

## Addressing Cyberbullying as a Media Literacy Issue

Christine Suniti BHAT, Shih-Hua CHANG, and Jamie A. LINSOTT

*Ohio University, USA*

### Abstract

*Background:* The Asian region accounts for the highest number of internet and mobile cell phones consumers among the regions of the world. As the use of information and communications technology becomes more and more widespread, the misuse of such technology becomes a concern. Cyberbullying, or bullying using information and communications technology is an issue that youth are encountering in Asia and in other parts of the world. Students who are cyberbullied experience several detrimental psychosocial effects that detract from their ability to be successful in school. In some instances, youth suicide has been linked to cyberbullying.

*Goals:* The purpose of this article is to highlight the need for proactive media literacy initiatives that promote the ethical and responsible social use of technology by students.

*Results:* Examples of initiatives to reduce cyberbullying and other harmful uses of social media are presented. These initiatives are targeted not just at students but at teachers, other school personnel, and parents. The need to address cyberbullying via school policies and country or regional laws is also discussed.

**Keywords:** media literacy, cyberbullying, school policies

## 由媒體知識之觀點論網路霸凌

克麗絲婷·巴，張世華，潔米·林斯高特

*美國俄亥俄大學*

### 摘要

*背景：*亞洲地區已成為世界上最多使用網路及行動電話的地方。隨著資通訊科技的使用越來越普及，此項科技的濫用已成為重要的議題。網路霸凌或利用資通訊科技霸凌是亞洲及世上其他地方的年輕人所正面臨的一個問題。遭受網路霸凌的學生會因身心的負面傷害而影響其在校表現。在某些實例中發現，青少年自殺與網路霸凌有關。

*目的：*此文的目的在強調需要有前瞻性的媒體知識倡導行動，以促使學子能有倫理的、負責任地運用科技於社交上。

*結論：*提出數例用以減少網路霸凌及降低其他利用社媒從事傷害性行為的倡導行動或對策。這些對策所涵蓋的對象除了學生，也包括教師、學校工作人員及家長。同時也將論及以學校政策及政府法令來因應網路霸凌的必要性。

**關鍵字：**媒體知識、網路霸凌、學校政策

The use of information and communications technology (ICT) by people around the world is widespread and continues to increase at a rapid rate. School-aged students use media extensively in China and the USA (Wan & Gut, 2008). In December 2009, there were an estimated 1,802,330,457 internet users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2010a). With an estimated 764.4 million users (42.4%), Asia is the geographic region with the highest number of internet users in the world. Europe is next with 764.4 (23.6%) million users, followed by North America with 259.6 (14.4%) million users (Internet World Stats, 2010a).

China is the country with the highest number of internet users in the world (384 million in 2009), a dramatic rise from 23 million in 2000 (Internet World Stats, 2010b). Within Asia, Japan and India are assessed having the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest number of internet users, 96 million and 81 million respectively (Internet World Stats, 2010c). According to Internet World Stats (2010c), Hong Kong has significantly increased overall internet use in the last nine years by 113.7% for ages 15 and up. Some 69.2% of the population uses the internet with a total of 4,878,713 people in Hong Kong alone.

In China and Hong Kong, as in other parts of the world, young people are using the internet in greater numbers than other age groups. The China Internet Network Information Center (2008) reported that over half of the internet users in China are under the age of 25. In Hong Kong 2,965,440 people are on Facebook, the social networking site. Of this number, 14% are between the ages of 13-17 and 29% are between the ages of 18-24 (Facebakers, 2010a). In China, there are 62,620 Facebook users, of which 7% are between the ages of 13-17 and 34% are between the ages of 18-24 (Facebakers, 2010b). In the USA there are an estimated 117,348,840 Facebook users, of which 11% are between

the ages of 13-17, and 24% are between the ages of 18-24 (Facebakers, 2010c). Age is self-reported on Facebook so it is possible that there may be a large number of users who claim to be older or younger than they are.

Hong Kong has long prided itself as a telecommunications hub of the region. Mobile phones have become ubiquitous, and in Hong Kong, many people own more than one cell phone. Hong Kong has a population of 7,008,300 (Hong Kong, the Facts, 2009), but according to the Office of Telecommunications Authority (OFTA, March 2010), in November 2009 there were 12,057,735 mobile subscribers in Hong Kong, a mobile penetration rate of 171.6%. In China, it was estimated that there were more than 765 million mobile subscribers in February 2010 (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, 2010).

The use of the internet and mobile phones in Hong Kong and China continues an upward trend. This trend brings to the forefront the importance of current and relevant media literacy efforts targeted at different age groups. Media literacy refers to the understanding of media and the use of it as a source of information, entertainment, enrichment, growth, empowerment, and communication (Wan, 2006). Young people continue to increase their use of ICT for social purposes, often preferring to interact via social networking sites such as Facebook or via mobile phones more than face-to-face communication. This has raised new issues of media literacy initiatives as they apply to social communication.

Livingstone and Brake (2010) noted that social networking sites provide opportunities and risks for young people. Opportunities include self presentation, learning, widening their circle of relationships, and managing privacy and intimacy. Risks are linked to opportunities and include loss of privacy, bullying, and harmful contacts. Livingstone and Brake

highlighted the need for digital or media literacy initiatives related to social networking. Young users of ICT for social purposes should be fully conversant with acceptable and unacceptable ways of using such technology. One of the detrimental effects of the misuse of ICT for social communication with young people is the phenomenon of cyberbullying. This type of bullying is gaining momentum, keeping pace with the rapid increase in the use of the internet and mobile phones as social interaction tools.

Cyberbullying is defined as “the use of information and communications technology to intimidate, harass, victimize, or bully an individual or a group of individuals” (Bhat, 2008. p.54). Hinduja and Patchin (2009) define cyberbullying as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (p.5). Most often, when people think of bullying, physical bullying is the first type of bullying that comes to mind. Bullying is defined as “a deliberate, aggressive, hurtful act that is repeated over time and is difficult to defend against” (Education Bureau, Hong Kong, n.d.). Bullying can take several forms besides physical bullying. Calling someone names or spreading rumors about them is verbal bullying or harassment. But when verbal bullying is delivered by ICT, it is termed cyberbullying.

### **Bullying and Cyberbullying in Hong Kong and China**

In the past decade, researchers have investigated bullying in Hong Kong and China. The Hong Kong Playground Association (2008) conducted a study to investigate the prevalence of bullying among adolescents aged between 6-24 years in Hong Kong and Macao. Their aim was to implement appropriate anti-bullying policies and services for adolescents. Valid data were collected from 883 and 225

participants in Hong Kong and Macao respectively. Their mean age was 14.3 years. The results indicated that about 90% of participants had seen bullying incidents in the past three months, about 50% of them had bullied others, and about 60% had been bullied.

Regarding location, participants in the study reported that the most bullying incidents happened on school premises followed by on streets. The most prevalent type of bullying was aggressive verbal bullying. The results indicated that around 30 % to 40% of adolescents would not seek help when they were bullied and that 20% to 30% of them would seek help from friends rather than parents, teachers, or other professionals. The reason that adolescents who were bullied would not seek help was they believe they could tolerate it and they thus tended to handle bullying on their own. The study suggested that it was important to educate adolescents on how to deal with bullying and seek help or support (Hong Kong Playground Association, 2008). While this study did not focus on cyberbullying as a separate issue, findings indicate that bullying is an issue of concern in Hong Kong.

Li (2008) conducted a cross-cultural study comparing experiences of bullying and cyberbullying in Chinese and Canadian students aged 11-15. Findings indicated that of the Canadian sample, 25% reported being targets of cyberbullying, 15% reported being a cyberbully, and 54% had heard of or observed someone being cyberbullied. In the Chinese sample, 33% reported being targets of cyberbullying, 7% reported being a cyberbully, and 47% had heard of or observed someone being cyberbullied. The types of ICT used in cyberbullying reported by the Canadian sample were email: 23%, chat room: 35.9%, and multiple forms of ICT (email, chat & cell phone): 32.1%. For the Chinese sample the following percentages for cyberbullying were reported: email: 16.8%, chat room: 24.4%, mobile phones: 21%, and multiple sources: 42.9%.

An interesting finding reported by Li (2008) was the cultural differences in students' willingness to seek help from adults when they were cyberbullied or observed that someone was being cyberbullied. Among the Chinese participants, 66% stated that when they were cyberbullied, they told adults, and 60% stated that when they observed that someone was being cyberbullied they told an adult. By contrast, of the Canadian participants, 9% of the students reported that when they were cyberbullied they told adults such as teachers and parents, and only 19% stated that when they knew someone was being cyberbullied they told adults. If such a large percentage of Chinese students are likely to seek help from adults when they are cyberbullied, it would be important for parents and teachers to understand relevant issues and know effective ways to intervene. Wong (2004) in a study on bullying in Hong Kong schools advocated for a comprehensive school-wide approach rather than a punitive or suppressive one. He suggested that it was important to educate teachers and parents about bullying and help them understand why it should be taken seriously. He advocated for a prevention program to be delivered in schools. Wong (2004) reported on a program that offered 21 hours of peace education to secondary school students during which they learned self understanding, emotional control, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal communication skills. Lee and Wong (2009) noted that "a harmonious atmosphere and culture among students, teachers, and parents is therefore conducive to positive behavior and unfavorable to bullying among students" (p.230). In addition to a comprehensive anti-bullying program focused on students, these authors suggest that family education for parents on topics such as improved parent-child communication is helpful in reducing bullying.

### **Bullying and Cyberbullying: Similarities and Differences**

According to Hazler (1996), the following elements have to be present to define an incident as bullying in the traditional sense: (a) there should be a power differential between the bully and the target, with the bully being more powerful by being physically stronger or more verbally skilled than the target; (b) harm should be experienced by the target as a result of the bully's actions-this could include physical harm or social or psychological harm, and (c) the bullying actions should be repeated over time. A single act of aggression therefore does not constitute bullying.

Cyberbullying can be more difficult to address for targets as well as school personnel or parents because of key ways in which it differs from bullying in the traditional sense. With cyberbullying as in traditional bullying, harm is experienced by the target as a result of the cyberbully's actions. A power differential between cyberbully and target exists because the cyberbully has the power to hurt, shame, victimize, or harass the target. The power held by the cyberbully may come from information that could be embarrassing or humiliating for the target if it is shared with others. Power could also come from anonymity or masked identity in cases where the target does not know the true identity of the cyberbully. Cyberbullies can hide behind anonymity or by using pseudonyms, and as a result are often emboldened to say things they are unlikely to say face to face (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Further, cyberbullying often has a component of sexual harassment (Shariff, 2008) and that may lead to the target keeping silent out of embarrassment. For example the cyberbully may spread rumors about the sexual orientation of the target or may circulate a nude or partially nude photograph of the target.

Targets of cyberbullying often have no escape from the cyberbullying because of their use of ICT at home or outside of school. Recent cases in the USA have highlighted a vicious cycle of cyberbullying outside of school, followed by bullying in school or being the focus of whispers, giggles, or insults, followed by cyberbullying once the school day is over. Thus the targets of cyberbullying have virtually no escape from the torment. Exacerbating this situation is the exponential manner in which messages or photographs can be widely disseminating using ICT. In bullying in the traditional sense there are a finite number of people who are aware of the situation or participate in the bullying. But this is not the case with cyberbullying. Finally, it is much harder to 'catch' the cyberbully in the act. Therefore cyberbullying often comes to light when either the target or bystanders come forward to inform others, or the target physically retaliates against the cyberbully. The complex issues involved in cyberbullying make effective intervention a challenge. Approaching the issue from a proactive, preventative and media literacy perspective is vital.

### **Interventions with Students to Address Cyberbullying**

In cyberbullying situations, there are four types of roles that people tend to play: active cyberbully, secondary cyberbully, observer, and target (Bhat, Cahill Roberts, and Llewellyn, 2007). Take for example a situation in which a female student at a high school is the target of a rumor that she is a lesbian. It is clear in this situation that the target is the female student. The active cyberbully in this situation would be the individual who started the rumor about the female student's sexual orientation and began to circulate it. The motive of the cyberbully would be

to shame, harm, embarrass, or harass the target. If the cyberbully posted information of this sort on his or her social networking site, all those who view this information and then forward it or discuss it become secondary cyberbullies. If the cyberbully sends text messages via mobile phone to contacts and those individuals participate in discussing the issue and forwarding or embellishing the original message, they become secondary cyberbullies. They are also considered to be cyberbullies because their actions contribute to the wider dissemination of the rumor or hurtful information. Finally, there may be observers who do not view or disseminate the information but are aware of what is happening and may or may not know the target personally. For example, observers could be parents of students in the school that the female student attends or friends of the target who are aware of her distress. Effective interventions should target each of these roles.

Some information on cyber-bullying and other concerns related to the use of ICT by young people in Hong Kong may be found at InfoSec, (2009) an online resource maintained by the government of Hong Kong. In addition, we offer the following suggestions for effective prevention with students incorporating the following media literacy elements:

- (a) a definition of cyberbullying and behavioral examples of types of actions that constitute cyberbullying
- (b) knowledge and understanding of the types of ICT used to cyberbully
- (c) the roles in cyberbullying, including that of active cyberbully, secondary cyberbully, observer, and target, and what actions each one can take to prevent cyberbullying (i.e. a clear list of do's and don'ts
- (d) specific safety and reporting features associated

with each type of technology. For example both Facebook (2010) and MySpace (2010) have extensive safety information.

- (e) specific actions students should take if they are cyberbullied. These actions could be taking screen shots, printing evidence, speaking to trusted adults, and not retaliating as this often escalates the cyberbullying.
- (f) behavioral examples of types of actions that are to be taken to curb cyberbullying
- (g) an understanding the detrimental psychological, social, and academic effects of cyberbullying experienced by targets of such attacks
- (h) reporting procedures for cases of cyberbullying and encouragement of observers to step forward to stop the harassment
- (i) clear consequences for those who engage in cyberbullying

### **Anti-Cyberbullying Policy and Law as Strategies**

Several cases of cyberbullying of school students in the USA have received widespread attention in the media. Tragically in some of these cases, the targets of cyberbullying have been so distraught that they have taken their own lives. The most recent high profile case was of Phoebe Prince, a fifteen year old female student in a high school in Massachusetts who completed suicide in January 2010 (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010). Media reports indicated that this young student was physically bullied in school and on the way home from school. Further, she was cyberbullied when she returned home with taunting and abuse delivered on social networking sites and via cell phones. It is alleged that Ms. Prince had a brief relationship with a popular male student which led to her becoming the target of bullies in the school.

Cases such as this one have provided an impetus for anti-bullying legislation in the USA. However, anti-cyberbullying legislation is not widely used in Asian countries. South Korea instituted a policy requiring people to provide their real names when communicating in chat rooms after the suicides of two celebrities who were victimized online (Lewis, 2007). Later efforts to institute a cyber defamation law in South Korea have not been successful (Tonghyung, 2009). In Singapore, anti-cyberbullying legislation was debated, but instead law-makers decided that education and prevention efforts would be more helpful (Goh, 2009).

In the USA, after the death of Ms. Prince, the county prosecutor charged nine students at the school with various felonies including statutory rape, causing bodily injury, harassment and stalking in March 2010 (Eckholm & Zezima). Massachusetts did not have an anti-bullying law in place at the time, but a bill instituting such a law was signed by the governor of Massachusetts in May, 2010 (The Associated Press, May 3, 2010). This new anti-bullying law describes cyberbullying in very clear terms:

“Cyber-bullying”, bullying through the use of technology or any electronic communication, which shall include, but shall not be limited to, any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic, photo electronic or photo optical system, including, but not limited to, electronic mail, internet communications, instant messages or facsimile communications. Cyberbullying shall also include (i) the creation of a web page or blog in which the creator assumes the identity of another person or (ii) the knowing impersonation of another person as the author

of posted content or messages... (Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010: An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools, 2010, Section 5, a, para 1).

As of June 2010, forty three states in the USA have passed anti-bullying legislation in an effort to curb the rising incidence and severity of bullying and cyberbullying (Bully Police USA, 2010). State legislation that has passed more recently tends to have a more detailed emphasis on cyberbullying. When the problem of cyberbullying initially became an issue of concern, schools tended to focus on prohibiting the use of ICT for social purposes in school, on school transportation, and at school events. However, as it became apparent that much of the cyberbullying actions had taken place outside of school, in homes of students, schools began to believe that this was outside their jurisdiction. Eventually school officials acknowledged that whether or not the cyberbullying was happening on school premises or using school computers was immaterial. What was evident was that if it compromised the learning environment for students in the schools then it was indeed an issue that the school needed to deal with. The recent state of Massachusetts legislation acknowledges this point by stipulating that bullying is an offence even if it takes place:

at a location, activity, function or program that is not school-related, or through the use of technology or an electronic device that is not owned, leased or used by a school district or school, if the bullying creates a hostile environment at school for the victim, infringes on the rights of the victim at school or materially and substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school. (Chapter 92 of the Acts of 2010: An Act Relative to Bullying in Schools, 2010, Section 5, b, ii, para 1).

## **School Policies to Address Bullying and Cyberbullying**

In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau (EDB) has instituted a policy of not tolerating any act of bullying in schools. It provides guidelines for preventing and intervening in instances of bullying in schools. The EDB has developed a resource package called “Co-creating a Harmonious School”, which sets out guidelines for schools to enhance teachers’ awareness about school bullying, including cyberbullying, as well as formulate and implement school-based strategies to prevent, handle, and follow up bullying incidents (Hong Kong info.gov, 2010). Further, the guidelines provide the “Flowchart in Handling Bullying Incidents” to protect the students being bullied and restore a harmonious school environment. Schools are urged to follow the principles in the guidelines and implement the anti-bullying policy. Parents are encouraged to work closely with schools and teachers to prevent and address bullying. The Regional Education Office of the EDB can provide consultation, training, and counseling services for the school personnel and students concerned jointly with other related professionals and officers. If the cases are serious, or involve suspected abuse or criminal offence, the EDB will liaise with the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and the Hong Kong Police Force for appropriate handling measures. School or parents can also consult the Family and Child Protective Services Unit of the SWD or report the case to the Police if necessary (Hong Kong info.gov. 2010). These measures will go a long way in protecting students from bullying. However more specific attention to cyberbullying may be warranted.

In some states in the USA, departments of education develop anti-bullying model policies to assist districts with implementation of anti-bullying

laws. For example, the anti-bullying law in Ohio mandates that every school district in Ohio have an anti-bullying policy that contains procedures for responding to, investigating, reporting, and documenting incidents of harassment, intimidation, and bullying, including cyberbullying (Ohio Department of Education, 2010, para 3). If such a policy is to be effective, the responsibilities of school employees should be clearly outlined along with information on how to intervene. The aim of such a policy should be to make as clear as possible to students what types of behaviors constitute bullying or cyberbullying and what are the consequences for engaging in such behaviors. In order to facilitate the implementation of effective policies across the state of Ohio, the Ohio Department of Education (2010) developed a model anti-bullying policy for use by school districts in Ohio. School districts outside of Ohio would benefit from perusing the clear definitions of behaviors that constitute bullying and cyberbullying in this model policy. These definitions facilitate prompt identification of bullying behaviors by school personnel.

- 1.1.1 *Physical violence and/or attacks;*
- 1.1.2 *Threats, taunts and intimidation through words and/or gestures;*
- 1.1.3 *Extortion, damage or stealing of money and/or possessions;*
- 1.1.4 *Exclusion from the peer group or spreading rumors; and,*
- 1.1.5 *Repetitive and hostile behavior with the intent to harm others through the use of information and communication technologies and other Web-based/online sites (also known as “cyber bullying”), such as the following:*
  - 1.1.5.1 *Posting slurs on Web sites where*

*students congregate or on Web logs (personal online journals or diaries);*

1.1.5.2 *Sending abusive or threatening instant messages;*

1.1.5.3 *Using camera phones to take embarrassing photographs of students and posting them online; and,*

1.1.5.4 *Using Web sites to circulate gossip and rumors to other students;*

1.1.5.5 *Excluding others from an online group by falsely reporting them for inappropriate language to Internet service providers (p.7).*

In the Phoebe Prince case, the school district has been sharply criticized for not having robust anti-bullying policies in place and school officials have been accused of not taking prompt and definitive actions to protect the target and punish the bullies (Eckholm & Zezima, 2010). By having such policies in place and ensuring that they are consistently enforced, schools can be assured that they are making the best possible effort to protect students and create an environment that is conducive to learning.

## **Strategies to Address Cyberbullying with Parents**

Parents are a key element of media literacy initiatives. Parents provide and pay for computers, internet connections, and cell phones, and should acknowledge that it is a parental responsibility to teach children how to use these powerful forms of communication in an ethical and safe manner. Parents need to know and understand that with children who are minors, they can be held accountable for the actions of their children.

For example in the case of a child’s use of social networking sites such as Facebook, parents should:

- (a) set ground rules for the amount of time the

child can spend online. Parents need to be aware that online addiction is becoming a mental health issue of concern with a pattern similar to other types of addictions.

- (b) set ground rules about who can be considered a friend. A recommendation is for children to only become ‘friends’ with people in the online world that they already know in the offline world
- (c) understand privacy settings and account profiles. They should know the best ways to restrict the number of people who can search for and contact their child, as well as the amount of information they can obtain about their child.
- (d) have an agreement about what parents can know about their child’s online interactions. Children often think that they should be afforded privacy on a social networking site. But with minor children this may not be advisable. Honest and regular communication between parents and children is essential.
- (e) discuss appropriate and non-appropriate content that children can share online. Pertinent incidents reported in the media can serve as teachable moments. Children should be reminded that photographs and words sent online can never be deleted because of how widely and rapidly they are circulated.
- (f) discuss appropriate and inappropriate behavior on social networking sites. This could include defining unacceptable behaviors such as saying rude, hurtful, or mean things about people, bullying or ganging up on someone, making up or spreading rumors, or participating in hurtful polls (such as voting for the ugliest person in the school).
- (g) discussing public versus private conversations.

For example a ‘wall conversation’ is one that can be seen by everyone in the networks of the two people conversing.

- (h) discuss clear ‘consequences’ for not abiding by agreed upon rules for the use of social networking and enforce these in a consistent manner.

Similar discussions and agreements should be made regarding the use of mobile phones. Regardless of whether parents themselves are using ICT for social purposes it is essential for them to gain understanding and awareness of such tools in order to teach their children the safe and ethical use of them.

ICT has brought many opportunities and positives into our world. When used for social interaction, social networking and mobile phones can be abused by students who do not have adequate media literacy about safe and ethical uses of such technology. With proactive media literacy initiatives for students, school personnel, and parents, we can educate young people in such a way as to maximize opportunities and minimize risks associated with ICT. Schools should regularly review their anti-bullying policies and programs to ensure that they are current and relevant to the types of social interaction of the times. While broad-based programs focusing on prevention of cyberbullying are essential, it is also important that the school community know the consequences of engaging in cyberbullying and know also that these consequences are consistently enforced.

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## Authors:

Christine Suniti Bhat, Assistant Professor,  
Ohio University. [bhatc@ohio.edu]  
Shih-Hua Chang, and Jamie A. Linscott, Doctoral Students,  
Ohio University

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