

Cyberbullying in Society: An Analysis from the Perspectives of Victims, Perpetrators, and Authorities

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying remains a widespread issue with serious psychological and legal consequences. This study explores the social and digital dimensions of cyberbullying in Malaysia by examining perceptions from three perspectives: victim, perpetrator, and authority. Guided by the Third-Person Effect Theory, a 15-item questionnaire was administered to 193 undergraduate students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Segamat, Johor. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Findings reveal that respondents believe others are more emotionally affected by cyberbullying, more vulnerable to reputational harm, and more likely to experience anxiety and depression than themselves. They also perceive others as more likely to post harmful content and justify offensive online behavior. From the authority perspective, participants feel others are less informed about digital safety, more dependent on law enforcement, and less aware of legal remedies. These self-other perceptual gaps reflect the third-person effect and highlight the need for targeted interventions. Based on the findings, it is recommended that anti-cyberbullying strategies move beyond general awareness to include interactive, reflective, and community-driven initiatives that address the self-other bias and foster personal accountability. Integrating the Third-Person Effect as a core framework in digital literacy programs and policy design can enhance self-awareness and collective responsibility in preventing and responding to cyberbullying.

Keywords: victim, perpetrator, authority, third-person effect, legal, behaviour, policy.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Cyberbullying in Malaysia: Challenges and Legal Perspectives

Cyberbullying is defined as the harassment, trolling, intimidation, or harm of individuals through digital means, including online bullying, cyberstalking, and defamation (Ray, McDermot & Nicho, 2024). Lee et al (2023) believe that this increasing concern is prevalent in Malaysia, where the rise of social media and digital communication has resulted in notable psychological, social, and even legal ramifications. Although laws and enforcement strategies have been introduced to address cyberbullying, finding effective methods to prevent and manage these incidents continues to pose challenges (Razali & Nawang, 2022).

Furthermore, Malaysia lacks in-depth research on the social pathology associated with cyberbullying, particularly regarding the psychological and legal implications for both victims and offenders. Consequently, this study is crucial not only for uncovering the underlying causes and motivations behind cyberbullying but also for evaluating the reactions of victims, authorities, and the wider digital community in both regions.

The objective of this research is to examine the digital and social pathology of cyberbullying in Malaysia, assess its psychological and legal effects on victims and offenders, and investigate potential preventative strategies. To fulfill these aims, the study will utilize the Third-Person Effect Theory as a foundational framework. This theory suggests that people often believe that others are more susceptible to the influence of digital content than they are themselves, which can affect views on cyberbullying, legal measures, and policy formulation (Goldbach et al, 2023).

A qualitative methodology was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 193 undergraduate students in Universiti Teknologi Mara Segamat branch, Johor campus, Malaysia. Additionally, secondary data will be analyzed from academic literature, legal documents, and case law to understand how perceptions shaped by the third-person effect impact legislation, enforcement practices, and societal attitudes towards online harassment.

The results of this research will shed light on the root causes and effects of cyberbullying while aiding policymakers in enhancing existing laws and enforcement frameworks. By exploring the influence of the Third-Person Effect Theory on the perception of cyberbullying, this study will recommend legislative changes and awareness initiatives aimed at creating a safer and more responsible digital landscape in Malaysia.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Kee et al (2022) opined that the advent of digital communication platforms has revolutionized interpersonal interactions, yet it has also contributed to the rise of cyberbullying as a widespread and intricate social issue. While cyberbullying impacts individuals across various demographics and regions, its psychological, social, and legal consequences are frequently underreported or misunderstood, particularly by those who are not directly involved (Grifoni, 2021). In Malaysia, the perceptions surrounding cyberbullying can significantly affect individual behaviors, policy efficacy, and institutional reactions (Madon & Chin, 2021)

This study, drawing on the Third-Person Effect Theory, examines how individuals perceive the effects of cyberbullying, both on themselves and on others. This perceptual discrepancy can

influence attitudes, responses, and preventative measures, potentially impacting the effectiveness of societal interventions.

Despite an increasing focus on cyberbullying within academic and policymaking domains, there is a scarcity of comprehensive studies that consider the issue from the viewpoints of victims, offenders, and authorities—particularly through a theoretical perspective that addresses misperception and social distance. There is an urgent need to comprehend how individuals rationalize or downplay their vulnerability or complicity in cyberbullying and how they appraise the roles of social institutions and legal frameworks in tackling it. Without this understanding, initiatives aimed at developing effective public education, legal enforcement, and digital safety policies may remain disjointed or misaligned with public perceptions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do individuals perceive the psychological, social, and legal impact of cyberbullying on themselves compared to others?
2. To what extent do individuals believe that others are more likely to engage in or justify cyberbullying behaviour compared to themselves?
3. How do individuals evaluate the effectiveness of legal enforcement, awareness campaigns, and institutional responses to cyberbullying.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore individual perceptions of the psychological, social, and legal consequences of cyberbullying from the victim's perspective, in line with the Third-Person Effect Theory.
2. To investigate how individuals view the motivations, justifications, and awareness levels of cyberbullying perpetrators, particularly how they differentiate themselves from others in terms of likelihood to bully.
3. To assess public perception of the roles and effectiveness of authorities, legal frameworks, and digital platforms in combating cyberbullying.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wootton (2024) defines social pathology as deviations from the normative conditions within human societies. It is often described as a pathological or dysfunctional phenomenon. It stems primarily from external influences, and investigations into these pathologies can enhance social wellbeing (Fromm, 2023). True health encompasses not merely the absence of disease but also the capacity to respond effectively to changing circumstances. The roots of social pathology theory can be traced back to Emile Durkheim's ideas surrounding "anomie" and "egoism." (Klingler, 2023)

Cyberbullying, recognized as a manifestation of social pathology, entails harassment, intimidation, and defamation conducted via digital channels (Aydin et al, 2021). Gohal et al (2023) highlight that the repercussions are profound, leading to psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. The anonymity afforded by digital platforms often diminishes accountability for offenders, which can embolden them.

The Third-Person Effect Theory posits that individuals tend to believe that cyberbullying affects others more significantly than themselves, shaping their views on legal interventions. In Malaysia, relevant legislative measures exist under the Communications and Multimedia Act

1998 along with the Penal Code; however, enforcement remains uneven. Current research indicates that effective responses to cyberbullying necessitate policy reforms, enhanced digital literacy initiatives, and more stringent enforcement practices. By incorporating insights from the Third-Person Effect Theory, this study seeks to shed light on how perceptions of cyberbullying influence public discourse as well as legal enforcement and policymaking.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study with a structured questionnaire as measuring instrument, directed at the perception of cyberbullying according to the Third-Person Effect Theory. The intention is to study how people perceive the difference between cyberbullying experienced by self and others from three perspectives: the victim, the perpetrator, and the authority figure.

The questionnaire, a product of the current study, includes 15 items, 5 in each of the three perspectives: victim perspective, perpetrator perspective, and authority perspective. Each item on the scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “1” (Strongly Disagree) to “5” (Strongly Agree), providing for the gradation of responses to statements capturing psychological, social, and legal aspects of cyberbullying.

This study targets undergraduate students from Universiti Teknologi Mara Segamat branch, Johor campus, Malaysia, on their perception and legal knowledge of cyberbullying. A sample of 193 respondents was surveyed. Active users of digital platforms and social media were purposively screened as such users are envisaged to witness or know about cyberbullying events. Data was gathered by a self-administered online questionnaire to achieve convenience sampling. All subjects were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality to allow for truthful and accurate answers.

The questionnaire consisted of items designed to assess respondents’ perceptions from three main perspectives: victim, perpetrator, and authority. Drawing from the third-person effect framework, the items aimed to explore how individuals compare their own experiences and behaviours with those of others. This structure enabled the identification of perceptual gaps, particularly in understanding how respondents evaluated the psychological and social impact of cyberbullying on themselves versus others.

Victim Perspective – Third-Person Effect Questions

These questions emphasize the belief that *others* are more affected by cyberbullying than the respondents themselves:

1. I believe cyberbullying has a more severe emotional impact on others than it does on me.
2. People around me are more likely to be targeted by cyberbullies than I am.
3. Cyberbullying is more likely to damage others’ reputations than mine.
4. Others experience more anxiety and depression due to cyberbullying than I do.
5. The general public is more vulnerable to the long-term effects of cyberbullying than I am.

Perpetrator Perspective – Third-Person Effect Questions

These questions focus on the perception that *others* are more likely to engage in or justify cyberbullying than the respondent:

1. Others are more likely to post harmful or offensive comments online than I am.
2. People in society are more likely to view cyberbullying as acceptable than I do.
3. I believe most people enjoy humiliating others online more than I ever would.
4. Sharing or liking harmful posts is more common among others than in my own behaviour.
5. Others are less aware of the legal consequences of cyberbullying than I am.

Authority Perspective – Third-Person Effect Questions

These focus on the belief that *others* (i.e., general society) are more affected by law enforcement effectiveness, awareness, and digital safety compared to the individual:

1. Others are more dependent on law enforcement to protect them from cyberbullying than I am.
2. People in society are more likely to distrust Malaysia's cyber laws compared to me.
3. The public is less informed about digital safety practices than I am.
4. Parents in general are less aware of the dangers of cyberbullying than I am.
5. Others face more difficulty in collecting digital evidence of cyberbullying than I do.

Hypotheses

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

- H1: Respondents are more likely to perceive that cyberbullying affects others more than it affects themselves (Third-Person Perception – victim perspective).
- H2: Respondents are more likely to believe that others are more involved in or supportive of cyberbullying behaviour than themselves (Third-Person Perception – perpetrator perspective).

FINDING

Victim Perspective – Third-Person Effect Items

As per the information available, there is a trend in responses where there are more respondents who say that others are more affected by cyberbullying and especially in terms of emotional and psychological impact, than they are themselves. Of note, 143/193 agreed that cyberbullying affected other people worse than themselves emotionally, and 144/193 agreed that other people get more anxious and depressed as a result of cyberbullying.

This is highly consistent with the third-person perception, where people minimize their susceptibility and maximize those effects that occur to others. As to the social impact, perception remains unchanged. A large proportion of respondents (118 out of 193) think cyberbullying is more likely to harm others' reputation than their own, and 121 out of 193 think the victims are more likely to be those around them than themselves. These attitudinal responses may indicate psychological dissociation with the crime—individuals might feel less vulnerable, perhaps due to their feelings of control, understanding, or denial, and this lack of perceived vulnerability may impair self-protective or reporting conduct.

Finally, thinking about long-term effects, 130 participants felt the general public is at more risk from long-term effects of cyberbullying than they are. This serves to amplify the third-person effect and suggests a societal inclination to view cyberbullying as a problem that affects others more than the self. On the one hand, such attitudes may encourage support for more far-

reaching forms of interventions; on the other hand, they may lead to minimizing one's own personal risk, thus reducing the chances that an individual will take the initiative to protect themselves online.' This is a vital lesson for crafting awareness campaigns that promote self-awareness and self-accountability.

Perpetrator Perspective – Third-Person Effect Questions

Results indicate a high degree of overattribution of harmful online behavior to others over the self. Over three quarters (146 out of 193) think that others are more likely to make nasty comments online, and 147 feel that most people enjoy humiliating others on the Internet more than they do. This is a classic example of social desirability bias, which sees people put themselves in a good light and ascribe negative behaviours to others – in this case, distancing themselves from the perpetrator as online attacker.

Furthermore, 131 agreed that sharing or liking content containing dangerous behavior was something that they are more likely to see others do rather than do themselves. The latter point re-emphasizes the sense that behaviors associated with cyberbullying are actions of others, not of oneself. But it's interesting to note that only 88 people think that society is more tolerant of cyberbullying than they are. This relatively limited consensus may in fact, imply that despite people recognising the prevalence of cyberbullying actions in others, these actions might not be perceived as socially acceptable or supported by society for those who engage in them, giving cues for their lack of acceptance based on the behaviour-norm fit.

Lastly, considering oneself as being more cognizant of his surroundings than others are in terms of legal consequences (135 of 193) contributes a further layer to this distancing. Respondents might feel that they are better informed and morally superior in their enlightenment than the general mass of humanity. This perception may be one of enacting personal integrity, but in doing so, it may also obfuscate the reality of the normalisation or minimising of cyberbullying, even amongst those who do not self-identify as aggressors. These results underscore the value of interventions that foster an individual sense of responsibility and question the assumption that cyberbullying is necessarily someone else's issue.

Authority Perspective – Third-Person Effect Questions

The results show a great degree of self-assurance and independence for participants to handle problems of cyberbullying. For example, 149 of 193 respondents believe that others are more reliant on the police to protect them from cyberbullying than themselves. This indicates that a great number of people think that with minimum dependence on the authorities, they can themselves cope with or react to cyber threats more easily.

These beliefs could be based on confidence in one's own abilities with regard to digital literacy or resilience, but also more general third person perceptions where threats and dependence are transferred to others. For trust in Malaysian cyber laws, 112 respondents perceive society to be less trusting in Malaysian cyber laws than themselves.

This is an ambivalent view – some respondents express willingness to trust in the legal system, but they see the public as more sceptical. It's a situation from "confusion, not crisis." Even a large proportion of the people inside the cybersecurity profession don't believe that the public is as informed about digital safety as they are, with 138 out of 193 respondents noting that they are

more informed. They indicate a broader tendency toward moral and intellectual grandstanding, in which people are convinced that they are smarter and better-situated to steer the ship of state than the average person. While this perspective might be accurate for some, it also may cause you to underestimate your risks and overestimate the vulnerability of others.

This perceived disconnection extends to parental knowledge and evidence collection. Both parents generally being less aware of the dangers of cyberbullying ($n = 145$), and other parents being more challenged in the collection of digital evidence ($n = 125$), it constitutes an expressing though underlying sentiment that others are both less able and knowledgeable. If one can get the public to see it this way, it might encourage public participation of the sort that's been seen in the past in educational campaigns or in behalf of legal reforms, but it always opens a gap between popular self perception and popular actual condition.

This is a critical gap to address — public education calls to action should be about “community responsibility and a personal response to engaging in prevention.” The results of both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are supported, suggesting a robust application of Third-Person Perception among the participants. Participants believed others are more vulnerable to experiencing cyberbullying and to be perpetrators of harmful online activities, than are they. This reflects a pattern of perceiving the self as less susceptible and less personally involved in the course of a consistent self-other bias in line with patterns typical of TPP.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research reveal a clear and consistent trend that aligns with the Third-Person Effect, indicating that individuals perceive others as being more influenced by, engaged in, or less aware of cyberbullying than themselves. When victims reflect on their own experiences of victimization, most participants believe that the emotional and psychological damage caused by cyberbullying is significantly worse for others than for themselves. They also view others as more susceptible to reputational harm, anxiety, and long-term negative consequences. This suggests a psychological detachment from the impact of cyberbullying, potentially leading them to downplay their own susceptibility or emotional responses.

Conversely, regarding perpetrators' behaviors, participants consistently assert that others are more inclined to engage in harmful actions online (such as posting offensive comments or endorsing humiliation) than they are themselves. This highlights a pronounced self-other divide, where individuals distance themselves from socially undesirable behavior and may thereby obscure their own participation in toxic online environments. Additionally, many respondents perceive others as being more dependent on law enforcement, lacking knowledge about digital safety, and insufficiently equipped to gather evidence or understand legal matters. This again reflects a sense of superiority or preparedness compared to others, reinforcing the self-serving nature of the Third-Person Effect.

Based on these insights, several recommendations emerge. First, awareness initiatives should extend beyond general public outreach to encourage personal introspection regarding the notion that cyberbullying predominantly affects “other people.” While Tozzo et al (2023) recommend public education, the researcher believes interactive and reflective components, prompting individuals to consider how they might inadvertently contribute to or enable cyberbullying, are more effective instead of intervening. Second, as mentioned by Hendry et al,

(2023), digital literacy programs need to evolve from mere information dissemination towards fostering personal accountability and critical thinking, encouraging individuals to evaluate their online conduct alongside that of others.

Moreover, the perception that victims rely more on authorities or possess less knowledge about digital safety may lead to complacency. Lan, Law & Pan (2022) believed that focus groups must indicate a need for initiatives promoting cohesive community involvement among bystanders who feel equally responsible for preventing and reporting instances of cyberbullying while supporting active victims. Lastly, research and policy strategies should contemplate integrating the Third-Person Effect as a fundamental framework within studies and interventions due to its potential to illuminate psychological barriers hindering personal engagement in combatting cyberbullying. By emphasizing this cognitive bias, it becomes possible to create more effective, inclusive, and self-aware strategies aimed at mitigating the impacts of cyberbullying in both offline and online contexts.

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