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## Protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social media sites – a study of undergraduate students

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### Abstract

In recent years social networking sites have become prominent forums for individuals to communicate with one another; some would say it is their lifeline for being connecting with others. Individuals with access to computers with wireless connections can connect in parallel universes, anywhere, anytime. While most online interactions are considered positive or neutral, one negative consequence is the exposure / perpetration to cyber bullying (Tokunaga, 2010).

Thus, as social media sites become more integral to the lives of adults, systems and behaviours directed toward protecting oneself from cyber bullying need to be identified. The findings reported here form a part of a larger study examining the prevalence rates of cyber bullying on social networking sites. This paper reports 254 undergraduate students' perspectives on protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social media sites. Data encompassed three groups – bullies, victims and observers; fell into 4 categories: Internet Service Providers; Public Education and Media Awareness; Formal and Informal support; Reporting; and encompassed the life world of individuals (Glasser, 1998). Within this life world, action was recommended at different systematic levels of society – community, family and individual.

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*Keywords:* cyber bullying; social media sites; online bullying; help seeking behaviours; virtual communication; life world; protecting oneself online; online safety

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### 1. Introduction

#### *1.1. Protecting oneself from cyber bullying social media sites – a study of undergraduate students.*

Cyber bullying is an aggressive act using electronic communication carried out by an individual or group of individuals directed at another person or group of people who have difficulty defending themselves. It is motivated by perceived anonymity, unrestrained and easy access to e-communication, and contact without physical interaction. The intention is to embarrass, hurt, humiliate, offend, get revenge, have fun, and / or exert power over others. It encompasses different subcategories (e.g., texting, email, social media) and modalities (e.g., flaming, denigration and defaming, using offensive symbols, sexual harassment, exclusion, harassment, slandering). Certain modalities are specific to the cyber world: hacking, bombing, outing, happy slapping, and masquerading (Carter, 2012).

Motivations similar to traditional bullying that are driving bullying on social networking sites such as Face Book and MySpace embrace: seeking revenge (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007); provocation (real or imagined),

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retaliation, status, domination, and power (Berger, 2007); limited social and peer support (Williams & Guerra, 2007); high environmental exposure to violence (Calvete et al., 2010). Motivations distinctive to the cyber world include: (1) perceptions of online anonymity (Hinduja&Patchin, 2008); (2) unrestrained and easy internet access (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009); (3) harm without physical interaction (Englander & Muldowney, 2007).

A high percentage of bullying goes unreported in the cyber world. Mechanisms for reporting traditional bullying are outlined and endorsed in the offline world of school and work based policies and procedures, but this is not the case for online bullying (Tokunaga, 2010). One may question if not reporting cyber bullying equates with collusion and is an enabler sabotaging protecting oneself online.

Numerous strategies for curbing cyber bullying, have been proposed in the literature, with the majority reliant on the resilience of the individuals enacting them: ignoring, assertive confrontation threatening to report bullying events, switching one's name in online accounts, permanently blocking certain people from onsite sites, retaliating and becoming a bully (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Aricak et al. (2008); Dehue, Bollman, & Völlink, 2008; Patchin&Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga 2010). Researchers and practitioners alike maintain that while these strategies may be effective when the bullying is a one off, they become untenable when the behaviour is repetitive. Whilst the majority of these strategies are focused on children and adolescents and occur in the life world of individuals, some may be applicable to adults.

Children and adolescents consult friends for support and direction about what to do to protect themselves online when cyber bullied (Slonje& Smith, 2007). Formal support including counselling and psychosocial education is also endorsed as a support mechanism for child and adolescent victims of cyber bullying (Ybarra, 2004). Seeking counsel from friends and counselling support are not reported in the literature as avenues of support for adults.

Instigating stricter privacy settings, restricting access to online personal profiles, and limiting personal information disclosed online, are recommended as ways of staying safe on social networking sites (Aricak et al., 2008). Individuals pursuing these actions have a sense of control over their destiny online. They intentionally inform themselves about what they can do to stay safe online. Cyber safety education at the community, family, and individual level, focusing on the ethics of online communication, is recognized as a possible step in developing individuals' online self-protection behaviour (Hinduja&Patchin, 2009; Patchin&Hinduja, 2009; Patchin&Hinduja, 2010). This education places responsibility for usage online within the life world of the individual.

## **2. Structure of the study**

### *2.1. Research question*

The research question reported in this paper is specific to protecting oneself online from cyber bullying: What are undergraduate students' perspectives of protecting themselves from cyber bullying on social media sites? Protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social networking sites is directed toward staying safe online by limiting exposure / perpetration to cyber bullying. Findings are intended to fill the gap in the research literature by identifying cyber safety protection behaviours on social media sites, applicable to adults.

## **3. Method**

### *3.1. Participants*

Participants were 259 undergraduate students enrolled at an international university in Singapore. Of the 259 participants who registered for the internet-based self report measure, 254 had a sufficient completion rate to be retained for further analysis. Only a few questions were programmed to be obligatory, so many participants reached the final page without answering all of the questions.

The sample was 48.4% females and 51.6% males. Age span ranged from under 20 (23%) to 40-49 (.4%). Participants identified their ethnicity as Chinese (72.9%), Indian (24.9%), and Malaysian 2.2%.

### *3.2. Measures*

A thorough search of the literature was unable to locate a self-report measure that contained all the items of interest examined in the larger study examining undergraduate students' perceptions of the prevalence rates of cyber bullying on social media sites. Therefore, informed by existing literature on cyber bullying, an anonymous survey instrument was developed. The item pool included a total of 53 items, with a combination of closed and open ended questions.

### 3.3. Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained by the relevant authority before the project commenced. Once participants consented to participate in the study, they anonymously completed the online self report measure. This measure remained live for four weeks and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The measure was pilot tested for format, clarity, length, and ease of administration. Participants were recruited to the study via the university's Face Book page, student email accounts, and advertisements placed on campus. Incentives for completing the self report measure included an iPad, valued at S\$550 and 10 x \$10 Starbuck vouchers.

### 3.4. Data analysis

The data was analysed thematically according to a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). Participants recorded their perceptions of protecting themselves from cyber bullying on social media sites. Through comparative analysis, participants' responses were compared, connected and incorporated as themes. This, alongside a comprehensive literature review built on the themes, formed the basis of these findings. In the larger study, statistical analysis was conducted using the SPSS program to discern response patterns, validity and reliability of the data.

## 4. Results

Findings encompassed three groups – bullies, victims, third party observers - and included protecting oneself from cyber bullying behaviours on social networking sites within the life world of the individual. Three systems were named as levels of penetration: community, family, and individual. This infiltration encompassed four themes: internet service providers, public education and media awareness, formal and informal supports, and reporting.

### 4.1. Bullies

Participants reported that bullies could protect themselves online by ceasing to dialogue disrespectfully and being polite and assertive in their interactions with the 'victim'. Taking responsibility for inappropriate online behaviours, self monitoring postings, changing and challenging negative mindsets, and releasing stress in constructive ways were named as beneficial behaviours for bullies to pursue. Restitution in the form of rebuilding shattered relationships was also recommended. All strategies resided in the life world of the individual, and, were dependent on the individual being motivated to change inappropriate habits of behaviour to more constructive needs satisfying behaviours.

*Rehabilitation in the form of giving public talks on anti-bullying ... Thinking on a more positive note of the person ... Talk openly about your problems with the victim ... Make an understanding that beyond the letters on their screen is also a human being ... Reduce the number of saying negative comments about people ... Try to overcome stress in other ways ... Participating in healthy outdoor activities, go out with friends ... Stop bullying and make some other activities that are not related to negative effects such as explore comedy pictures. Get a life and stop being mean. Participate in healthy outdoor activities, go out with friends.*

### 4.2. Victim

Victim cyber safety behaviours concentrated on individuals not placing themselves in a vulnerable position, possessing a strong identity, believing in and honouring themselves. Strategies included upgrading online security,

monitoring and limiting access to networking sites, defending themselves online or face-to-face, ignoring the bait of the bully and investing oneself in life energizing activities. Most strategies, belonging in in the individual's life world, were dependent on the resilience of these individuals concentrating their attention on what they can control, rather than what they cannot control.

*Upgrading security system, use weird password, changing password regularly ... Any response you give will keep the game going. You may be concerned that others will believe lies a cyber bully spreads about you on social networking sites, but defending yourself against the lies won't make them seem less credible and will only encourage the bully to invent more lies ... Don't let it make you down, be patient and remain calm ... Just think of them like it's a broken radio that say something that is not important. and if you can, meet the person and try to solve whatever the problems are because there is no smoke if there is no fire.*

#### 4.3. Third party observers

Being a third party observer was viewed more in the role of defender of internet safety rather than encourager and supporter of bullying. Empowering and educating third party observers to take a stand and be proactive in providing assistance to victims was proposed as a needs satisfying behaviour, initiated in the life world of the individual, influenced at the community, family and individual levels.

*Third party observers should be able to flag bullies anonymously.*

*Recognizing and addressing the solution early by approaching either bully or victim and approaching external sources.*

System responses to protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social media sites included four distinctive courses of action: intervention by internet service providers to moderate online safety and privacy; public education and media awareness; formal and informal support; and reporting mechanisms.

#### 4.4. Internet service providers

Devising stricter online privacy settings and routinely changing username and e-mail address were named by a minority of participants as useful behaviours in protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social networking sites. Installing reporting device applications on all sites to raise awareness of internet safety and reporting cyber bullying events was suggested. Some acknowledged that social media sites do have monitoring buttons but no-one recounted activating them. Is this because the sense of belonging to the site outweighed the sense of personal safety?

*Internet Service Provider (ISP) account closure and/or banishment ... Lock his IP address so that he will not be able to access the social media sites any more ... Getting the social media sites to red flag or ban the "Bully" from creating more harm to the "Victim".*

#### 4.5. Public education and media awareness

Using the media to promote and educate the public about self-protection online was proposed as a system level behaviour directed at online safety and curbing exposure or perpetration to cyber bullying.

*Educate public on cyber bullying and its consequences on the victims and the social community ...*

*Increasing public awareness about actions which are deemed as cyber bullying.*

Psychosocial education programs with a specific focus on building social and emotional resilience and satisfying needs in helpful and constructive ways was advocated. Soft skills such as empathetic communication, restitution, social problem solving and dispute resolution, would form the curriculum. No mention was made of the dissemination of this curriculum to an adult audience, and how this could be achieved within the online world.

*Increase their social awareness of alternative venues in which they can properly vent their frustration ...*

*Make bullies understand that a comment online may leave a scare that never heals just like real life bullying can. Show them videos on how to protect and fend and stand up for themselves online.*

#### 4.6. Formal and informal support

Online and offline support was recommended in the life world of the individual. Counselling represented formal support, and peer and family input signified informal support.

*Counselling, understanding the root cause of the problem*

Sometimes friends were the first line of investigation to see if they, or their acquaintances, were the bully. Informal support encompassed online forums and chat rooms, with advice sort and given anonymously. Many participants advocated for online support, as the bullying transpired in the virtual world.

*Talking to your family, friends or other people that you know well... Try online chat groups to disclose problems if talking to someone is hard.*

#### 4.7. Reporting

The system and process for reporting cyber bullying was raised repeatedly by participants. Many aligned reporting bullying with protecting oneself online, and maintained responsibility resided in the jurisdiction of the Internet Service Provider, the victims themselves and third party observers. Some participants advocated for a 24/7 hotline monitored by government authorities. This system of and process for reporting would reside in the life world of the individual and be influenced at all levels of society.

*You witness the theft ... then you call 999. You witness cyber bullying then call? Show me the number please ... Have a 27/7 contactable hotline for reporting cyber bullying.*

### 5. Discussion

This study examined one research question: What are undergraduate students' perspectives of protecting themselves from cyber bullying on social media sites? Participants reported that as electronic communication tools are the means through which individuals engage in cyber space, it is essential that the systems and behaviours for online safety for curbing cyber bullying are understood within this context.

Behaviours specific to protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social media sites were identified in the life world of adults. Participants' emphasised taking responsibility for behaviour choices online began with the individual. Individuals' willingness to accept and follow through with responsible online behaviour was identified as crucial. Choice rather than chance therefore, determines one's destiny online.

Choice theory is a new way of understanding why and how individuals behave the way they do. It is an internal control psychology, a pro-relationship theory of human behaviour. According to this theory a socially responsible person chooses behaviours that will satisfy their basic needs yet allow others to satisfy their basic needs. They do not choose behaviours that violate another's rights. The life world is the world of the individual focuses on five generic basic needs: survival and safety, belonging and love, fun and joy, choice and freedom, recognition and power (Glasser, 1998). The challenge for individuals is between what they want in terms of needs and what they are getting. This is what is referred to in the literature as the motivating gap driving individual's behaviour choices. Behaviour choices to meet needs have consequences, and these are perceived in varying degrees (positive, negative, neutral). In the case of cyber bullying, bullies behave to meet their needs for power, fun, freedom, belonging and survival at the expense of their victims. As these behaviours are inappropriate, individuals are challenged to create new habits of behaving. New habits need to meet their needs as much as their old behaviours did as individuals always choose to do what is most satisfying at the time. Findings indicate that this learning happens and is influenced in the life world of the individual, at different levels of society.

The life world does not operate in isolation and is reliant on interaction at the systematic level of community, family, and individual. Psychosocial and internet safety education was reported as pathways directed toward building individuals capacity to regulate their online behaviours in needs satisfying ways. The importance of educating and empowering third party observers to take a stand in providing help to victims and report bullying events was reported as a system driven needs satisfying help seeking initiative.

A small number of participants identified friends and family as support, a strategy largely unexamined in the literature on adult cyber safety (Slonje& Smith, 2007). The complication with this strategy is that the bully may be a

‘friend’, a mutual ‘friend’, or the bullying events may have marginalized victims and third party observers from their friends. The role of friends – real and virtual - requires further investigation in the research.

Counselling was proposed as a systematic avenue of support for individuals to learn how to protect themselves online: (1) build their skill repertoire; (2) debrief after exposure or perpetration of cyber bullying; (3) regulate behaviours in needs satisfying ways. Ybarra (2004) argued in defence of counselling for children and adolescence exposed to cyber bullying. Further studies need to be conducted to confirm its effectiveness, its form and structure, with adults networking on social media sites.

The role of internet service providers in adopting codes and policies of online safety was proposed as behaviours for adults to protect themselves on social media sites. Currently users can report inappropriate online activity by clicking on the social reporting tool or report abuse page (Facebook), the harassment and violent threats policy button (Twitter), or contact the website operator (Google). The frequency with which this button is activated requires further research. Notifying users when logging in to social media sites of internet safety and support processes was also recommended in this study.

Devising a system for identifying offensive content could alert the moderator of the site to take immediate action such as restricting the bully access to the site. A minority of participants recommended tightening internet privacy settings and limiting the amount of personal information shared online. These individuals acknowledged the risks of online communication yet choose not to prioritize protection online. There are contradictions in the literature surrounding disclosure and sharing of personal information online, protecting oneself online, and reduced exposure to cyber bullying (Hinduja&Patchin, 2008; Sengupta&Chaudhuri, 2011). Are individuals disinterested; confused about distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ online spaces; or do they have minimal understanding of privacy protection (Bryce, 2008b; Livingstone, 2008).

Public awareness about self-protection online was proposed at the community, family and individual level. The buy in of individuals, families and communities to act on the media messages would require longitudinal research to measure its effectiveness and sustainability over time.

*They should know what harm they could cause by the actions they do when they cyber-bully and the huge impact it has on their victims. The bullies have to recognize the fact that internet has no privacy; therefore they should and could not hide behind their computers.*

## 6. Limitations and future work

One limitation of this study is the participant size and adult undergraduate cohort. Including youths and elders perspectives of self-protection online would build upon this study. Expanding the qualitative data collection instrument beyond the self report measure to include observational data and open-ended interviews or focus groups would add depth to the current findings (Camodeca&Goossens, 2005).

As cyber bullying is a relatively new phenomenon, future studies need to explore how individuals learn help seeking behaviours on social media sites – self-taught, observations, mentored, multiple sources. Identifying the penetration of this learning and the place (online or offline) may further inform the effectiveness and sustainability of help seeking behaviours on social media sites. The role of chronological age, gender, cross-national and cross-culture perspectives in the enactment of online protection systems and behaviours is a future area for this research.

Educating third party observers as effective defenders of internet safety is a research area requiring attention. Internet safety education provided at the community, family and individual level was named in this study. Individuals signing up for cyber education mentors may be one way of building self-protection behaviours when online. Further research would be most useful in this area.

The role of real and virtual friends as positive, neutral or negative support lifelines in building individuals resilience to cyber bullying is a research area worthy of consideration. The jurisdiction of internet service providers in promoting online safety and privacy needs to be evaluated in the research.

## 7. Final word

All behaviours are an individual’s best attempt at the time to meet their basic needs. The challenge is to ensure that the behaviour choices of one individual or group do not intrude on the way others satisfy their needs. The findings presented above suggest the importance of need satisfying behaviours on networking sites. These findings

identified that whilst protecting oneself from cyber bullying on social media resided in the life world of individuals, there needs to be a collective effort at all levels of society: communities, families and individuals.

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