Media reporting of cyberbullying: A framing analysis of The Star

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Abstract Cyberbullying refers to aggression that is intentionally and repeatedly carried out in an electronic context (e.g., e-mail, blogs, social networking sites, instant messages, text messages, etc.) against a person who cannot easily defend him- or herself. The experience of cyberbullying has been linked with a host of negative outcomes for both individuals and organizations (e.g., schools), including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, sleeping difficulty, various health problems, decreased performance in school, absenteeism and truancy, dropping out of school, and even murder or suicide. In Malaysia, cyberbullying is considered one of the top five cyber threats, it is the third most dangerous risk after fraud and intrusion. Considering the seriousness of cyberbullying as a cyber-threat as well as social problem, this study aims to analyze the coverage of cyberbullying by The Star, which is the most highly circulated English daily newspaper in Malaysia. Framing was employed as the theoretical framework, while content analysis was used as the research method to analyze news coverage of cyberbullying by The Star from 2013-2017. The findings showed that coverage in The Star focused on prevention and intervention strategies, which reflected the newspaper’s effort in educating readers about the social problem, as well as raising their awareness. The contribution of the findings to the understanding of cyberbullying as a social problem was discussed.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, cyber threats, cyber harassment, framing, content analysis

1.0 Introduction
Marshall McLuhan’s (1967) famous notion of "the medium is the message" succinctly describes the unintended/unanticipated consequences caused by new media usage today. The double-edged nature of modern technology, continuously balancing between risks and opportunities, manifests itself clearly in several emerging societal problems like cyberbullying, gaming addiction, privacy invasion, sexual exploitation, health problems, terrorism, etc.

Cyberbullying refers to aggression that is intentionally and repeatedly carried out in an electronic context (e.g., e-mail, blogs, social networking sites, instant messages, text messages, etc.) against a person who cannot easily defend him- or herself (Kowalski, Limber and Agatston, 2012; Patchin and Hinduja, 2015). The experience of cyberbullying has been linked with a host of negative outcomes for both individuals and organizations (e.g., schools), including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, sleeping difficulty, various health problems, decreased performance in school, absenteeism and truancy, dropping out of school, and even murder or suicide (Kowalski and Limber, 2013; Patchin and Hinduja, 2010; Van Geel, Vedder and Tanilon, 2014; Wachs et al., 2016).

In Malaysia, cyberbullying is considered one of the top five cyber threats, it is the third most dangerous risk after fraud and intrusion (Farezza, 2017). Based on the statistics compiled by CyberSecurity Malaysia, there were in total 1,524 cyberbullying cases recorded from 2012-2016 (Lee, 2017). There is also growing concern that Malaysian children and adolescents nowadays are increasingly using various cyber technologies at younger ages (Abu Bakar, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2015; Yusuf et al., 2018). In their study of Malaysian adolescents’ internet usage pattern, Pawanteh and Rahim (2000) highlighted that implications of internet usage must be viewed within the context of the developmental process since adolescents between the ages of 13-18 are engaged in a struggle between giving up
childhood and developing the social skills necessary for adult living. There is also the transition phase where the young person is in search of an identity and a lifestyle.

Previous studies found that increased Internet usage has led to increased involvement as perpetrators, victims or witness in cyberbullying. A survey by DIGI Telecommunications Sdn Bhd and Telenor Group in 2016 revealed that one in four students in Malaysia admitted they had experienced cyberbullying. The cyber security unit of the country has also conducted a survey on the effect of cyber threats on children and adolescents. It was found that about 60% of the cases reported to them were about cyberbullying on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace (Anis, Rahim and Lim, 2012).

Furthermore, various media reports in Malaysia have suggested that cyberbullying is prevalent among children and adolescents. In May 2017, a 20-year-old student jumped from the 17th floor in Georgetown, Penang. The deceased was said to be struggling with his studies and was also a cyberbully victim (Brown, 2017). In October 2017, The Star reported a case where a nine-year-old was having suicidal thoughts after being called nasty names on Facebook (Brown, 2017).

2. Research Objectives and Research Questions

Considering the prevalence and harmful effects of cyberbullying, this study aims to examine the framing of cyberbullying by The Star, which is the English daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Malaysia. The following research questions were raised for the purpose of this study:

RQ1: What was the intensity of the newspaper coverage on cyberbullying?
RQ2: What were the news sources used by the newspaper in reporting cyberbullying?
RQ3: What were the news frames employed by the newspaper in reporting cyberbullying?

3. Theoretical Framework

This study drew upon framing as the theoretical framework. Scholars (Bosman and d’Haenens 2008; McCombs 2005) pointed out that the most frequently cited definition of framing comes from Entman (1993):

> Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman 1993: 52)

Other definitions for framing include ‘the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions’ (Griffin 2003); and ‘the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed’ (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (tone of the picture).

In addition, Manheim (1994) summarized that news framing analyses usually cover three aspects: visibility, valence and frame genres. Visibility refers to both the amount and the prominence level of an event/issue or a nation receives in news coverage. Prominence is usually demonstrated by some typical elements such as the article’s placement in the newspaper or web sites, the headline, the visual tools associating with the text, the mention on the evening television news etc. Valence or slant is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioural effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements,
valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favourably or unfavourably on the event/issue. Entman (2007) also stressed that agenda setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power, and he connected them to explicit definitions of news slant and bias.

4. Method

This study was based on a content analysis of news articles from The Star, the English daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Malaysia. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the 2016 average daily circulation of The Star was 217,082 (www.abcm.org.my). The Star has a national circulation, although predominantly the circulation is within Peninsular Malaysia (Selva, 2017).

This study investigated the reporting of cyberbullying for five years, which is from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2017. The articles were collected via database search, which were pulled from The Star’s online achieve by using “cyberbullying” as the search term. The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, editorial, columns and letters.

The intensity of coverage refers to the importance of news stories (De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko and Boomgaarden, 2006). It was studied from two angles: 1) number of news items, and 2) type of news items. In addition, this study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach, whereby the researchers outlined the coding categories after a preliminary examination of the data. The categories for news sources used in this study were: 1) Ministries or government agencies; 2) Civilians; 3) Experts and professionals; 4) Telecommunication (telecom) or information technology (IT) companies; 5) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists.

Six categories of news frames were identified in this study: 1) Prevention and intervention strategies; 2) Prevalence of cyberbullying; 3) Harmful impact of cyberbullying; 4) Risks of the Internet; and 5) Court case or laws related to cyberbullying. The following are the operational definitions for the news frames:

1) Prevention and intervention strategies – reports about the efforts carried out by government, private sectors, telecom or IT companies in combating cyberbullying, the efforts include awareness campaign, media literacy education, apps, etc. Also reports experts’ and professionals’ advise for parents, youth, consumers on how to prevent, detect or combat cyberbullying.

2) Prevalence of cyberbullying – provides statistics for cyberbullying or discussion about the severity of cyberbullying in the society.

3) Harmful impact of cyberbullying – reports about the negative effects or suffering faced by the victims of cyberbullying.

4) Risks of the Internet – reports about other negative consequences of Internet dependency and usage.

5) Court cases or laws related to cyberbullying – reports about cyberbullying court cases or passing of new laws to prevent or punish cyberbullying in different countries.

5. Findings

As shown in Table 1, the study collected 71 articles about cyberbullying within the period of five years. Among the 71 articles, 28 of them (39.4%) were taken from international news agencies like Reuters, AFP, Asia News Network, etc.
Table 1: Number of Articles Covering Cyberbullying by *The Star*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Articles</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 demonstrated that the coverage on cyberbullying was mostly in the form of straight news (92.96%). It was followed by columns (4.23%) and letters (2.82%).

Table 2: Types of Articles Covering Cyberbullying by *The Star* (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Articles</th>
<th>Percentage (n = 71)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight news</td>
<td>92.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columns</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since some articles cited more than one news source, Table 3 shows the total number of news sources cited in the articles (n = 117). It was found that representatives from ministries and government agencies were the most frequently cited news sources in the coverage of cyberbullying (29.06%). Civilians (23.08%) were also quoted for their opinions on cyberbullying, followed by experts and professionals (19.66%), representatives from telecom or IT companies (15.38%), NGOs and activists (12.82%).

Table 3: News Sources Used in Covering Cyberbullying by *The Star* (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Sources</th>
<th>Percentage (n = 117)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representatives from ministries and government agencies</td>
<td>29.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilians</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts and professionals</td>
<td>19.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representatives from telecom or IT companies</td>
<td>15.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs and activists</td>
<td>12.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study found that some articles carried more than one frame, therefore Table 4 records the total number of news frames found in the articles (n = 108). The most salient frame found in the coverage of cyberbullying is prevention and intervention strategies (45.37%) (see Table 4). Prevalence of cyberbullying (15.74%) is the next prominent frame, followed by harmful impact of cyberbullying (14.82%), risks of the Internet (12.04%), court cases or laws related to cyberbullying.

Table 4: News Frames Used in Covering Cyberbullying by *The Star* (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Sources</th>
<th>Percentage (n = 108)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prevention and intervention strategies</td>
<td>45.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevalence of cyberbullying</td>
<td>15.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful impact of cyberbullying</td>
<td>14.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risks of the Internet</td>
<td>12.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court cases or laws related to cyberbullying</td>
<td>12.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion and Conclusion
The findings showed that coverage on cyberbullying was rather low from 2013 to 2017, the average coverage was only 14 articles per year. Nonetheless, the most salient frame found was prevention and intervention strategies, which reflected the newspaper’s effort in educating readers about the social problem, as well as raising their awareness.

Most cyberbullying studies were conducted in Western countries, with only a few focusing on Asia (Balakrishnan, 2017). Therefore, this study contributes to deeper comprehension of cyberbullying in the Malaysian context, especially about the role of newspapers in addressing the social issue. Last but not least, this study could be useful for the policy making about cyberbullying. The worrying trend of increasing prevalence of cyberbullying means that the problem has to be tackle more vigorously. The findings of this study could help various government agencies (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission), NGOs or telecommunication companies to develop and implement policies that deal specifically with cyberbullying.

7. References


