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Cyberbullying in the Social Media Environment: Investigating Young Adults' Experience in Malaysia

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Abstract

The rise of social media in Malaysia has transformed communication, yet it has also ushered in cyberbullying. This study explores cyberbullying experiences among Malaysian young adults, focusing on their engagement, language use, and coping mechanisms. Data from 148 university students reveal that cyberbullying is prevalent on platforms like Facebook which is mainly instigated by strangers, online contacts, classmates, and friends. The most common cyberbullying types identified are physical-related and intelligence-related. While most participants acknowledged the harm of offensive language, a significant portion admitted to ignoring incidents, emphasising the need for targeted interventions and education to combat cyberbullying among Malaysian youth.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Language Use, Young Adults, Social Media

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1.0 Introduction

Cyberbullying has been defined in numerous studies as harm inflicted through the use of digital technologies such as social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). It concerns repeated actions that aim to demean, harass, embarrass, scare, or cause pain to those who are targeted (Mishna et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). The effects of cyberbullying are considered severe as it can affect someone's mental and emotional health, such as feelings of distress, anxiety, depression and suicide. Thus, underscoring the urgency of addressing this issue, this study looks into the experiences of young adults in Malaysia, as this group is dominant on social media platforms and particularly vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying. For instance, previous studies have shown that a significant number of young adults in Malaysia have experienced cyberbullying, though exact statistics may vary (Abdullah & Nawang, 2019). In relation to this, through the use of offensive language, the forms of cyberbullying in the country range from body shaming to intelligence-related insults. Thus, it is important to note that other factors might also contribute to the unique dynamics of cyberbullying in Malaysia, emphasising the importance of targeted interventions and educational efforts.

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1.1 Problem Statement

In Malaysia, the rise of cyberbullying and its effects on victims are grave concerns. One specific aspect of cyberbullying that requires attention is the effect of offensive words on the victims. Victims may suffer adverse psychological and emotional effects, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Baruah, Dashora & Parmar (2017); Eyuboglu et al. (2021); Albikawi (2023)). Hence, the problem of cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia, specifically on social media platforms demands deeper investigation as most existing studies on cyberbullying in Malaysia have primarily focused on children and adolescents. This research gap limits our understanding of the unique experiences and challenges young adults face concerning cyberbullying. In addition, the phenomenon and distinctive features of cyberbullying in Malaysia are not adequately addressed in previous studies. Thus, this study serves as a vital step in addressing this gap in the literature by tailoring its investigation to the Malaysian landscape so that we can gain insights into the prevalence, nature, and consequences of cyberbullying among young adults in this population.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study aims to explore the experiences of young adults in Malaysia regarding cyberbullying. Thus, the objectives of this study are: [1] to identify the prevalence of cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia; [2] to investigate the language used in cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia; and [3] to know young adults' perceptions and responses on awareness levels and coping mechanisms in Malaysia. First, the study aims to pinpoint the prevalence rates of cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia by investigating their cyberbullying experiences with cyberbullying, including the medium used, the dynamics of relationships between victims and perpetrators, and the specific forms of online bullying they encounter. Additionally, the research aims to delve into the intricate nuances of language usage in cyberbullying within this demographic, allowing for the identification of the most common types of cyberbullying incidents in Malaysia. Finally, the study also seeks to gain insights into young adults' perceptions and responses regarding their awareness levels and coping mechanisms in the Malaysian context. This multifaceted approach will enhance our understanding of cyberbullying dynamics and facilitate the development of targeted interventions and strategies for addressing this issue among Malaysian youth. In summary, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of young adults' experiences with cyberbullying in Malaysia by examining these key aspects.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media and Cyberbullying

The interplay between social media and cyberbullying has garnered substantial attention in recent years. With online platforms becoming integral to contemporary communication, they have also emerged as fertile ground for cyberbullying incidents. Researchers have diligently examined the prevalence, dynamics, and consequences of cyberbullying within the context of social media. For example, Kowalski et al. (2014) conducted an extensive exploration of various cyberbullying forms and their effects on adolescents, while Smith et al. (2008) shed light on the overlap between traditional and cyberbullying. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that anonymity, accessibility, and social reinforcement mechanisms inherent to social media platforms significantly contribute to the proliferation of cyberbullying, as well-documented by Li (2007). Therefore, one of the key objectives of this study is to identify the medium, primarily social media, used in cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia. This knowledge is crucial to raising awareness about cyberbullying incidents when using social media or engaging in online communication. In conclusion, the pervasive impact of social media on cyberbullying emphasizes the urgency for comprehensive preventative and intervention strategies in the digital age.

2.2 Language as A Tool in Cyberbullying

Language is a powerful tool in the realm of cyberbullying, where individuals wield words as weapons to harm and humiliate their targets. Cyberbullies normally use linguistic strategies to taunt, threaten, or demean their victims through various online platforms. Thus, the current study builds upon previous research that highlights the pivotal role of language in the context of cyberbullying. Much like the works of Tokunaga (2010) and DeSmet et al. (2016), which emphasize the significance of language, this study recognises that the choice of words, tone, and the shelter of anonymity offered by digital platforms serve as catalysts for the perpetration of aggressive communication in the realm of cyberbullying. By delving into the nuances of linguistic strategies employed by cyberbullies, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge, shedding further light on the mechanics and psychological impact of cyberbullying. This enhanced understanding can inform more targeted and effective prevention and intervention strategies, ultimately bolstering efforts to combat cyberbullying and foster a safer digital environment for all.

2.3 Coping Mechanism and Awareness in Cyberbullying

Awareness levels and coping mechanisms in cyberbullying are crucial globally. While the world focuses on educating and implementing reporting systems, Malaysia needs context-specific strategies due to cultural and technological nuances. Hence, the current study holds great relevance in the context of previous research, as it further underscores the significance of coping mechanisms and awareness levels in addressing cyberbullying, particularly in our digital age. Building on the findings of studies like Hinduja and Patchin (2015), which highlighted the effectiveness of awareness programmes in schools, and Mishna et al. (2019), which emphasised the role of counselling services, the present research complements this body of work by delving into the intricate nuances of how society copes with and responds to the challenges of cyberbullying. By exploring these aspects in greater depth, this study

contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies and interventions required to combat cyberbullying effectively and promote a safer online environment for all.

2.4 Previous Studies on Cyberbullying Among Young Adults in Malaysia

The existing body of literature on cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia offers valuable insights into different dimensions of this pressing issue. This includes prevalences of cyberbullying, linguistics analysis, impacts of cyberbullying, and investigations into awareness and coping mechanisms. For instance, Yusuf et al. (2021) focused on prevalence and incidence rates by surveying students in schools and universities to gauge the extent of cyberbullying's impact. In addition, studies like Balakrishnan (2015) and Zhu et al. (2021) have looked into the traits of cyberbullying perpetrators and victims, including age, gender, and online behaviour, offering insights into the factors contributing to involvement in cyberbullying incidents in Malaysia. Along this line, Zainudin et al. (2016), Azman & Zamri, (2022), and Azumah et al. (2023) have also investigated specific behaviours related to cyberbullying, such as the use of offensive language, spreading false information, and posting hurtful comments, aiming to categorise these actions and understand their motivations in cyberbullying. Besides these, studies by Balakrishnan & Fernandez (2018), Adebayo et al. (2020), and Khairi et al. (2022) have explored the impacts of cyberbullying, including the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of cyberbullying on Malaysian youth. In addition, as Malaysia has no specific cyberbullying laws, more studies have been conducted to address future legal measures in combating cyberbullying incidents. Studies by Low & Gill (2022) and Razali, Nawang & Mohamad (2022) have examined the legal and policy frameworks surrounding cyberbullying in Malaysia by evaluating existing laws and regulations and making recommendations for potential improvements. In conclusion, previous research has significantly expanded our knowledge of cyberbullying in Malaysia, covering prevalence, impacts, behaviours, and legal aspects.

2.5 Research Gaps in Cyberbullying Research Among Young Adults in Malaysia

Existing research has primarily focused on the prevalence, impact, and risk factors for cyberbullying among adolescents. However, in the social media environment, young adults in Malaysia face unique challenges and experiences, and their perspectives and coping mechanisms may differ from those of adolescents. As a result, there is a need to investigate the experiences of cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia. Thus, this study offers valuable insights into the specific challenges and dynamics this age group faces by investigating young adults' cyberbullying experiences in the social media environment.

3.0 Methodologies

In this study, the research design has been developed based on Saunders' Research Onion Framework, which is known as a comprehensive model that facilitates a systematic and organised approach to research planning and execution. Based on this framework, key components such as research philosophy, research approach, research strategy, time horizon, data collection methods and data analysis techniques are outlined in Fig. 1.

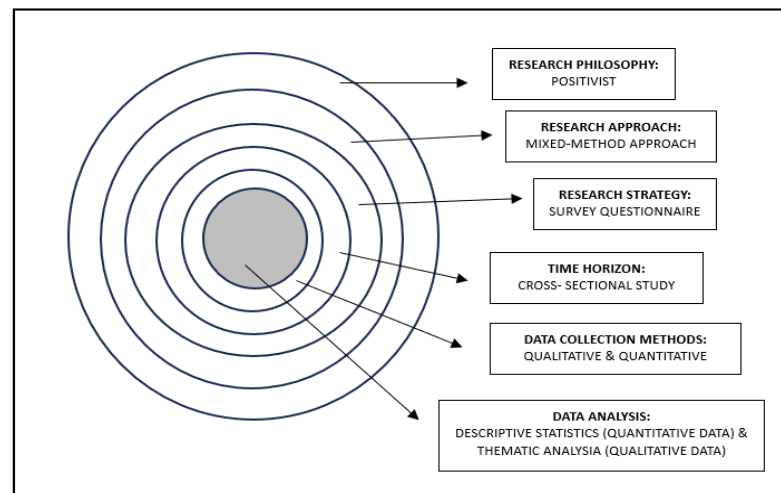


Fig. 1: Research design based on Saunder's Onion Framework

- Research philosophy: This study utilised the positivist research philosophy as it uses structured survey questionnaires to collect quantitative and qualitative data.
- Research approach: The research uses a mixed-methods approach where quantitative and qualitative data are collected to get a more comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia.
- Research strategy: The research strategy involves using a survey questionnaire. It consisted of six sections with 15 items.
- Time horizon: This study is cross-sectional as the data is collected from participants at a single point in time.

- Data collection methods: This mixed-methods study used a purposive sampling technique to collect data from 148 students at a Malaysian public university via a survey questionnaire.
- Data Analysis: The information gathered from the survey questionnaire was subjected to both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Quantitative analysis involves using statistical techniques, such as descriptive statistics, to analyse quantitative responses. In addition, thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clark (2016). Additionally, the analysis of Item 8 was categorised using the approach outlined by Rezvan et al. (2020).

4.0 Findings

4.1 Cyberbullying Experiences (Prevalences)

In addressing the respondents' experiences in cyberbullying, 49% of the 148 respondents acknowledged being victims of online bullying, while 32% expressed uncertainty. In addition, a significant proportion of respondents had encountered cyberbullying, with Facebook being the most commonly cited platform (32%). Furthermore, the findings also indicated that the majority of respondents (43%) reported experiencing harassment primarily from strangers, while online contacts (22%), classmates, and friends (19%) were also mentioned as sources of harassment. Finally, the last item in this section presented responses from respondents regarding their most recent cyberbullying experiences. The following are some of the responses:

Table 1: Recent Cyberbullying Experiences

| No | Responses |
|----|---|
| 1 | someone call me fat |
| 2 | Individu tersebut menyatakan bahawa ibu bapa yang tidak melanjutkan pelajaran ke university merupakan ibu bapa yang bodoh. Saya merasakan itu satu penghinaan terhadap ibu bapa saya kerana beliau tidak melanjutkan pelajaran ke university. |
| 3 | Someone send images |
| 4 | Im play game, and i lose, when lose other player said to me that im really stupid to play |
| 5 | I have received a hate comments from a stranger through YouTube and tiktok mostly attacked me because I'm a woman(misogynist, sexist and verbally sexual harassed), Muslim(terrorist and oppressed) and Malaysian(Asian hate). |

In brief, Table 1 exposed a multitude of cyberbullying incidents reported by the respondents, encompassing actions like the transmission of offensive images and texts, involvement in name-calling, and various other forms of online harassment. These behaviours underscore the intricate and diverse nature of cyberbullying experiences encountered by young adults in Malaysia across various social media platforms. Additionally, the result also indicated that approximately 49% of respondents occasionally encountered offensive language in digital interactions, including comments, messages, or posts on social media platforms. Furthermore, 81% of respondents believed that using offensive language in cyberbullying could severely impact the victim's mental health and overall well-being.

4.2 Language Use

The results showed that the most frequent types of cyberbullying reported by the respondents were physical and intelligence-related. Table 2 contains examples of physical-related and intelligence-related cyberbullying given by the respondents. In the Malaysian context, the categories as mentioned earlier are the most appropriate, prevalent, and socially relatable. Moreover, the responses included cyberbullying-related terms and expressions in both Malay and English, known as Malaysia's dominant languages. This observation highlights Malaysia's multicultural and multilingual nature, where people navigate the digital realm using these languages to express their experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying.

Table 2: The Most Frequent Types of cyberbullying

| Physical-related cyberbullying | Intelligence-related cyberbullying |
|--|---|
| <i>Fat, hitam, hodoh, ugly, hitam legam, macam pariya, hippo, obese lady, putih macam macam, besar macam badak, tong drum, rambut negro, pendek, kurus macam tiang listrik</i> | <i>Dumb, stupid, bodoh, crazy, brainless, noob, sengal, Semak, bongok, kepala hotok, kepala bana, bodoh macam lembu, no brain</i> |

As can be seen, the data in Table 2 reveals recurring terms like "fat," "hitam," "ugly," and "obese," suggesting their frequent usage in Malaysian cyberbullying incidents involving body shaming. Conversely, respondents were also commonly targeted for their intelligence, with words such as "stupid," "bodoh," "noob," and "bongok" frequently appearing. These derogatory terms aimed at demeaning their intelligence are likely to be offensive to the victims.

4.3 Coping Mechanism and Awareness

In this section, five items were addressed. Item 11 revealed that 54% of respondents chose to ignore cyberbullying incidents or expressed uncertainty about their awareness. In comparison, 36% reported offensive content to the platform providers, whilst another 10% confronted perpetrators with positive messages/replies with the hope that they were not going to be harassed again. In Item 12, 65% of respondents sought support when facing cyberbullying, with 59% choosing to confide in friends (Item 13). Moreover, item 14 underscored that 51% of respondents were uncertain about the adequacy of awareness and education regarding cyberbullying and its impact on young adults in Malaysia. Finally, several suggestions were collected through item 15, where the respondents advocated for

more cyberbullying campaigns, enforcing stricter laws, initiating discussions about personal experiences, and implementing age restrictions on social media platforms.

5.0 Discussions

5.1 Cyberbullying Experiences (Prevalences)

The findings of this study provide important insights into cyberbullying experiences among Malaysian young adults. First, it highlighted the pervasiveness of this problem among this demographic. Second, numerous social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter contributed to the frequency of cyberbullying incidences in Malaysia. Somehow, this highlights the importance of comprehensive approaches to combat cyberbullying across various digital platforms effectively. Third, the findings also revealed that strangers are the most common source of harassment, though online contacts, classmates, and friends all play a role. This variety of sources highlights the importance of broad-based preventive measures and educational efforts to combat cyberbullying. Fourth, respondents' recent cyberbullying experiences provided valuable insights into the various forms and consequences of cyberbullying in Malaysia, such as the use of offensive language, the dissemination of false information, and hurtful comments, which shed light on the emotional and psychological toll on victims. Finally, the findings of this study also highlighted the critical need for targeted interventions, education, and support programmes to address the alarming prevalence of cyberbullying among Malaysian young adults.

5.2 Language Use

The findings highlighted physical-related bullying and intelligence-related bullying as the most common types of cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia. The prevalence of physical-related cyberbullying normally entails disseminating hurtful or offensive content about a person's physical appearance, disabilities, or health conditions. In addition, physical cyberbullying can have serious consequences, such as adverse effects on self-esteem, body image, and mental health. Addressing this type of cyberbullying requires both preventive measures to promote body positivity and victim support mechanisms. On the other hand, intelligence-related cyberbullying occurs when people are targeted because of their intellectual abilities, academic achievements, or perceived intelligence. This includes mocking or belittling someone's intelligence, spreading false information about their academic performance, or engaging in intellectual harassment. Furthermore, this type of cyberbullying can harm a person's self-esteem, academic motivation, and mental health. It also emphasises the importance of fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity in which intellectual differences are celebrated rather than used as a basis for harassment. Overall, the prevalence of physical-related and intelligence-related cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia underscores the pressing requirement for tailored interventions and educational programmes to aid victims in coping with the emotional and psychological aftermath.

5.3 Young Adults' Perceptions and Responses on Cyberbullying Awareness Levels and Coping Mechanisms in Malaysia

The survey results provide crucial insights into the respondents' perceptions, responses, and awareness levels regarding cyberbullying among Malaysian young adults. The data reveal two key themes: the perceived impact of offensive language in cyberbullying and the prevalence of respondents ignoring incidents in conjunction with uncertainty about awareness. Firstly, most participants agreed that offensive language used in cyberbullying can have severe and long-term consequences for the victim's mental health and overall well-being. This finding is consistent with a growing body of research highlighting the negative psychological consequences of cyberbullying. In this case, offensive language, insults, and derogatory remarks cause victims not only emotional distress but also anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation. Hence, this recognition emphasises addressing online harassment and promoting respectful communication in digital spaces. Secondly, the data reveal a noteworthy proportion of respondents who reported ignoring cyberbullying incidents. This response pattern is accompanied by uncertainty about awareness, implying that some young adults may need to comprehend the gravity of the issue fully or may need more knowledge and skills to respond effectively to cyberbullying situations. However, ignoring incidents can contribute to the continuation of the cyberbullying cycle and worsen its negative effects on victims. In conclusion, the need for certainty regarding awareness highlights the significance of focused interventions and educational initiatives to give young adults the skills and information they need to recognise, address, and prevent cyberbullying on social media.

6.0 Conclusion

The study's findings show that cyberbullying is a disturbingly common occurrence among Malaysian young adults, particularly on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The perpetrators included strangers, online contacts, classmates, friends, and others. In addition, the instances of physical and intelligence-related cyberbullying were particularly concerning, emphasising the critical need for targeted interventions and educational programmes to combat these specific forms of online harassment. Moreover, the study also emphasises the negative impact of offensive language in cyberbullying on the mental health of victims. Furthermore, a sizable proportion of respondents admitted to ignoring incidents and demonstrating a lack of awareness, emphasising the importance of comprehensive awareness campaigns, supportive interventions, and resources to assist victims in coping with the emotional and psychological consequences of cyberbullying. Even though the limitations of the study include the potential underrepresentation of diverse perspectives, the reliance on self-reported data, and the evolving nature of social media,

which may impact the generalizability of findings, more research in this area is required to fully address the issue of cyberbullying among Malaysian young adults. Therefore, potential research directions may include examining the role of bystanders, the impact of cyberbullying on mental health, cultural factors, and the efficacy of awareness programmes for mitigating cyberbullying among young adults in Malaysia.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The paper's contributions extend to both academia and society, providing valuable insights and guidance for addressing the pressing issue of cyberbullying in the digital age.

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