

Social Media Influencer and Cyberbullying: A Lesson Learned from Preliminary Findings

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers generate large followers that include the enthusiastic engaged people who value their views, as well as haters. While enjoying the opportunities to become the endorser of certain brands as a result of being famous, they are also bound by cyberbullying issues. Cyberbullying is not new, it has happened even before the social networking era. Nonetheless, the focus of cyberbullying related studies is usually school children or young adults. This study fills the gap by exploring the categories of cyberbullying faced by the social media influencers and the best practices to deal with the problem. We collected the data by using content analysis and interview techniques. The findings show that social media influencers face (i) harassment, (ii) flaming, (iii) outing, (iv) masquerading, (v) dissing, (vi) trolling and (vii) catfishing as part of the cyberbullying by their haters. We also found that the influencers' best practices to handle the situation differs based on the form of cyberbullying. The findings contribute to the existing literature on cyberbullying studies, particularly the lesson learned from the cyberbullying towards social media influencers.

Keywords: Social media influencer, cyberbullying, social networking.

I INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers are users of social media who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a particular topic or those who have established their credibility in a specific industry. They make regular posts about the topic on their preferred social media channels, which generate large followings of enthusiastic engaged people. These followers pay close attention to the influencers' views.

According to Otu (2015) trolling on the social media happens when social media users make controversial and abusive content to misinform, divert attention, as well as mock and bully the publisher of a post. Trolling may come from a range of reasons, such as disagreement, jealousy, or just for the sake of driving a particular conversation towards a particular direction. In many cases, the act of trolling allows the room for cyberbullying. This is because, among social media users, there are some who do not realize the impact and the significance

of either their comments or actions on social media (Millet, 2014).

Recently, there are many studies focusing on cyberbullying due to the seriousness of this issue. They study different aspects of the issue, including role of parental and norms (Sasson & Mesch, 2017), social media of cyberbullying (Sterner & Felmlee, 2017; Görzig & Frumkin, 2013), empathy (Zych et al., 2018), prevention and resilience (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017), mental health (Kim et al., 2018), prediction (Chen et al., 2017), cross cultural (Smith & Robinson; Shapka et al., 2018), prevention (Espelage & Hong, 2017), higher education students (Heiman & Olenik, 2015), bystander behavior (Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2017; Patterson et al., 2017), and socio-emotional (Heiman et al., 2015). These large number of studies testifies the seriousness and importance of the research issue.

Looking at past studies, a few important gaps have been found. Firstly, although scholars concur that cyberbullying prevention and intervention are necessary, there is lack of research focusing on how to prevent or address cyberbullying. According to Espelage and Hong (2017), Cassidy et al. (2013) and Pearce et al. (2011), one common strategy to prevent cyberbullying is to provide information on what constitutes cyberbullying and to avoid being a victim. Yet, the current study believes that there are other strategies to handle cyberbully that we are not aware of. Therefore, identifying the best practices for handling cyberbully is a must.

Secondly, much of the cyberbullying research are focusing on teenagers and young adults. We argue that it is necessary for researchers to include various range of ages because focusing solely on teenagers may lead researchers to miss some important findings related to different age groups. Victims from different age groups may experience very different issues related to cyberbullying.

Thirdly, much less is known about the cyberbullying on social media influencers. It is important to investigate this field as the influencer marketing industry is a big industry. It is predicted to be A \$5-\$10 billion dollar market in the next 5 years (Evan, 2018). Identifying the best practices to handle cyberbullying, which is one of the issues that are likely to hinder its growth, is therefore vital. In addition, the best practices can help the authorities

to strengthen the cyberlaw, particularly on the harassment in the industry. It could also become a platform to develop the awareness program related to cyberbullying.

Given the identified research gaps, the objective of this research is to investigate the cyberbullying targeting to the social media influencers and identifying the best practices in order to control the situation.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Social Media Influencers

Self-branding, or personal branding, involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital (Khamis et al., 2016). As many of them developed their brand on social media, they are also often referred to as social media influencers. According to Wilson (2017), influencer endorsements play a prominent role in the psychology of brand association and influencing consumers as they often adore the influencers. Wilson (2017) argues that consumers become over-obsessed with the influencers and can form too much of a connection with them.

B. Categories of Cyberbullying

Several researchers and practitioners (Willard, 2007; ETCB, 2018; Karspersky Lab, 2018; Kansara & Shekokar, 2015) have listed the followings as the categories of cyberbullying: (i) *harassment* - involves the bully sending offensive and malicious messages to an individual or a group and is often repeated multiple times. i.e. cyberstalking, rude messages, threatening messages; (ii) *flaming* - refers to an online fight exchanged via emails, instant messaging or social media accounts. i.e. harsh words, inappropriate images; (iii) *exclusion* - the act of intentionally singling out and leaving a person out from an online group and subsequently leave malicious comments and harass the one they singled out; (iv) *outing* - online posting of sensitive, private or embarrassing information without victim's consent; (v) *masquerading* - use fake identity to harass someone anonymously; (vi) *fraping* - impersonates someone by illegally logs into their social networking account; (vii) *dissing* - the act of sending or posting cruel information, to damage their reputation or friendships with others; (viii) *trickery* - the act of gaining trust so that they reveal secrets or embarrassing information that will be shared publicly; (ix) *trolling* - the deliberate act of provoking a response through the use of insults or bad language on online forums and social networking sites; (x) *catfishing* - catfishing is when a person steals somebody's online identity, usually photos, and re-creates social networking profiles for deceptive purposes; and (xi) *slandering* - hurting

someone by spreading malicious rumours. We note that some of these categories are overlapping each other, depending on the level of cyberbullying actions. For example, slandering is part of the harassment.

Meanwhile according to Smith et al. (2018), cyberbullying forms include (i) text message bullying; (ii) picture/ video clip bullying (via mobile phone cameras); (iii) phone call bullying (via mobile phones); (iv) email bullying, (v) chat-room bullying, (vi) instant messaging; and (vii) bullying via websites. While these cyberbullying forms appear in the electronic context in general, we suggest that, in the era of social networking, these cyberbullying forms can also be conducted on social networking sites.

C. The effect of cyberbullying to the victims

The effects of cyberbullying lead to both negative long term and short term consequences (Davison & Stein, 2014). A study by Espelage and Swearer (2003) shows that cyberbullying leads to severe depressions and even suicide attempts. In addition, Ortega et al. (2012) suggest that the emotional impact of cyberbullying on the victim depends on some individual variables but also on the type of cyberbullying. Smith et al. (2008) claim that cyberbullying has more negative impact as compared to traditional bullying, particularly when it involved video clip. This is supported by the earlier findings by Ybarra et al. (2006) who found that cyberbullying causes distress. In addition, Davison and Stein (2014) argue that Cyberbullying has costs associated with it and the costs can be measured in terms of direct as well as indirect financial impacts such as lost productivity.

III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data collection was conducted with the combination of content analysis and interview technique. Content analysis is conducted in order to describe and quantify the phenomena (Krippendorff 1980, Downe-Wamboldt 1992, Sandelowski 1995). It is also known as a method of analyzing documents. We followed 20 social media influencers' Instagram within 2 months to identify (i) the type of cyberbullying, (ii) the frequency of the cyberbullying, and (iii) the reaction by the social media influencers as the victims.

The influencers were chosen randomly using a snowball sampling based on a recent case of cyberbullying published on a web portal related to the viral issues. Only those with public accounts were selected in order to address the ethical issues of the disclosure of private data used in the content analysis.

In addition, we have interviewed seven social media influencers in order to investigate their experiences on cyberbullying. We have approached more than 20 influencers, however, for the preliminary findings, only seven participants will be reported as we are still in the process of collecting the data. The participants were asked to share their experiences in handling cyberbullying, particularly how do they handle the situation and how their experience being bullied has affected their lives.

The main coding was done using deductive coding and was based on the literature. However, there were also cases where codes emerged progressively during the data collection, so inductive coding was also used. A comparison was made for both data source in order to identify the similarity and differences of the findings, before drawing the conclusion.

IV FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will discuss the findings of this research.

Categories of Cyberbullying

We found that amongst the problems faced by the social media influencer are (i) harassment, (ii) flaming, (iii) outing, (iv) masquerading, (v) dissing, (vi) trolling, (vii) catfishing, and (viii) slandering. These problems are frequently found in our dataset, which also conform to the findings of the existing studies by Willard (2007), ETCB (2018), Karspersky Lab (2018), Kansara and Shekokar (2015).

From our dataset, we further identified the characteristics of each cyberbullying. Table 1 shows the sample of the data for of each category and their main characteristics.

We further found that there is evidence of the cyberbullying targeting to tarnish the social media influencers' reputation as product endorser. This includes the personal life of the influencers as well as the trust issues. These findings extend the works by several researchers (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Ortega et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2006) by highlighting the potential impact of the cyberbullying on the social media marketing industry. Although we understand that the data are not enough to draw the conclusion, the findings open a room for further investigation.

Impact of Cyberbullying

The current study also considered the consequences of cyberbullying. We identified three negative impacts of cyberbullying. Table 2 shows the impact of cyberbullying to the social media influencers.

Best Practices

All the seven participants suggest that the best way to handle cyberbullying is depending on how serious the problem is. If it just a basic harassment or flaming that involve harsh words or trolling on their appearance or stuff they posted on the social media, the participants believe that the best way to handle is to ignore. This is because giving reaction usually creates more problems as other haters may started to take sides with the bully. It will create a negative conversation between the followers and the haters.

Table 1. Sample Data

Categories	Characteristics	Sample
Harrasment	Body shaming	<i>The dress doesn't suit you because you're too fat</i>
	Religious Issue	<i>Teach your wife to wear a proper attire. Both of you will be burned in hell. Pity your kids to have ignorant parents like you</i>
	Educational Background	<i>You didn't even have a degree, get a degree first before you want to criticize others.</i>
Flaming	Private messages	<i>The haters sent private messages telling me that I'm an attention seeker. They even cursed me.</i>
Outing	Old picture	<i>That was an old picture of me. I have changed. But the haters keep on circulating that picture.</i>
Masquerading	Fake account	<i>They used fake accounts to harassed me.</i>
Dissing	Personal relationship	<i>She cheated with someone else's husband. I hope the company removed her as their ambassador</i>
Catfishing	Stolen Identity	<i>Please note that I only have one Instagram account and I don't have a Facebook account. Guys... please unfollow that account. I do not share any of those</i>

		<i>inappropriate contents.</i>
Slendering	Trust	<i>She don't even use the products. She did this just for the money. Why should we trust her? Unfollow her!</i>

Participant XX stated that “It would be best for the victim to **take time before responding** and **seek support** from people around them. Most victims tend to lash out and respond without giving much thought about it - typical responses would be along the lines of I don't care about what you think, I'm just being me or trying to attack the bully in return”.

Similar opinion on this issue was given by Participant YY who stated “Keep calm, try to stay as positive as possible and of course, the best thing to do is **ignore** and block that person. Don't go along with them coz they are attention seekers.”

Table 2. The Impact of Cyberbullying

Impact	Descriptions
Lost opportunities	When things are getting out of control, the influencers will end up closing account for temporarily basis.
	The tarnished reputation is likely to cause the business to stop hiring that particular influencers as their product endorser
Lost of followers	The fake account and masquerading caused the lost of followers, which may lead to the lost opportunities for the influencers
Psychological effects	The influencers are likely to experience higher levels of stress, were more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression, lower self-esteem, lost sleep

However, if the cyberbullying involves **bigger issues**, such as outing, masquerading, dissing, slandering and catfishing, the participants believe that **action should be taken**. This is because these types of cyberbullying **could damage their reputations** as well as affecting their job as the endorser for some products.

Participant ZZ stated that “If it's getting out offhand, I will lodge a **police report**, especially if it involved tarnishing my reputation as a public figure”.

This is supported by Participant AA who stated: “If the attack affected my business or my reputation, I

will make a police report and get advice from an expert to sue them for defamation”.

Police report will be an easy way out as many of the haters or bully are likely to stop harassing after the police report. According to one of the participant “cyberbully happened because there is lack of enforcement in monitoring social media and the internet”.

In addition, the participants perceived that there are some actions taken while handling the cyberbully could worsen the situation. For example, Participant XX claimed that by creating a war with the bully, it will involve more people and the situation will be out of hand.

In some cases the **participants** are doing well in managing cyberbully, therefore, they try to **avoid police report** unless the situation gets worse. Nonetheless, their decision to avoid police report sometimes lead to another problem to the influencers. This is likely to happen when the **bully cannot take a pressure from the followers**. We found that there are cases where the bully got attacked by the followers of the social media influencer. It started with the bully leaving nasty comments on the social media influencers' page, using their actual account. When the influencers respond to the attack, their avid followers will usually react. It leads to tracing the bully's account and started to harass the bully.

There are generally **three possible outcomes** of this cycle. Firstly, there are cases where the **bully will play victims and reported the issues to the authority**. This will give more pressure to the social media influencers, as the police report is made on them, instead of the bully. Secondly, the cycle of bullying sometimes **forced the bully to close their accounts**. Thirdly, the reaction of the followers **forces the bully to come out with a public apology**.

Nonetheless, based on our findings, the issues do not stop there as more netizens will be aware of the issues, hence more attack is faced by the bully. Although it stopped the bullying to the social media influencer, however, this situation has led to another bullying cycle. What makes it worse is, the social media influencers who are the victims did not realize that their reaction to the issues leads to another vicious cyberbullying cycle. This finding confirmed the earlier works by Arslan et al. (2012) who found that **cyberbullies place themselves at a greater risk of being bullied in return** and a **vicious cycle is induced**. They argue that being a cyberbully contributes to a twenty-fold increase of also being a victim. In addition, the findings also in line with Kowalski et al. (2014) who found that cyberbullying

victims have a greater risk of becoming bullies themselves.

The discussion in this section shows that the social media influencers should consider either ignoring the attack or report it the authority in order to avoid more negative consequences. They must also educate their followers to handle the matters well. The bystanders' action, although not covered in this paper, is important to control the damage done by the attack.

V CONCLUSION

This paper provides preliminary findings on the cyberbullying issues on social media influencers which is expected to guide the social media influencer newbies in handling cyberbully. This study contributes to the existing literature on cyberbullying, particularly the cyberbullying towards social media influencers.

The paper also contributes to knowledge in two aspects. Firstly, it identifies the categories of cyberbullying, including harrasment, flaming, outing, masquerading, dissing, catfishing, and slendering. Each of them is further characterized and discussed. Second, we analyze the impact of cyberbullying, which extends the work by several researchers (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Ortega et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2006). We further suggest best practices to manage cyberbullying, aligning with the existing efforts Arslan et al. (2012) and Kowalski et al. (2014).

The current research has certain limitations. Of them, two main ones will be discussed here. Firstly, the current data were collected with a limited number of participants. Ideally, more participants should have been interviewed to get more diverse data. More participants would have provided more insight in order to achieve more comprehensive findings. Nonetheless, the complementary of content analysis and interview technique have strengthened the research findings. Secondly, the study was conducted by only focusing on social media influencers who use Instagram, which reflect the usage of a single case. This leads to generalization issues where the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of all social media influencers. Therefore, the interpretations of the findings are specific to the views and experiences of the participants that were being studied.

Our future work will improve these limitations. More precisely, future work should include more participants and extend to include other platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Further, we also plan to extend our work by collecting data from different

countries, which increase the generalization of the research.

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