Enough is Enough! Celebrities' Cyberbullying Coping Strategies

Syahida Hassan[*a], Mohd Idzwan Yacob[b], Nur Fairuza Syahira Roslan[c], Thuan Nguyen[d], Azlina Mahad[e], Azlinda Ahmad[f]

[a,c] *School of Computing, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah Malaysia*
[b]*School of Creative Industry Management and Performing Art, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah Malaysia*
[d]*School of Business & Management, RMIT University Saigon South Campus, Ho Cho Minh City, Vietnam*
[e]*Ministry of Health, Kompleks E Pusat Pentadbiran Kerajaan Persekutuan, Putrajaya, Malaysia*
[f]*Anuar Zain Network Sdn Bhd, Wangsa Melawati, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

Abstract

Cyberbullying frequently occurs on social media. Celebrities, who have connected to their fans through social media, are frequent victims of cyberbullying. To date, the research focusing on celebrities' cyberbullying is minimal, therefore suffers limited knowledge of this area. Thus, celebrities' behaviours in coping with cyberbullying remain relatively unclear. This study aims to explore celebrities' coping strategies for cyberbullying. Adopting a qualitative approach, we interviewed ten celebrities to explore their coping strategies. In addition, we observed 30 celebrities' accounts on social media to understand their coping behaviour. The findings show that celebrities usually adopted technological coping, avoidance coping, emotion-focused coping, and active/aggressive coping strategies. The results contribute to the existing literature on cyberbullying studies, particularly cyberbullying towards celebrities.

Keywords: Celebrities, online bashing, coping strategy

1.   INTRODUCTION

Despite social media's benefits in creating and establishing friends networks, users should also be cautious of its potential harms due to uncontrolled and inattentive use (A. Ahmad et al., 2018). The capacity of social media that allows anonymity of the predators increases the act of cyber-aggression and victimization (R. Ahmad et al., 2018), such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is not uncommon in the digital age and has almost become a norm.

Bauman et al. (2013) and Smith et al. (2006) defined cyberbullying as an "aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself." Handono et al. (2019) stated that everyone available on the Internet is not safe from cyberbullying, regardless of who they are. Cyberbullying victims can be in any age range, such as children, teenagers, and adults, race, gender, and social status, including public figures such as politicians, social media influencers and celebrities.

These days, more celebrities have become the target of cyberbullying (Kho & Chaw, 2018). According to Boorstin (1961) a celebrity is defined as someone who is widely known. Participation in a variety of fields can lead to celebrity status. In this study, we define a celebrity as someone who is in the state of being famous, particularly those who are involved in the entertainment industry, i.e., a singer, actor, or comedian. Being a celebrity does not make them resistant to being the victim of cyberbullying. Celebrities often become the target of trolls and receive a lot of threats, negative comments, and messages online. In South Korea, many cases related to cyberbullying

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[*]Corresponding author.
E-mail: syahida@uum.edu.my

have been reported. However, most perpetrators remain unpunished (Yi & Cha, 2019). There were several cases where South Korean celebrities committed suicide due to cyberbullying issues. Even though the perpetrators did not physically kill them, their cyberbullying behaviour can lead to mental distress (Harvey, 2020) and cause loss of lives.

In Malaysia, the consequences of cyberbullying related to celebrities are not severe compared to other countries. However, cyberbullying towards celebrities in Malaysia has recently raised concern as it has become more frequent (Mohammad, 2021). For example, a Malaysian celebrity was bullied after the leak of her video at an alcoholic party. This incident caused uproar and public dissatisfaction, especially from Muslim communities in Malaysia (Othman, 2019). The incident has induced online bashing because consuming alcohol is prohibited in Islam (Mohamad, 2020). With advanced communication technology and various social media platforms, it is easier for the community to express their frustration and anger towards that celebrity's behaviour. In addition, Muslim celebrities are increasingly expected to adhere to strict Islamic religious codes by the netizens (Alkaff, 2022). Alkaff (2022) argues that this phenomenon is rapidly increasing in Southeast Asia. It became a form of social discipline expressed by the comments made by certain followers on the celebrities' social media platforms. This toxicity may influence public perception by normalizing hostility and intolerance toward those who are perceived as different from them. Celebrities who seem to be defying these 'Muslim norms', particularly those who choose not to cover their hair, frequently face online bashing.

There has not yet been a suicide among Muslim celebrities in Malaysia. Nonetheless, this toxic culture has affected celebrities in many aspects of their lives, including their career, family, and mental health. The impact of cyberbullying includes the development of negative online reputations, which can have an impact on college admissions, employment, and other areas of life. It may even lead to more severe and long-lasting consequences like self-harm and suicide (Lu et al., 2020). In addition, cyberbullying victims may experience depression or commit suicide (Yi & Cha, 2019). Therefore, coping strategies are vital to control the negative impact on the victims.

Addressing these issues before it becomes more severe is crucial, as what happened to celebrities in South Korea. Furthermore, minimal studies have been conducted from the perspective of celebrities. According to Ouvrein et al. (2021), most studies on celebrity bashing have focused on the perpetrators and bystanders, as well as investigating the underlying factors that might explain involvement in the act of cyberbullying. Hence this study aims to identify the coping strategies taken by celebrities to protect themselves from the negative impact of cyberbullying. This study is hoped to contribute as a basis for prevention and intervention initiatives and generate an in-depth understanding of the coping behaviour of celebrities in cases of cyberbullying.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Celebrities are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying threats since they perceive fame, attention, and public adoration (Rutledge, 2020). There is some related work that involves cyberbullying and celebrities. Hassan et al. (2018) found that most social media influencers faced several types of cyberbullying, which are harassment, flaming, outing, masquerading, dissing, trolling and catfishing. Later, Saengprang and Gadavanij (2021) discovered that most South Korean celebrities receive online harassment, while British celebrities experience denigration and harassment according to the cyberbullying types.

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Victimization in cyberbullying was associated with a lower degree of resilient coping (Han et al., 2021). Folkman and Lazarus (1980) define coping strategy as: "*Specific behavioural and psychological efforts, which individuals use to manage, reduce, minimize or tolerate stressful events*". Successfully dealing with cyberbullying involves using strategies associated with more favourable outcomes that aim to reduce the current bullying and prevent future victimisation (Orel et al., 2017; Perren et al., 2012; Völlink et al., 2013). On the other hand, unsuccessful coping is associated with strategies that inadequately address bullying and result in adverse outcomes.

Past studies have categorized the cyberbullying coping strategy into a few categories, as shown in Table1. Meanwhile, some researchers grouped the coping strategies into (1) behavioural, (2) cognitive, and (3) social coping (Ouvrein et al., 2018). However, it is not easy to distinguish the coping strategies as some categories overlap. Hence some of the descriptions are interrelated with other coping strategies. For example, social support can be categorized under emotion-focused coping, as well as approach coping.

Table 1: Categories of coping strategies

Coping Strategies	Description
Emotion-focused	It aims to manage the emotional distress associated with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). i.e., social support.
Problem-focused	Aimed at resolving the stressful situation or event or altering the source of the stress (Carroll, 2020)
Passive	It is characterized by helplessness and/or reliance on others (Snow-Turek et al., 1996).
Active/Aggressive	Deal with the pain using their resources (Snow-Turek et al., 1996). i.e., retaliation, confronting.
Approach	Allow for appropriate action and/or the possibility of noticing and taking advantage of changes in a situation that might make it more controllable (Roth & Cohen, 1986).
Avoidance	Avoidance strategy in dealing directly with problems (Roth & Cohen, 1986).
Technological	Entrust social media features to resolve the situation (Byrne, 2021).

Past research (Alipan et al., 2021; Andrysiak et al., 2022; Byrne, 2021; Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Völlink et al., 2013) show that there are inconsistent findings in coping mechanism adoption. This is supported by Orel et al. (2017), who argue inconsistent findings on getting social support as a coping strategy between traditional bullying and cyberbullying victims. Although seeking help may be able to help reduce the impact of bullying on psychosocial outcomes, past research shows that many schoolchildren choose to cope by doing nothing, ignoring, avoiding, or retaliating (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Völlink et al., 2013). As for the university students, the majority rely on help-seeking approaches and technology coping methods (block the bully, change privacy settings). Technological coping is consistent with the growing social media cyberbullying pattern (Alipan et al., 2021; Andrysiak et al., 2022; Byrne, 2021; Varela et al., 2022). Many university students entrust social media settings to resolve the situation (Byrne, 2021).

Meanwhile, past research found three coping categories adopted by celebrities: (1) behavioural (i.e., retaliate), (2) cognitive (i.e. positive thinking), and (3) social (i.e. seeking support) (Ouvrein et al., 2021; Ouvrein et al., 2019). Nonetheless, this finding is limited to a group of reality TV celebrities. Hence, more exploration is needed to give more explicit pictures of the problem.

3.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study involved both semi-structured interviews and content analysis. The semi-structured interview method is used for this study as they are designed to extract the interviewee's ideas and opinions on the topic of interest, relying on the interviewer to ask relevant follow-up questions based on the answer given by the participant. Meanwhile, content analysis is a proper qualitative method due to its content-sensitive nature and ability to analyse open data sets (Kyngäs, 2020).

We interviewed ten celebrities (i.e., singers and actors) known to get harsh comments or be cyberbullied by netizens. Data from content analysis and semi-structured interviews were analysed and coded using deductive coding, where the codes are derived from the data. In addition, we analysed the social media accounts (i.e., Instagram and/or TikTok) of 30 celebrities to identify how they cope with harsh comments. Only accounts with public settings were chosen to address the human ethics issue. The celebrities' accounts were selected randomly based on the number of followers. All chosen accounts have more than 100K followers. The data from the content analysis were used as triangulation.

4.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings show that the celebrities' coping strategies while facing cyberbullying include: (1) technological coping, (2) avoidance coping, (3) emotion-focused coping, and (4) active/aggressive coping. The details will be discussed next.

4.1 Technological coping

Most cyberbullying cases related to celebrities happen on social media. Hence technological coping is the most adopted strategy by celebrities. Many celebrities consider technical solutions the most effective strategy for stopping cyberbullying. For example, the participants chose to delete the comments or block the predators to stop the predator, as shown in the following excerpts:

> "*Delete the horrendous comment and block their accounts.*" (Participant P1)

> "*Block them from accessing my account.*" (Participant P3)

These findings support past studies by Alipan et al. (2021), Andrysiak et al. (2022), Byrne (2021), and Varela et al. (2022). They claim that victims rely on the facilities provided by social media platforms to cope with cyberbullies.

4.2 Avoidance coping

Many of the participants claim that they usually ignore the hostile or harsh comments on their social media, which is under the category of avoidance strategy, which is consistent with past research (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Völlink et al., 2013). The following excerpts show the evidence:

> "*I honestly hate it because it promotes too much negativity, but it is also my responsibility to ignore them.*" (Participant P2)

> "*I have to ignore the negative and focus on the positive stuff. They (celebrities) should ignore them because responding to them will only worsen the situation.*" (Participant P4)

> "*I ignore it.*" (Participant P7)

Some celebrities do not respond to cyberbullying because they are responsible for representing their company image, as shown in the following excerpt:

> "*As a person who works for an established public company, I have a social responsibility for the company's brand to be neutral and not judgmental. That is my main reason not to react emotionally to cyberbullying.*" (Participant P10)

An avoidance strategy could help with slowing down the attack towards the celebrities. However, although the avoidance strategy has been widely adopted in the case of cyberbullying, past research has shown that the strategy has internalized symptoms, which raises the victims' chance of depression (Grant et al., 2013).

4.3 Emotion-focused coping

Some of the participants said that they should seek support, as shown in the following excerpts:

> "*It would be best for us to take time before responding and seek support from people around them.*" (Participant P9)

This finding is consistent with Ouvrein et al. (2021) who found that most celebrities choose social coping strategies (seeking help) when they experience cyberbullying. Support from the celebrities' circle is crucial as it can make the victim feels that they are safe and not alone.

4.4 Active/aggressive coping

One of the coping strategies adopted by celebrities is an active/aggressive coping strategy. Our findings support the claim from earlier research which argue that retaliation is one of the solutions to cope with cyberbullying (Bastiaensens et al., 2019; Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Ouvrein et al., 2019; Perren et al., 2012). Retaliation falls under active/aggressive categories. Some of the celebrities chose to explain or defend themselves when they were

attacked, as the following excerpt:

> *"If it gets out of hand, I normally will defend myself."* (Participant P6)

However, often the retaliation worsens the situation. For example, participant P8 asserted that starting a war with the bully would bring in more people and escalate the situation. Participants P9 and P3 share the same sentiment, as shown in the excerpts:

> *"Most victims tend to lash out and respond without giving it much thought – typical responses would be along the lines of 'I do not care about what you think; I am just being me' or trying to attack the bully in return."* (Participant P9)

"It worsens if we respond personally because we might do something unnecessary base on that particular emotion." (Participant P3)

Based on the content analysis, we found that retaliation frequently creates a cycle of bullying towards predators. The content analysis data discovered instances in which celebrities' fans attacked the predators. It started when the bully made derogatory remarks on the celebrities' pages using their actual account. Most of the time, the celebrity's devoted fans will react when she responds to the attack. Then, the fans counter-attack the predator. Often the family members will also suffer the attack. The state of harassment is quite intimidating and at times, the predator was eventually forced to deactivate social media accounts to reduce the impact.

Our findings also show that if cyberbullying involves more significant issues, such as slandering and catfishing, some participants believe that firm action should be taken. This type of cyberbullying could damage their reputations and affect their job as endorsers for some products.

> *"If it is getting out of hand, I would lodge a police report, especially if it involved tarnishing my reputation as a public figure"* (Participant P3)

> *"If the harassment continues, I usually report them to the Police."* (Participant P8)

The celebrities believe that the police report will be an easy way out as many haters or bullies are likely to stop harassing after the police report.

> *"Cyberbullying happened because there is a lack of enforcement in monitoring social media and the internet."* (Participant P9)

They believe that local authority is a problem solver for this issue.

> *"Police is the one who will help us in this issue."* (Participant P1)

Based on content analysis and interview data, once the police are involved, usually the predators will issue a public apology. Hence the harassment cycle stops.

5.   CONCLUSION

Celebrities are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying threats since they perceive a lot of fame, attention, and public adoration (Rutledge, 2020). There are generally perceived as having a higher social status within a community. Therefore, social media accounts are necessary to create and maintain their follower base (Soo, 2016). Hence, mass media and their followers expose their lives to be judged and critiqued. In the entertainment industry, it is worse that there are too many victims, bullies, and bystanders in a picture. Therefore, it is not easy to control the cycle of cyberbullying. Consequently, celebrities need to be educated to adopt suitable coping strategies that can improve their well-being as a victim.

Based on the findings of this research, this study proposes that celebrities should try not to worsen the condition, as it could bring more harm. Celebrities should evaluate the condition and get opinions from family and friends before deciding how to cope with cyberbullying. To help celebrities cope with the situation, celebrities, as well as

the public, also need to be aware of the impact of cyberbullying. They need to get involved positively, whereby an effective measure would be to train them not to reinforce cyberbullying. This can be done in many layers. For example, as role models, celebrities play a vital part in educating their followers to avoid responding to cyberbullying. They may need to delete any harsh comments on their social media accounts to avoid unnecessary cyberbullying-related problems. In addition, the ethics of using social media should be trained from a very young age.

This study is expected to bring insight to plan initiatives to control the negative impact on the victim of cyberbullying. In addition, it generates an in-depth understanding of the coping behaviour of celebrities. Further study could focus on a more significant sample of celebrities, as well as the roles of bystanders in helping them cope with cyberbullying.

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