

An Exploratory Qualitative Study on Cyberbullying Experience from a Victim's Perspective and Coping Strategies among Women with Heavy Social Media Usage

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Various studies have highlighted that women are at a higher risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying, with the severity of cyberbullying among women in many countries increasing and the urgency of having necessary intervention steps by governments and legal institutions in place. Nonetheless, the taboo of discussing mental health and individual struggles has hindered victims from disclosing their cyberbullying experiences they have gone through or are still currently experiencing due to the fear of being discriminated against. Therefore, this study aimed to explore cyberbullying from a victim's perspective among women with heavy social media usage, as well as their coping strategies. A qualitative research design was utilised to understand the cyberbullying experience and coping strategies among five young women aged between 20 to 26 years old. Participants were recruited through social media. Collected data were analysed using thematic analysis which revealed three cyberbullying themes: "harassment", "relational aggression" and "trolling", three initial reaction themes: "anger", "sadness" and "confusion", two crossroad themes: "helplessness" and "sense of control" that either lead to the relapse of cyberbullying experience or coping strategies, and three coping strategy themes: "social coping", "emotion-focused coping" and "problem-focused coping" and lastly, cognitive reappraisal. The findings provide comprehensive insights into understanding cyberbullying experiences and coping strategies among women with heavy social media usage. Understanding the effectiveness of various forms of coping allows mental health professionals to support their clients by finding out the implemented coping strategy and expanding on other forms of coping to build a more holistic support for their clients.

Keywords: *coping strategies, cyberbullying from a victim's perspective, heavy social media usage, women*

BACKGROUND

Cyberbullying is a continuous, harmful and hostile behaviour that has the intention to create power inequality and inflict harm on others (Langos, 2012; Safaria, 2016). Cyberbullying is categorised into two main types: direct and indirect. "Direct" cyberbullying happens in a private context in which the perpetrator texts the victim privately (Langos, 2012; Safaria, 2016); while for "indirect" cyberbullying, the perpetrator requests help from or manipulates others to abuse the victim as a group (Safaria, 2016; Sleglova & Cerna, 2011). There are various subtypes of cyberbullying, such as (1) exclusion: the act of isolating an individual from a social or online group that involves mutual friends, (2) harassment: a persistent pattern of sending inappropriate messages to the victims, (3) trolling: posting harmful comments about others and having the intention to make others feel embarrassed, but do not have an interpersonal relationship with the victims, and (4) dissing: spreading negative information about the victims through private messages or public posts to ruin the individual's reputation and relationship with others (Ariffin *et al*, 2021; Peled, 2019).

Cyberbullying has become the main type of bullying that occurs with the increase in the use of social media platforms which has led to increased toxic behaviours among users (The Star, 2022; Winterfeldt, 2013). Although cyberbullying does not cause physical harm to the victims, the impact of the harm and the consequences that victims need to bear are similar to that of being physically bullied (Nixon,

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2014; Winterfeldt, 2013). In fact, the consequences or impact of cyberbullying could be harsher and more hurtful than physical bullying. Free Malaysia Today (2021) highlighted that female victims, in particular, encounter several negative effects to their general well-being and mental health. They felt helpless in dealing with their cyberbullying experience while some had sleep difficulty and low self-confidence and self-esteem (Djuraskovic, 2022). There have been efforts to address cyberbullying but Kazerooni *et al.* (2018) and Public Safety Canada (2018) questioned the efficacy of these cyberbullying intervention and prevention programmes. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of legal protection established for online users (Winterfeldt, 2013). Djuraskovic (2022) highlighted the severity of the psychological impact of cyberbullying and the urgency of enhancing law enforcement to overcome and prevent this situation from worsening.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic in the last few years has made cyberbullying incidents worsen. Being stuck at home and spending more time online during the government movement control orders increased levels of stress and anxiety among Malaysians, which also contributed to rising cyberbullying cases in Malaysia (Free Malaysia Today, 2021). The common focus of cyberbullying tended to be comments on physical appearance and that were sexuality-related (Free Malaysia Today, 2021). Furthermore, a local study confirms the prevalence of cyberbullying in Malaysia. When 270 medical students from a public university in East Malaysia were surveyed, researchers discovered that 24.4% of them reported experiencing cyberbullying victimisation whereas 13.0% reported cyberbullying perpetration over the past six months

and was associated with reports of depression, anxiety, and stress (Lee *et al.*, 2023). Hence, there is a need to understand cyberbullying in more depth in order to inform stakeholders in developing targeted intervention, as well as to develop guidelines to help prevent this phenomenon from occurring.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study was to explore cyberbullying experiences from a victim's perspective; whereas the sub-objective was to explore their coping strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research has evinced a correlation between social media usage and an individual's likelihood of becoming a cyber victim (Adebayo & Ninggal, 2021; Craig *et al.*, 2020). Individuals are at a higher risk of being cyberbullied when they: (1) are antisocial on social media content and interact more with online groups (Festl & Quandt, 2016; Hazlyna *et al.*, 2021), (2) have uncontrollable and excessive access to social media (Craig *et al.*, 2020), (3) engage in problematic use and talk to unknown people (Craig *et al.*, 2020); (4) disclose their private or school information or upload a picture of themselves (Craig *et al.*, 2020; Sengapta & Chaudhuri, 2011), and (5) interact more on social media than those who used social media for academic tasks (Kwan & Soric, 2013; Safarta, 2016).

Katz *et al.* (1974) introduced the Uses and Gratification Theory which can be used to explain how active social media users fulfil certain needs when utilising social media platforms (Edege & Chuks-Nwosu, 2013). Katz *et al.* (1974) classified this approach into five main needs:

- i. Cognitive need: motivates users to utilise social media platforms to search for information and facts that they consider accurate and factual (Kasirye, 2022.; Ruggiero, 2000).
- ii. Affective need: users access various types of platforms to gain their personal needs such as emotional and/or satisfaction needs (Kasirye, 2022).
- iii. Personal identity need: individual's needs for self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence and social status (Kasirye, 2022; Stafford *et al*, 2004).
- iv. Tension-free need: users intend to take their minds off the issues and keep their minds on social media platforms to avoid thinking about the issue in question (Kasirye, 2022).
- v. Social integrative need: users select the social media platforms that achieve their desires for social interaction (Kasirye, 2022).

Cyberbullying may result in negative psychological impact, however, some individuals may appear to be more resilient in coping with it, thus leading to better outcomes in overcoming cyberbullying experiences (Autry, 2016). Resilience coping is called the "buffer" against negative influences that help to reduce loneliness and the impact of cyberbullying, but such mitigating effects were relatively poor (Han, 2021). According to Caba and Lopez (2013), there are two main coping strategies for individuals who are dealing with cyberbullying incidents. Positive strategies are when individuals utilise a dialogue-linked assertive approach in seeking help from the public or dealing with their cyberbullied experiences, whereas negative strategies refer to when individuals develop passive attitudes towards the experiences, such as keeping silent (Alcaine & Sanchez, 2020).

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping inaugurated that individuals often evaluate the stimuli around them, as either dangerous, safe or difficult, which then generates emotions. Experiencing excessive distress may lead to the coping process whereby the individual reappraises the stimuli as unresolved, unfavourable or favourable, which results in the outcome being the coping strategy, that either directly solves the problem or manages one's emotions (Biggs *et al*, 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) introduced the two main appraisals:

- i. Primary appraisal: attributes a specific environmental or individual transaction and determine the meaning of the transaction by associating it with the individual's well-being (Biggs *et al*, 2017; Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The transaction is categorised as positive, stressful or irrelevant.
- ii. Secondary appraisals: identify the solutions to cope with the stressor (Biggs *et al*, 2017; Dewe & Cooper, 2007).

When an event is perceived as stressful (primary appraisal) and requires effort to solve the problem (secondary appraisal), a coping strategy is activated (Biggs *et al*, 2017; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Two coping strategies were identified by Lazarus & Folkman (1984):

- i. Problem-focused coping: manages the problem.
- ii. Emotion-focused coping: regulates emotion when the problem arises.

The result of coping strategies combined with the new information from the surroundings formulates cognitive reappraisal (Biggs *et al*, 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A basic interpretive qualitative research approach was selected for this study and utilised semi-structured interviews for data collection. Merriam (2002, 2009) explained that qualitative research aims to perceive the world from the participant's perspective, while subsequently organising and analysing data based on its revelations. A total of five women were recruited through purposive sampling via social media and interviewed. The inclusion criteria were:

- i. Female aged between 18 to 29 years old.
- ii. Have experienced cyberbullying as a victim.
- iii. Must be a heavy social media user who uses two or more social media platforms at least six or more hours per day.

The rationale for the selected inclusion criteria:

- i. Female victims: several studies have demonstrated that women have a higher tendency to be the victims of cyberbullying (e.g. Kasahara *et al*, 2019; Khan, *et al*, 2020), as women:

- Were more likely to report themselves as cyberbullying victims (Kasahara *et al*, 2019; Musharrar & Anis-ul-Haque, 2018).
- Utilise text messaging and email, which results in higher incidence for them to be prone to cyberbullying activities that are related to spreading rumours and destroying friendships, as both victims and perpetrators (Kasahara *et al*, 2019; Notar *et al*, 2013).
- Tend to use social media more frequently for socializing purposes (Khan *et al*, 2020; Livazovic & Ham, 2019).
- Have a higher likelihood of developing neuroticism when they encounter any uncontrollable situation, and become mostly reserved, very observant or are easily influenced by peers in friendship and relationships (Adeboyo & Ninggal, 2021).

- ii. Young adulthood population: Young adults aged between 16 to 29 years old are the most active social media users (Henderson, 2020; Hruska & Maresova, 2020; Ilakkuvan *et al*, 2019).

iii. Heavy social media users: There is no accepted standard for defining the number of hours spent among heavy social media users, but has been understood to mean users who have more than one social media platform (Jamilah *et al*, n.d.; Kennedy, 2019; Murphy *et al*, 2018) and who spend between four to eight hours per day on

social media (Adebayo & Ninggal, 2021; Raju *et al*, 2015). Therefore, the range of spending six hours per day on social media and using at least two social media platforms were set as the parameter of this research study.

The demographic data of all participants are shown below:

Table I: Participants' Demographic Data

PARTICIPANT	AGE	NATIONALITY	THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA DAILY	TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
Ms A	23	Malaysian	8	Instagram and Facebook
Ms B	22	Maldivian	6	Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, Snapchat, Pinterest
Ms C	20	Indian	7	Instagram, Facebook, Discord
Ms D	26	American	8 - 9	Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok
Ms E	24	American	8	Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, very few participants were willing to share their experiences. Therefore, as long as they met the inclusion criteria as participants, their differing nationality was not the focus.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants recruitment was conducted on various social media platforms such as LinkedIn, and Facebook groups relating to peer supporters for cyberbullying victims and anti-cyberbullying groups (i.e. Cyber Bullying Awareness Group – Because WE Care!!, Cyber Bullying Awareness, Malaysia Counselling &

Psychology Peer Group's Facebook groups) and the university's Student Service Hub (SSH)'s social media platforms after receiving ethical approval from the IMU Joint-Committee on Research and Ethics. After registration, one-on-one interviews with participants were scheduled between July to November 2022. The interviews started with briefing each participant regarding the research and participants' rights, obtaining the participants' consent and then their demographic data. Pre-interviews were also conducted to assess their eligibility to participate in the research, after which in-depth interviews were conducted which ranged between 30 to 50 minutes and lastly, ending with a debriefing.

Data Analysis Procedures

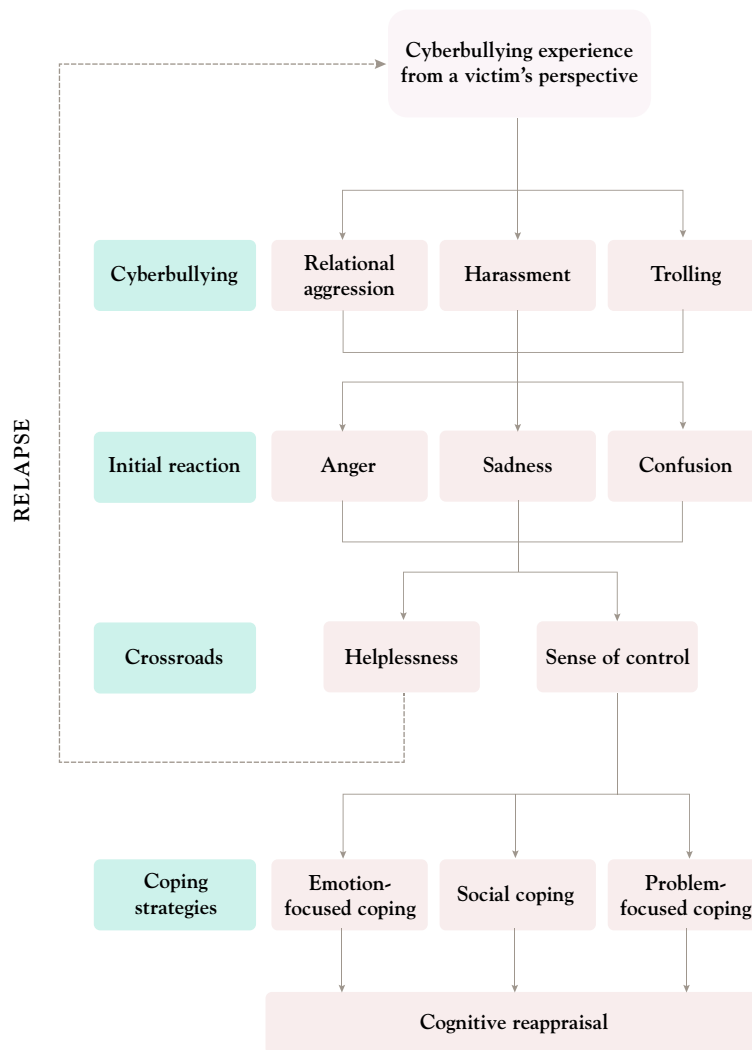
Braun and Clarke (2006)'s thematic analysis approach was applied to identify, analyse, organise, describe and report the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Each interview was transcribed and the researcher and co-author 1 compared and analysed the transcription from each participant. Related or similar phrases

or sentences were coded into labels to describe the content. Codes that had similar meanings were then filtered and categorised according to themes.

RESULTS

Figure I shows the summary of the results.

Figure I



Cyberbullying Experiences from a Victim's Perspective

Three cyberbullying themes were grounded in: relational aggression, harassment, and trolling.

Theme 1: Relational Aggression

Ms A noticed that her friends would gossip about her in groups and influenced other friends to dislike and isolate her from their social circle, while Ms C was cyberbullied on a Facebook confession page. She had attended a council conference as a representative and she noticed a couple of negative confession posts that were directed at her after the conference.

"He or she was trying to say that I am really bad to her or him. And then he or she wanted me to die. He or she was not satisfied with everything I did and did not agree with what I was doing." (Ms A, lines 41-48)

"A lot of not nice comments, like "She thinks she knows everything". Something about me being rude and something they disagreed about me." (Ms C, lines 21-26)

Theme 2: Harassment

Ms B who is a public figure with a large number of followers on Instagram in her country received multiple negative messages and comments from online users.

"Once, they just had a picture of me in jeans and a t-shirt, ... I was wearing a mask... The caption writes – She wears a mask to avoid Coronavirus, but she is not covering up to avoid getting raped and she should be raped because she dressed like this." (Ms B, lines 75-79)

"I saw my picture posted and said that "She is a prostitute and I have her. We sell her for this amount per night or this amount overnight, this amount for 2 days, ...". I even had my pictures in Tumblrs." (Ms B, lines 125-130)

Theme 3: Trolling

Ms D received comments related to her darker skin colour from her friends when she posted her child's photo on social media. Living in a city whereby Black individuals are minorities, Ms E received multiple comments on her physical appearance.

"We do not need the Black in America" or "She just looks horrified". (Ms D, lines 78-79)

"I would say mostly you do not find black women who are curvy in most cases. Now you are being maybe a 2 out of 10 for the black women. Then someone would tend to think that maybe you have gone for surgery to have implants ..." (Ms E, lines 200-203)

Initial Reactions

Three different reactions from the participants derived when they received cyberbullying comments from social media users which ranged from strangers to someone they know in real life: (1) anger, (2) sadness, and (3) confusion.

Theme 1: Anger

Ms B and Ms E experienced anger when they received harsh comments from online users.

"It just made me frustrated and angry because most of the time when they were saying to cover up, I am already mostly covered up." (Ms B, lines 97-98)

“I feel degraded and it made me so mad. They are using my picture and doing this disgusting thing (posting her picture on other accounts and leaving negative comments).” (Ms B, lines 125-126)

“I get angry and I reply to such comments.” (Ms E, line 49)

Theme 2: Sadness

Ms B and Ms D experienced profound sadness when they were cyberbullied.

“I just feel sad about it, and I don’t think I have any concept of how I should be dealing with this” (Ms B, lines 153-154)

“My emotion was so low at that time.” (Ms D, line 52)

Theme 3: Confusion

Ms A and Ms C were confused when they received comments that were directed to them. They could not make sense of why they were being targeted for cyberbullying.

“I was curious because I think in high school, I treated all my friends equally and I do not annoy anyone.” (Ms A, lines 48-51)

“I kind of did not get it because I know I have not done something wrong. I know that anything I said was because of my stance, not because of my personal opinion ... That’s just how I presented my case (referring to her presentation at a conference).” (Ms C, lines 102-108)

Crossroads

Two crossroad themes were found: “helplessness” and “sense of control” that either lead to the relapse of cyberbullying experience or coping strategies.

Theme 1: Helplessness

Ms C and Ms D felt helpless when they encountered the cyberbullying experience, not fully understanding why it happened and wondering if they did anything that contributed to being a target.

“Maybe I could have said something, I am not sure how that would have gone, I could have tried it at least. I think that’s what I would have done. I would have raised it, like why are these comments being allowed, what if I was not the target; what if someone younger was the target? That is not okay!” (Ms C, lines 339-343)

“I actually even had to go for psychological therapy for me to heal because it affected me. That was one occurrence that really did push me into bed about it” (Ms D, lines 46-47)

Theme 2: Sense of Control

Ms B described feeling helpless and tried to take action to help her regain some control over her life as it appeared as though bullies seemed to have more control instead.

“I feel this is also really frustrating me because I feel like I have such little control over myself.” (Ms B, lines 133-134)

“It feels that no matter what I do or what I post, it seems that men somehow seem to get control of the narrative. I feel frustrated that I can’t really do anything about it to change how they are viewing me.” (Ms B, lines 135-138)

Coping Strategies

Three coping strategy themes: (1) emotion-focused coping, (2) problem-focused coping, and (3) social coping were utilised by the participants in coping with their cyberbullying experience.

Theme 1: Emotion-focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping is modifying the way an individual feels and thinks about an event or condition (Sharma, 2003).

Ms A withdrew herself from her friendship circle and social media. Instead, she focused on participating in other co-curricular activities. She felt the need to shift the focus of her emotions to other aspects of her reality and this helped her cope more constructively instead of being emotionally burdened by her cyberbullying experiences.

“I don’t mingle around with friends that I am not comfortable with. So, I joined many activities and programmes to occupy my time. I would be busy and have less time to play social media.” (Ms A, lines 73-76)

She also emphasised personal time and being selective about what she shares online as coping strategies. Spending time alone helped her to cope emotionally with the pain of the cyberbullying experience. Limiting the extent of her self-disclosure online also helped her feel less vulnerable to possible reactions and comments by others on her posts.

“I want “me time” rather than enjoying around in a group.” (Ms A, lines 181-184)

“It’s not like we are not comfortable sharing with people. But it is like trust when we are sharing... We are frightened towards the response we receive.” (Ms A, lines 245-247)

Theme 2: Social Coping

Social coping is defined as seeking physical and emotional support from others and society to overcome a situation or cope with their emotions or feelings (Algorani & Gupta, 2022; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

All participants turned to various sources ranging from family members (eg. nuclear family, extended relatives) to non-family members such as friends, mental health professionals and even peer support groups. Collectively, these respective social support systems assisted the participants to process their emotional experiences, providing a safe avenue to be heard and feel supported.

“I share with Umi (maid at home) what happened and Umi will comfort me.” (Ms A, lines 111-114)

“She (mum) gave me a lot of support, especially when I told her that I am experiencing some problems with comments or even restrictions from whoever.” (Ms D, lines 91-95)

“I just had to consult the psychological therapist.” (Ms D, lines 61-67)

“We have this group in WhatsApp. We talk about bullied women, maybe about bullying, which may be about toxic relationships and the group assisted me in lifting my spirit.” (Ms D, lines 145-150)

Theme 3: Problem-focused Coping

This coping approach is where individuals identify the pros and cons of the situations or events and/or the solutions and produce an outcome in solving the issues or dealing with the situation (Sharma, 2003).

Two participants took action to reach out to the social media help centres to report the cyberbullying incident although not all of their actions yielded satisfying outcomes.

"I have tried with Instagram help centre a lot. They never worked but I also reached out to Tumblr ... They were pretty quick on it. They removed the pictures I reported. And on Telegram, I tried reporting and it didn't work," (Ms B, lines 183-186)

"I did reach out to the perpetrator (to confront them) and report (them) online." (Ms E, lines 92-94)

Cognitive Reappraisal

Interestingly, all participants practised cognitive reappraisal which refers to reframing their experiences realistically and constructively which benefits them. Instead of adopting a "victim mentality", participants benefited from reflecting on their experiences by objectively assessing the cyberbullying experience as a collective phenomenon that also happens to others, learning to focus on their strengths and how they were not to be blamed, recognising that they could never please everyone and even focused on learning to treat themselves better.

"I learned that you cannot satisfy all persons even if you are doing good, doing great with them." (Ms A, lines 24-26)

"I learned how to separate other people's perceptions of me and my self-concept. I try to not let an outsider's perspective affect how I should be viewing myself." (Ms B, lines 31-36)

"I know that anything I said was because of my stance, not because of my personal opinion." (Ms C, lines 101-106)

"In one of my Twitter handles, there are a lot of people on it and the women were talking about their experience and I could feel for them ... I was not alone. Many people are suffering outside." (Ms D, lines 179-184)

"I tried as much as I can to concentrate on the positive rather than the negative because after all, these people who posted the negative comments wanted to gain my attention." (Ms E, lines 212-216)

DISCUSSION

Cyberbullying Experience from a Victim's Perspective

The anonymity of Instagram's external message feature creates detachment and a decrease in users' empathy and perception of the consequences of their actions and behaviours (Aune, 2009; Mascotto, 2015). This leads users to believe that their actions and behaviours will not be caught and are not risky, hence increasing the tendency of saying hurtful words to others (Mascotto, 2015; O'Brien, 2012). Furthermore, most of the platforms require only a phone number to register an account (Galik *et al*, 2018; Peled, 2019). This makes it very easy for individuals to create a fake profile to cyberbully others without the fear of being detected. Social media users' behaviour of saying whatever they want to one of the participants who

is a public figure in her home country is one such example that highlights this occurrence (Saengprang & Gadavanji, 2021).

Users may even perceive their comments as personal opinions rather than interpreting them as negative comments against someone, especially public figures, as cyberbullying (Ouvrein *et al*, 2017). It is possible that they strongly believe that public figures should be able to deal with all those negative comments online as it is part and parcel of being famous and they might not read all those comments or messages.

A participant experienced incidents of men making sexual comments about her when reacting to her photos which she posted online. This experience is not a novel one for females. Living in a male-dominated world (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women are often defined by their bodies, dressed provocatively or even manipulated to be posed in sexually arousing or submissive postures. These images increase the perception of being “pornified” (Galdi & Guizzo, 2020; Valtorta *et al*, 2016). The mainstream portrayal of female figures in commercial game shows and music videos promote the ideas that women are sexy and attractive, with the intended purpose of satisfying men sexually (Galdi & Guizzo, 2020; Vandenbosh *et al*, 2013). Therefore, the sexual objectification of women in the media caused them to become the target of men’s sexist jokes, behaviours and remarks (Galdi & Guizzo, 2020).

Ms C and Ms A had similar experiences of being gossiped about by their groups of friends instead of strangers via cyberbullying. Group gossip provides

a group with information about individuals who do not comply with the established group norms, along with positively reinforcing individuals’ behaviour in seeking the need for belongingness in the group. Understanding the norms that are acceptable among the group increases an individual’s closeness to the group (Garcia-Fernandez *et al*, 2022; Wert & Daloverly, 2004), being liked by peers and having better social adjustment (Garcia-Fernandez *et al*, 2022; Wargo Aikins *et al*, 2017), increased popularity and tendency of being accepted by the group (Bechtoldt *et al*, 2020; Garcia-Fernandez *et al*, 2022). Those who do not comply will be perceived as an out-group (Bicchieri *et al*, 2022; Burger *et al*, 2004). As such, these participants could have unknowingly become the out-group of their initial circles of friendships, and thus became the target of cyberbullying.

Relating to Ms B, Ms D and Ms E’s experience of being discriminated against for their body size and/or skin colour, females have a higher tendency to be judged and called names such as “slut”, “fat” and “ugly” if they do not adhere to typical societal standards and norms of beauty (Mayeza, 2017; Mishna *et al*, 2018). Females are often pressured to meet the gender norm that is expected. Yet, if they appear to be attractive or sexual, they will be criticised and sexualised (Mishna *et al*, 2018). In addition, the practice of insulting an individual’s physical appearance, especially those with darker skin or burnt skin tone brings hurtful impacts to the victims. It causes them to develop low self-esteem and well-being (Alsawalqa, 2021; Rajbhandari & Rana, 2022).

Initial Reactions

Most of the participants questioned why they were being targeted as victims and not understanding what made them more vulnerable to cyberbullying compared to others. Past research explains that the anonymity of cyber-communication reinforces an individual's belief that online networks help to reduce an individual's responsibility towards their social behaviour, and increase their motive to publish other users' humiliating or shameful content on the Internet and to damage others' good reputations in the digital world (Lanzillotti & Korman, 2018; Loningro *et al*, 2015). Some of the research participants also said that they felt emotionally affected after such occurrences of cyberbullying and would be more cautious in their social interactions. This can be explained by past research that showed that victims who develop sadness tend to have anxiety and low self-esteem, are unable to trust others and feel bad about themselves (Campbell *et al*, 2012; Tan *et al*, 2019), due to being affected by online users' comments. Those experiences may cause them to further isolate themselves from others (Arsad *et al*, 2020; Gray & Bjorklund, 2014).

Furthermore, victims' negative impressions about themselves and their cyberbullying experiences may result in the development of a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. The misinterpreted beliefs about personal worth and ability to relate with others may lead to a decrease in an individual's confidence and self-esteem (Esquivel, Lopez & Benavides, 2023; Gonzalez, 2005). Participants may then develop a sense of insecurity and learned helplessness and this aligns with past reports of the consequences of unexpected digital attacks, leading to further

development of stress, depression and anxiety (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Martinez, 2013; Siegal *et al*, 1986). In terms of cognitive processing, victims are confused about what is happening to them and how they should solve the situation which might cause them to be ignorant of what is happening to them due to the anonymous nature of the cyberbullying incident (Aviles & Alonso, 2008; Martinez, 2013).

Consequently, victims who previously experienced cyberbullying will "learn" from their past experiences that they are incapable of successfully protecting themselves and feel helpless (Law *et al*, 2012), which may cause them to be unable to get out of the situation (Prihadi *et al*, 2019). Locus of control though may mitigate any action that is taken in response to being cyberbullied, since it is an individual's belief in their level of control over the results of an event that happened (Poole, 2017; Rotter, 1966). For instance, Ms B with a seemingly greater internal locus of control believes that she has control over her cyberbullying incident which led her to take action to approach the perpetrators. On the other hand, participants who implied that they had an external locus of control believed that they had little control over their cyberbullying incidents and social media usage and participation, which triggered a negative impression about themselves and their experiences, thereafter increasing levels of anxiety, loneliness and sadness, and a lower sense of well-being (Hojat, 1982; Manhatanankoon & O'Sullivan, 2008; Poole, 2017; Ye & Lin, 2015).

While the impact of helplessness on the relapse of cyberbullying experience was not explored in this study, nevertheless, Reijntjes *et al*, (2010) and Ali

and Shahbuddin (2022) indicated that feelings of helplessness result in future emotional issues such as anxiety, insecurity, low self-esteem, and depression, and also relapse of being the victim of cyberbullying.

Coping Strategies

The three main themes of coping strategies (problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and social coping) that participants reported using are consistent with existing literature, eg. Lazarus and Folkman (1987; as cited in Vollink *et al*, 2012) and Folkman and Moskowitz (2004; as cited in Algorani & Gupta, 2022) approaches.

The possible reasons why Ms A isolated herself from her friends on social media and instead joined co-curricular activities as a form of emotion-coping strategy was her way of coping with her feelings of insecurity, fear and/or self-doubt, and also the perception that social media is an unsafe place to interact with people, as reported by past research (Soriano *et al*, 2022). Furthermore, Pavri (2015) elucidates that victims isolate themselves from their social circle and consequently results in the development of self-related cognitions whereby they make self-referent attributions when they interpret peer behaviour cues that may have further negative repercussions on their self-concept.

Individuals tend to become more cautious in social media communication and interaction, for example, when they only interact with users that they know in real life and limit the content they share online (Sleglova & Cerna, 2011). In contrast, in offline settings, individuals also tend to be very reluctant to share their experiences with adults due to the perception of the tendency to receive insensitive and

ineffective responses from others (Kaiser *et al*, 2020; Oliver & Candappa, 2007). The fear of embarrassment and feeling of insecurity could be some of the possible barriers that cause individuals to be reluctant to share their cyberbullying experiences and be selective about what they share (Kvarme *et al*, 2019).

Regarding taking direct actions, previous studies have highlighted the reasons why individuals refuse to take direct actions in solving or reporting problems. The possible reasons are they are scared of being seen as a victim by others and may feel ashamed and embarrassed about being bullied, which may in turn increase the tendency for them to become depressed and anxious (Daneback *et al*, 2018; Manpreet & Saini, 2022). Nonetheless, not every victim is aware of cyber-safety and how they can seek support and report their cyberbullying incidents (Ryan & Curwen, 2013).

Past studies demonstrated that seeking necessary various support systems would help to decrease the negative impacts of cyberbullying experiences as individuals utilise their resources to help evaluate the stress of the incident in ways that help them deal with it more effectively (Neaville, 2017; Nixon, 2014). There are four different sources of support that participants sought: peers (non-family support), family members, professional help and support groups, consistent with what past research has shown. Firstly, strong peer support helps to reduce the risk of being cyberbullied as the victims receive empathy and moral support from their peers (Malinowska-Cieslik *et al*, 2022; Zych *et al*, 2019). This would help compensate for the negative treatment that they experienced from others in the cyberbullying incidents.

As for family members, positive and encouraging parent-child communication and parental understanding and support are crucial in helping individuals cope with their cyberbullying experience (Arato *et al*, 2022; Buelga *et al*, 2017). Moreover, Eatough (2021) highlighted the benefits of seeking professional help. However, only one participant sought professional help in coping with her cyberbullying experience, with the possible reason why victims may refuse to seek professional help is due to the preference of feeling comfortable in sharing their issues with someone whom they already trust (Beng & Hua, 2019; Lai *et al*, 2017). Lastly, having a peer support group. Similar to what Ms D mentioned, a peer support group creates a positive social environment which increases their emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships and decreases internalising behaviours (Pavri, 2015). In these groups, victims can make connections to each other and provide support to one another which helps increase their prosocial behaviour and peer relationships and also decreases their feelings of loneliness (Griese & Buhs, 2014; Pavri, 2015).

Cognitive Reappraisal

All participants were aware of the impact of cyberbullying as consistent with what was reported by past research (Campfield, 2006; Sleglova & Cerna, 2011). They found changes in their cognitive processing by implementing positive emotion regulation strategies such as accepting the situation, refocusing on the positive things and what they could do next after the incident (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014; Hamer & Konijin, 2016) as helpful for them in coping with the incidents.

In summary, the cyberbullied experience consisted mainly of being negatively commented on a public social media page or privately being messaged with negative and nasty messages. This experience is then often followed by initial reactions that involve emotions such as anger, sadness and confusion. The utilisation of the combination of coping strategies is helpful for helping survivors of cyberbullying to be more adaptive in the long term.

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Practical Implications

This study has significant implications for professional practice, especially in the fields of clinical psychology and counselling with young adults who experienced cyberbullying as victims. An in-depth understanding of the individual's types of cyberbullying experiences and coping strategies allows the professionals to provide effective management, intervention or support to them. Next, there is room for improvement in terms of the implication of laws in protecting the victims, punishing the perpetrators, and increasing awareness about cyber-safety and individuals' responsibilities for their behaviours and actions on social media platforms (ELUNA, n.d.; Nurulhuda & Nazli, 2022; Winterfeldt, 2013). Young adults may not be aware or unsure of how they could seek help or whom to report to when they encounter any cyberbullying incidents (Harris, 2019; Wozencroft *et al*, 2015). Hence, the government should educate the citizens or showcase the available systems that could support them and should consider introducing a new subject or topic that is related to cyberbullying prevention and support systems in primary and

secondary school syllabi. This research also implies raising cyberbullying and mental health awareness in society because seeking support (especially professional help) is still taboo in society (Ain, 2022; American Psychiatric Association, n.d.; Divinity, n.d.). Therefore, the collaboration between government, educational institutions and mental health professionals is essential in educating society to eliminate the taboo about seeking professional help and addressing mental health and/or personal struggles, as well as encouraging the public to be considerate and accepting individual differences and struggles, as well as being supportive to one another.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This exploratory study provides in-depth information on the actual phenomenon of female victims of the cyberbullied experience. Allowing the participants a safe space to reflect on their experience which includes their coping mechanisms may also help them realise that they are processing their negative experiences in a way that could be helpful to them, as well as provide some hope to them that there is “light at the end of the tunnel”. These findings may be helpful in providing further insight to others with similar experiences so that they do not feel so alone in their journey, as well as, inform relevant stakeholders on the key areas to focus on in targeted interventions for other victims of cyberbullying who seek professional help. Notably, this study had several limitations. Firstly, the sample does not represent a large population of individuals across countries, especially from Malaysia where the researchers reside. Despite numerous recruitment efforts, yet only one Malaysian participant volunteered for this study. Hence, potential cultural differences across cultures in terms of prosocial versus

cyberbullying behaviour need to be considered in understanding this phenomenon. Secondly, the taboo of discussing mental health may have restricted Malaysians from addressing the issues and experiences that they have gone through or currently are going through, due to the fear of being discriminated against (Ain, 2022). This might explain the reason why there is a limited number of participants in this research, although much concerted effort was made to recruit participants from Malaysia.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The current findings revealed the psychological experiences and coping mechanisms that female adults use when experiencing cyberbullying; yet, cyberbullying among the adult population, especially among males, is still not very well understood and there is a need to understand it in more depth, especially for those who experience repeated episodes of cyberbullying. Hence, future researchers could consider conducting a longitudinal study that focuses on the cyberbullying phenomenon among young adults. Future researchers may also consider conducting a cross-cultural study by specifically recruiting more males and participants from various countries, to gain insight into how they cope with their cyberbullying experience in the presence or absence of cultural influences such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Future researchers could consider conducting an in-depth study that focuses on the phenomenology of different types of coping strategies utilised by cyberbullying victims. Doing so helps to fill in the research gap about various types of coping strategies that have not yet been discussed comprehensively in the previous literature.

CONCLUSION

The current findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the cyberbullying experiences from a victim's perspective and coping strategies among women in the young adulthood stage and with heavy

social media usage. The findings also reiterated the harmfulness of inappropriate behaviour among social media users but highlighted the benefits of utilising support resources in helping the victims cope more effectively with their cyberbullying experience.

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