults who have never been\textsuperscript{14}.

However, the authors argue that the external training and assumed role of significant others such as family in supporting children in managing cyberbullying is a complex one. This is because the experience faced by these children may be labelled differently by children and how they choose to cope with it is another underexplored area. It is therefore the focus of this paper to look at the role of family in lieu of technology use of children and to examine the contributing and hindrance factors for children in sharing their cyberbullying experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Role of Family in Cyberbullying

As an agent of socialization, family is arguably one of the important sources of social support that one can have. Family can play a huge role in assisting children to prevent and manage cyberbullying. However, previous research noted that children’s unwillingness to talk and discuss about cyberbullying with their parents is a major issue in prevention and treatment\textsuperscript{15}. This is a concern as both genders are equally susceptible to bullying. There are evidences of increasing bullying cases among 14 and 15-year-old teenagers and the number of cyberbullying has been increasing due to the technology ownership and children’s ability to access it outside of parental supervision\textsuperscript{16}.

The role of family is a complicated one and many at times, this role tend to be perceived as an overly protective one especially in traditional or conservative family settings. In fact, Boyd\textsuperscript{17} noted that a gap exists between parents and children because of different ideas of what social life should look like.

Family may be seen as a facilitator of social support to their children in protecting them against excessive use of technology\textsuperscript{18}. Previous researches show that parents use a range of mediation strategies to regulate the use their children make of the Internet\textsuperscript{19} which include restrictions or rules of Internet use\textsuperscript{20}. Another factor related to children’ use of technology is the real or perceived use of technology by their parents\textsuperscript{21}. In European countries where parents use the Internet on a daily basis, their children use it more frequently too\textsuperscript{22}. These data seem to indicate that parents play an important role in influencing the technology usage among children both directly and indirectly. The relationship between parental and children’s use not only means that they spend more time using technology together, but also that there is an individualized increase in the time they spend separately on their devices\textsuperscript{22}. Research confirmed that adolescents’ engagement in high-risk internet behaviors resulted in negative and stronger relationship with parental supervision than restriction\textsuperscript{24}.

Previous researchers have highlighted that victims of cyberbully tend to not report their experiences to adults including their parents and family members. There were suggestions that children avoid such discussion to avoid embarrassment or not to have their social media privileges revoked\textsuperscript{25-26}. The authors argued that the reasons for children not sharing such experiences are more complicated than what some has previously suggested. Not only the intertwined factors of personal, perpetrator and family members need to be analysed but they have to be understood by looking at its push and pull factors.

3. Methodology

3.1 Framing Cyberbullying: PusPA Model Framework

The authors argue that PusPA Model Framework (Push-Pull Analysis Model) is useful in understanding the factors that influence the sharing or non-sharing of cyberbullying experiences among children with their family members. It was debated by Wan\textsuperscript{27} that for any social action, both its push and pull factors needed to be analysed and to be taken into

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consideration. Push factors refer to the reasons that hinder the likelihood of an action/behavior to take place while pull factors refer to the reasons that promote the likelihood of the action/behaviour to happen. In PusPA Model framework, the push and pull factors are further divided into three levels of analysis namely the agency, social institutions as well as social-political-economic environment. The agency refers to factors that are related to individuals’ personal factors such as individuals’ viewpoint, belief system, personality traits and characteristics. These ‘personal’ factors may be contributed by genetics or as a by-product of social and cultural influences that shape the individuals or the agents. The social institutions looks at the meso level analysis such as family, government, school, religious institutions and the like while the social-political-economic environment refers to the macro level analyses for example literacy rates, political climate, culture or national income to name a few. However for this paper, since the role of family is being investigated, only two levels of analysis were analysed - the agency as well as social institutional level.

![PusPA Model](image)

4. Results and Findings

Understanding Contributing and Hindrance Factors to Share Cyberbullying Experiences

By using the PusPA model, both the push and pull factors that may contribute towards sharing of experiences can be understood. These factors are looked at agency and social institutional levels as discussed below.

4.1. Agency

4.1.1. Push Factor: Adverse environment to open up

At the agency level, some children may opt to not speak up about their experiences due to various push factors. Some of them may brush the experience off as something that do not mean much to them or do not affect them at all. These children believe that what happens on the social media stays on social media and that the perpetrators may be doing that...
for fun. Therefore, these children may choose not to share their experiences as they do not see the need to engage in further discussion on it.

The push factor can also be linked to the personality of the children. Children who are very confident and have high self-esteem may not regard cyberbullying experience as something that needed attention or assistance from others, especially adults or family members. If need be, these children may also opt for a more proactive reaction for example “block” the perpetrators or “block and report” the perpetrators on social media sites. Some may even retaliate and engage in victim-bullying role instead through which they respond harshly and engage in bullying themselves. Since they have taken the matters in their own hands, such experiences need no further discussion with their family members.

It can also be argued that since bully according to some scholars tend to be carried out by the “popular” children that the children know, the victims may not want to report against these popular children. These children may think that no one will believe or side with them as compared to those popular children. Some victims may secretly look up to these popular children and hence allow the cyberbullying to persist without sharing it with their family members. In fact, some may even believe that by just keeping quiet and not talk about it, the cyberbullying will eventually stop and the perpetrators will find other victims.

Push factor may also be related to children’s attribute to internal causation and conclude that they deserve to be bullied, in some situation this is referred to as self-blame. This attribution can be rather stable and can lead to internalizing problems28. There are two forms of self-blame; behavioral self-blame and characterological self-blame. Behavioral self-blame occurs when an outcome is associated with one’s modifiable behaviors that can be controlled/ changed, while characterological self-blame occurs when an outcome is blamed on one’s non-modifiable disposition that cannot be controlled/changed29. This sometimes is exacerbated by their upbringing such as the constant victim blaming by family members in any of their actions. Thus, these children may opt to not talking about it in fear that they would be blamed instead.

4.1.2. Pull Factors: Conducive environment to open up

As for the pull factors at agency level, it is more likely that the children may open up when they view that their cyberbully experiences affect them negatively and that they needed the social support. However the authors argued that these victims may not have been severely bullied. This is because those who have would have been pounded down their esteem and confidence to the point of depression and even self-blame. Instead those who were bullied but are able to identify the effects such as feeling of sadness and helplessness or even feeling of loneliness, not wanted, angry and annoyed. Being socially secluded and discriminated against is another dimension that may make them want to reach out to their family members.

The individuals’ character and personality traits may also contribute substantially to their openness to family members. Children may open up if they want the bully to stop but do not have the courage to handle it themselves. Or, these children may have attempted to take actions in their own hands but did not see any difference in the behaviors of the bully. In terms of personality, it is arguably that these children can be categorized in between within the introversion-extraversion spectrum rather than falling in either extremes of personality. In addition, strong character children who believe that they can take control over bullies are more likely to engage in behaviors that seek to effectively manage bullies and minimize the effects of victimization30. This can be contrasted to those who exhibit no control to manage bullies and the effects are believed to be detrimental. These children may merely avoid the situation or becoming fearful31.

How the children identify and define the type of cyberbullying faced are also important contributing factors as to whether these children open up about their bullying experiences. For example if they experienced denigration and the rumors spread are deemed baseless, these children may be more open to report on the experiences rather than those who experienced trickery, where it may backfire on them for trusting others easily and for revealing the ‘truth’ voluntarily. Should the bullying is received suddenly without any triggers such as receiving sexual harassment by an unknown person compared to being cyberbullied in response to the victims’ action such as the picture they posed or lifestyle that they want to portray, the former may be more readily shared with their family members than cases of the latter.

4.2 Social Institution Level

4.2.1 Push Factors: Adverse environment to open up
The main reason why children may not want to reveal to adults or their family members is the fear of its consequences on the usage of information communication technology (ICT) and social media. The family members may no longer allow the children to spend their time on gadget or may monitor their usage closely. And worse still, these children may be asked to close their social media accounts or can no longer “socialize” with fellow social media users. Such response may act as a punishment that children may not be willing to endure hence serve as the push factor for children to open up.

Some children may also view that their family members will not understand them and engage in victim blaming instead. This is especially for family which are deemed as conservative or technologically conservative. These parents may disagree for children to spend time on social media and engaging in social media trends and sharing it online. Children may also be blamed for disclosing any personal information of themselves, their friends and families on social media that can easily be used by others to bully them outline. This is coupled with the blaming of allowing the instafamous aspiring children to keep their profile public rather than private.

By speaking to family members about their cyberbullying experiences, children will need to reveal what they have posted or shared online, which oftentimes are a secret to their family members. Perhaps their dressing, their lifestyle, the connections that they have with more mature friends or even strangers are among the unknown that children may not be willing to expose. Adopting Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical approach which argues that individuals are mere actor and actresses who changes their ‘performances’ to suit their audiences, what the family may learn about who the children are on social media may pose as unpalatable to their family members and causing the children to ‘lose face’[32]. Thus, this may hinder the revelation of such experiences to them.

4.2.2 Pull Factors: Conducive environment to open up

The pull factors at social institution level, and in this case the family, may be due to their openness, non-judgmental behavior, supportiveness and positive track record. Should the family members possess the following traits, it is more possible for the children to open up and share of the cyberbullying experiences. The first is the family’s openness. Openness can be defined as being able to listen, accept, discuss about any issues that the children face. The children would feel comfortable giving the information and its details as the person they revealed to can provide comfort by listening to them and providing sound advices.

The second characteristics that the family members are theorized to have in order to encourage open communication by children is their non-judgmental behavior. The family members should not have any judgement towards the posts that the children made, the friends that the children have and the comments that the children engaged in. Judgement may affect the labelling and hence affect the relationship and trust between the children and their family members hence would hinder open communication.

The third is supportiveness. Supportiveness refers to the role of family members in encouraging and trusting that the child is making weighted decision and constantly willing to help wherever and whenever necessary. This is an important trait that can encourage the children’s sharing of experience.

The positive track record by the family members can also promote the likelihood of the children to engage in such discussion. This is referred to how the family members have previously reacted towards the children’s other problems shared. This is a rewarding behavior for them and they are more likely to discuss such unpleasant experience.

5. Conclusion

The current study has presented findings on the push and pull factors of children speaking up on cyberbullying at micro and meso level analysis. On the push factor, there are several reasons why the children choose not to speak up. Some of the reasons are the cyberbullying experience doesn’t affect them, the children’s personality (high self-esteem), do not want to report over popular friends and some children feel they deserved to be bullied. Based on institution level, some of the reasons why children do not report on cyberbullying are due to the fear of its consequences on the usage of devices and they think the parents will not understand the situation. As for the pull factors, the children are willing to open up when they feel the parents are open, supportive and not judgmental to cyberbullying situation.

There are more to be unfold in regards to understanding cyberbullying – and its relation to family factors. The dimensions discussed in this article namely the characteristics of the family and the agency factors of the children that intertwine with the push and pull factors of them speaking up to family members is just the starting point.

More discussion on this is much needed as understanding how bullied individuals perceive control is significant because those who lack control and do not tell someone about their bullies or do nothing to stop the bullying are often at higher
risk for repeated victimization and harsh consequences\textsuperscript{33}. However, someone might feel helpless if he or she seeks help and receives inadequate support.

Future researchers may study the variables discussed in this paper simultaneously and examine its relationship. Future researchers may also predict the likelihood of these children talking to family members by looking at the ratio between the pull and push factors or the intensity of the issue, which have not been discussed in this paper. Additionally, research on cyberbullying should be conducted with larger sample sets, which would allow analyses to be performed with a more robust number of cases. This would also offer more possibilities in terms of explaining and a more detailed comparisons of specific cyberbullying incidents such as case-based on media use, and cyberbullying between the various bullying group online or offline context could be included in follow-up studies.

References


