MIDDLE SCHOOL CYBERBULLYING EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY AT A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN THAILAND

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Received: October 12, 2021; Accepted: October 25, 202; Published: October 26, 2021

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the differences between male and female perpetration and victimization cyberbullying experiences at an international middle school in Thailand using the Cyberbullying Experience Survey. Comparisons were also made with teacher's perceptions of student answers. This study also supplied information on the current situation of cyberbullying experiences among students to the school being researched. Data was collected from 79 middle school students and 11 middle school teachers using a Google Form with a 6-level Likert scale. The results showed low levels of cyberbullying activity throughout the sample. However, extreme experiences were reported by outliers from the sample. Recommendations include grades 1–12 cyberbullying classes, school-wide cyberbullying policy, as well as cyberbullying educational support website where students can get help.

Keywords: Adolescents, Cyberbullying, Middle School, Students

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of information communications technology has changed drastically over the past 20 years. From slow bulky computers that do very little with limited communications capabilities to the high speed incredibly capable and powerful, well-connected computers that we have in the year 2021, are changing the world for the better.

Decreasing device cost and associated edutainment value have also convinced parents to buy devices for their children. Device use among 9–11-year-old children for television (91%), tablet computers (78%), smartphones (67%), desktop (73%) and laptop computers (68%) are rising every year (Auxier et al., 2020). Even though social networking sites normally have an age requirement of 13 years old to become a member, children are finding their way onto social networking sites such as TikTok (13%), Snapchat (10%), Instagram (5%) and Facebook (3%).

Technology also brings drawbacks that countries around the world are wrestling with. One of these drawbacks deals with cyberbullying. While bullying has been defined as the intentional behavior that humiliates, harms, or hurts an individual (National Bullying Prevention Center,

2019), cyberbullying is the term used to refer to bullying using digital devices such as phones or computers.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to compare middle school male and female cyberbullying perpetration and victimization experiences as well as assumptions by middle school teachers of their student's cyberbullying experiences. Armed with this data, schools can implement mitigation strategies to reduce the cyberbullying intensity levels experienced by the students. They can also decide what teachers need to learn to help with this approach.

This study was based on the Cyberbullying Experiences Survey (CES) intended for late stage adolescents (Doane et al., 2013). However, due to the changing digital landscape, younger adolescents are dealing with similar issues faced by the original respondents of the CES.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vulnerable students growing up outside of developmental norms in bullying influenced cultures may be at increased risk to cyberbullying as either a perpetrator or victim. The outcomes of these experiences can range from maladjusted social and academic development into adulthood to an inability to cope or suicidal idealization.

2.1 Developmental Theories

Abraham Maslow, Erik Erikson, and Jean Piaget have generally accepted motivational and developmental theories that describe a normal path an individual takes as they age. Although not specifically written to describe bullying, perpetration and victimization experiences may be explained by these theories.

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs most basic levels are taken care of by parents of young children up until grade school. This is taken over by schools, teachers, and classmates during the school day. Motivation increases up Maslow's pyramid as self-esteem starts to develop. During this time if any of the 4 lower level needs disappears the student will be highly motivated to fill it (Richards, 2013). Students unable to make friends may lack self-worth and may find prestige and respect from others more desirable than self-esteem and confidence in oneself (Maslow, 1943).

Erikson's (1993) Psychosocial Development theories outline 8-stages individuals must correctly navigate to develop a personality and acquire basic virtues that help them deal with problems that arise in the future. This is how people get their sense of identity (Cherry, 2020). In the 3- to 5-year-old stage, children make friends, plan and initiate play with other children. Parents who help their children balance their initiative activities with other children help the child to develop their leadership and decision-making activities. Restrictive parents make the child feel guilty and possibly inhibit their creativity and psychosocial development (McLeod, 2018), (Heffner, 2001). Guilt done correctly will help the child to consider the feelings of others. However, too much unchecked initiative can lead children to be aggressive, pushy and indifferent to people's feelings (Tiwari, 2020). At the 9- to 11- year-old stage, a child tries to excel in school to increase their confidence and competence. Failing

during these tasks may make the child feel inferior (Cherry, 2020). Inferior children are often the targets of bullies (Gordon, n.d.).

Jean Piaget believed children develop intelligence by building on actual experiences (Piaget & Cook, 1952). Like Erikson, Piaget's theory listed stages children go through to develop normally. For example, in the 2- to 7-year-old preoperational stage, Piaget said children should be acceptable to play with by other children. Children who are not accepted will be lonesome, isolated, and antisocial (Peterson, 2017). At the 7- to 11-year-old concrete operational stage, children start to consider the perspectives of others. They build on their schemas to solve problems based on their life experiences up till this point. Children at this stage can mentally connect concreate experiences and imagine consequences of future actions based on their past experiences. For example, after watching a bully get something from another student, a child may copy this behavior to get something from another child. Although they are not yet able to imagine the psychological impact of the child they bully (American Addiction Centers, n.d.).

2.2 Physical Development

Middle school is a time of physical changes in both boys and girls as they start to mature to adulthood. Both boys and girls are getting taller and maturing sexually. Boys are experiencing increased testicular growth while girls' breasts begin to develop. Girls also begin menstrual cycles. Appearance related changes may make the child feel insecure and unsure about themselves. This uncomfortable feeling may make students feel sensitive or vulnerable to the opinions of others. This can lead to aggressive or inferior behavior in adolescents.

One of the more fascinating changes deals with the brain and its two and a half decades it takes to reach full maturity. Until then, adolescent impulsive decision making is controlled by the amygdala. This part of the brain is based on needs and wants without considering long term implications. The long-term implication decision making process is usually controlled by the prefrontal cortex. This doesn't reach maturity until around age 25 (Jensen, 2017). The impulses felt as a child are still there as an adult, but they are mitigated by the prefrontal cortex due to the myelination process being complete. Myelination is the process whereby the axions that carry signals to various parts of the brain develops sheath around it which helps it deliver signals more efficiently. This process starts at the back of the brain at the beginning of adolescence and is complete around age 25. Until it is complete, adolescents have a greater risk of making poor decisions based on what they want without looking at long term consequences (The Royal Institution, 2018).

2.3 Cultural Bullying

There are cultural practices that enhance bullying. In the home, many parents use corporal punishment, or spankings, to correct behavior they do not like. Christians often use religion as a reason to spank. In Proverbs 22:15, the bible says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." The idea being if you beat a child, you are saving him. Spankings often start in early childhood and likely fall under the definition of child abuse. Childhelp.org (Childhelp, n.d.) defines child abuse as when adults neglect to protect a child from abuse and violence or inflict physical abuse on the child

themselves. Children in turn learn to abuse others. Research shows that spanking at age one predicts childhood bullying at age three for males and the opposite effect for females (Turns & Sibley, 2018).

According to the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children (2020) corporal punishment in the school also a form of cultural bullying. It is practice in countries around the world. In 2021, it is still allowed in 68 countries around the world including the United States (Gershoff, 2017). The UN reports 732 million children aged 6 to 17 years old that study in schools where corporal punishment is allowed (Arora, 2017). In the United States, from the 19 states allow corporal punishment, more than 100,000 students are punished like this annually. Data suggest that victims of corporal punishment have low GPAs, report depression more and have a high propensity to spank their own children in the future (Gershoff, 2017).

It is worth mentioning that most states that allow corporal punishment are U.S. Republican (political) part controlled. Research reported a surge in bullying during the 2016 presidential campaign (Thompson, 2017). The Republican front runner often used bullying rhetoric to excite his supporters. Two-years later further research showed a connection between the Republican president and increases in bullying in states that supported him (Jacobs, 2019), (F. L. Huang & Cornell, 2019).

2.4 Digital Landscape Evolution

The digital landscape refers to the digital environment consisting of affordable ICT, social networking, high speed internet and cloud computing. This environment is highly ubiquitous in the lives of 21st century children. Adult themed problems often faced by the original adult participants of the Cyberbullying Experience Survey are now faced by early-stage adolescents. This includes cyberbullying.

2.5 Effects of Bullying

Feelings of depression are common in cyberbullying victims (Mishna et al., 2010). These feelings range from sad, low self-esteemed feelings to self-destructive thoughts and behaviors (DiMaria, 2020). Sometimes cyberbullying is worse than bullying because the victim is unable to run away. Other effects include low grades, attendance problems, inability to form friendships and cannot graduate (Victoria State Government, 2020). The bully also struggles with relationships, poor health, and low income (Wolke et al., 2013).

2.6 Types of Cyberbullying

The 4-types of cyberbullying looked at in this research are deception, unwanted contact, malice, and public humiliation. Deception happens when a deceiver purposely attempts to convince a victim something is true when in reality the deceiver knows it is false (Utari & Hermawati, 2018). Unwanted contact is when any type of online contact that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe (Commissioner, n.d.). Malice is an intentional behavior that is intended to cause suffering (Weisel, 2016). Public humiliation is a negative appraisal of yourself brought on by others that you wanted to remain private (Neel, 2014).

2.7 Teacher Perceptions

Normally, teachers are not part of a student's online life and are unaware of any problems their students may have. Many teachers feel untrained to handle cyberbullying and think it should be part of teacher training in the university (Yot-Domínguez et al., 2019). Some teachers feel bullied students will report their problems (Y.-Y. Huang & Chou, 2013).

2.8 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework below examines the similarities between males and females and teacher's beliefs of how their students answered.

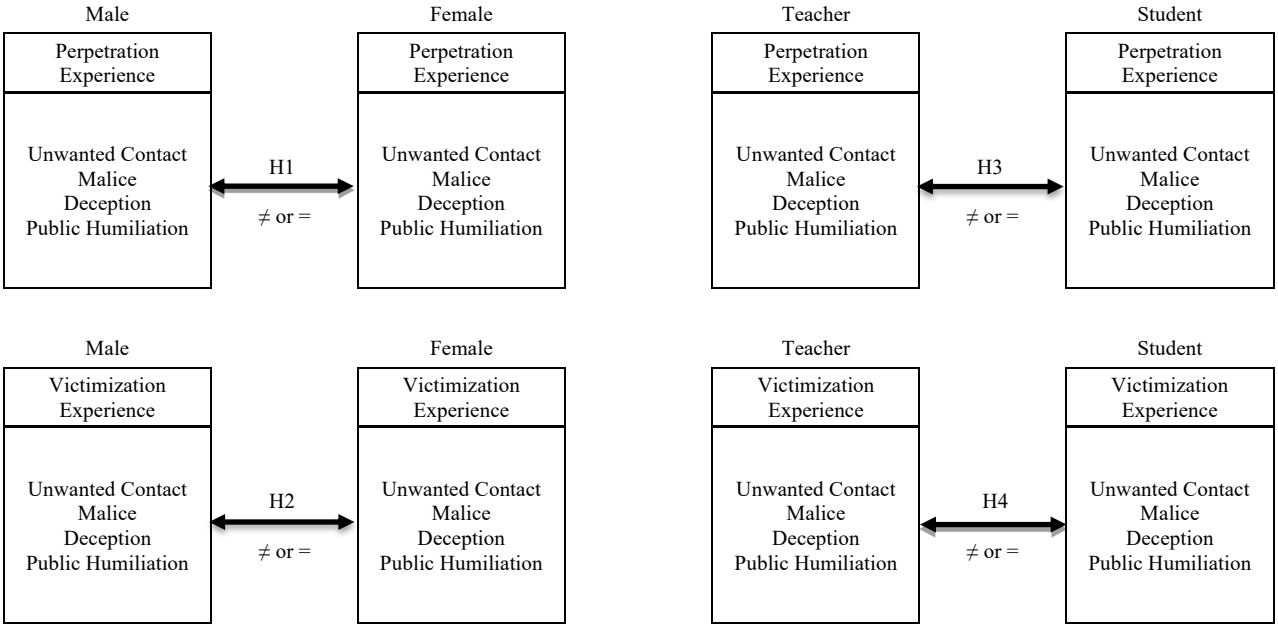

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population

The population of the study focused on middle school students and middle school teachers. As of September 2021, there were 109 middle school students. Twelve middle school teachers also agreed to take the same survey students took to compare their assumptions of what students would answer. A pilot study was also conducted which helped with survey administration for the final survey as well as techniques for increasing participation amongst middle school students.

3.2 Sample Size and Sampling Method

The was a census sample as the entire middle school was given the opportunity to be sampled. The G*Power app calculated the sample size of 34 students. The power was set to 95% with an alpha of 5%.

3.3 Research Questionnaire

The questionnaire had questions from the 4-perpetration and victimization constructs described earlier in paragraph 2.4. Questions about deception, unwanted contact, malice, and public humiliation were answered with a 6 level Likert scale. (1) never, (2) less than a few times a year, (3) a few times a year, (4) once or twice a month, (5) once or twice a week, (6) everyday/almost every day.

3.4 Reliability and Validity of Questionnaire

Reliability was checked with PSPP for the perpetrator and victim constructs. Unwanted contact Perpetration had a low Cronbach's Alpha, and its questions were discarded.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mean results resulted in low cyberbullying intensity levels (CIL) reported by students and assumed by teachers. However, high maximum range results were more helpful in showing significant experiences by individual students. Some of these experiences were disturbing as outlier reports of a couple of students experiencing frequent sexual message cyberbullying or electronic posting of the student's nude image. Other outlier cyberbullying experiences reported elevated levels of malice and public humiliation.

4.1 Hypothesis Testing

An independent samples t-test was used to compare male cyberbullying perpetration experiences to female cyberbullying perpetration experiences. To reject the null hypothesis, the p-value needed to be significant at less than or equal to 0.05. If the p-value was greater than 0.05, the null would be retained.

4.1.1 Hypothesis 1

- **$H_0$1: Male & Female levels of perpetration experiences are not different**
- **H_a1: Male & Female levels of perpetration experiences are different**

Table 1 shows the independent samples t-test results comparing constructs for cyberbullying perpetration experiences for male and female students. The results for malice (MP), $t(77)$, = -0.543, p = 0.589 and deception (DP), $t(77)$ = -0.606, p = 0.546 were not significant. This means the results between the males and females are similar and the null hypothesis is retained. However, public humiliation perpetration (PHP) is close to being significant with $t(77)$ = -1.777, p = 0.08.

Table 1: Student Only Perpetration Constructs' Independent Samples T-Test Results

Variable		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
PHP-Avg	Student's t	-1.78	77.00	.08	-0.07	0.04	-0.16	0.01
MP-Avg	Student's t	-0.54	77.00	.59	-0.06	0.12	-0.30	0.17
DP-Avg	Student's t	-0.61	77.00	.55	-0.04	0.07	-0.17	0.09

4.1.2 Hypothesis 2

- **$H_0$2: Male & Female levels of victimization experiences are not different**
- **H_a2: Male & Female levels of victimization experiences are different**

Table 2 shows the independent samples t-test results comparing constructs for cyberbullying victimization experiences for male & female students. The results for public humiliation (PHV), $t(77) = -0.171$, $p = 0.865$, malice (MV), $t(77) = -1.003$, $p = 0.319$, unwanted contact (UCV), $t(77) = -1/342$, $p = 0.184$ and deception (DV), $t(77) = -0.849$ were not significant. This means results between males and females are similar and the null hypothesis is retained.

Table 2: Student Only Victimization Constructs' Independent Samples T-Test Results

Variable		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
PHV-Avg	Student's t	-0.17	77.00	.87	-0.03	0.15	-0.33	0.28
MV-Avg	Student's t	-1.00	77.00	.32	-0.22	0.22	-0.67	0.22
UCV-Avg	Student's t	-1.34	77.00	.18	-0.22	0.16	-0.54	0.10
DV-Avg	Student's t	-0.85	77.00	.40	-0.13	0.15	-0.43	0.17

4.1.3 Hypothesis 3

- **$H_0$3: Teacher & Student levels of perpetration experiences are not different**

- **H_a3: Teacher & Student levels of perpetration experiences are different**

Table 3 shows the independent samples t-test results comparing constructs for cyberbullying perpetration experiences for teachers and students. The t-test results for malice (MP) $t(89) = -1.86$, $p = 0.067$ are nearly significant. However, the t-test results for public humiliation (PHP) $t(89) = -2.72$, $p = 0.008$ and deception (DP) $t(89) = -3.18$, $p = 0.002$ are significant. This means the results are not similar and the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 3: Teacher's & Student's Perpetration Constructs' Independent Samples T-Test Results

							95% Confidence Interval	
Variable		**Statistic**	**df**	**p**	**Mean difference**	**SE difference**	**Lower**	**Upper**
PHP-Avg	Student's t	-2.72	89	.01	-0.20	0.07	-0.34	-0.05
MP-Avg	Student's t	-1.86	89	.07	-0.33	0.18	-0.68	0.02
DP-Avg	Student's t	-3.18	89	.00	-0.52	0.16	-0.85	-0.20

4.1.4 Hypothesis 4

- **$H_0$4: Teacher & Student levels of victimization experiences are not different**
- **H_a4: Teacher & Student levels of victimization experiences are different**

Table 4 shows the independent samples t-test results comparing constructs for cyberbullying victimization experiences for teachers and students. The results show public humiliation (PHV), $t(89) = -0.983$, $p = 0.328$, malice (MV), $t(89) = -1.046$, $p = 0.299$, unwanted contact (UCV) $t(89) = -0.832$, $p = 0.408$ and deception (DV), $t(89) = -1.617$, $p = 0.109$ are not significant. This means results between teachers and students are similar and the null hypothesis is retained.

Table 4: Teacher's and Student's Victimization Construct's Independent Samples T-Test Results

							95% Confidence Interval	
Variables		**Statistic**	**df**	**p**	**Mean difference**	**SE difference**	**Lower**	**Upper**
PHV-Avg	Student's t	-0.98	89.00	.33	-0.20	0.20	-0.59	0.20
MV-Avg	Student's t	-1.05	89.00	.30	-0.32	0.31	-0.93	0.29
UCV-Avg	Student's t	-0.83	89.00	.41	-0.19	0.22	-0.63	0.26

DV-Avg	Student's t	-1.62	89.00	.11	-0.35	0.22	-0.78	0.08

4.2 Discussion of the Results

While it was unexpected for the results of the t-test to be similar, it was more surprising the range scores (1-6) maximum of 6 appeared in the raw data next to individual students while mean scores remained low. This is statistically considered an outlier and since it involves the abuse of a child, it is significant even if it is only one child. However, as the survey was anonymous, there was no way to identify the children with range scores that signify abuse. They must report the abuse to start a school response.

5. CONCLUSION

The safety, health and welfare of students is extremely important to schools. The outlier data found cyberbullying issues that cannot be followed up on without an actual report from a victim. However, k-12 students can be taught what is right and wrong behavior online with specific classes that target outlier issues. Signs spread throughout the school can reinforce these classes to try to influence student behavior. Teachers can also be trained to look for signs of depression and intervene if necessary. Students should be allowed to use a school's digital resources such as chat and video communication tools to isolate incidences and enable a school response. Incidents that happen off campus or on non-school platforms such as Discord or Instagram, cannot always be responded to by the school as they have no authority to do so. Future research should focus on the high school since cyberbullying happens more there than it does in middle school (Wang et al., 2020).

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