

## **University Students' Perceptions of Cyberbullying: A Research on Gender Difference in Thailand**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objectives of this study are to investigate the perceptions of cyberbullying of university students, to explore their perceptions of factors associated with cyberbullying and to investigate the gender difference on factors associated with cyberbullying. This study was conducted with university students who were 17-25 years of age. Results indicate that is no difference between the proportions of male and female university students reporting both cyberbullying the others or being a victim of cyberbullying. However, females tend to perceive “non-confrontational” as a motivation to cyberbullying more than males. Females tend to perceive anxiety emotion to cyberbullying more than males. However, males tend to perceive emotion of powerlessness to cyberbullying more than females. Lastly, females tend to perceive avoidance reaction to cyberbullying more than males.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender difference, Cyber bullying, Motivation, Emotion, Reaction

### **1. Introduction**

Thailand's internet penetration rate is ranked among the top in ASEAN. In the last six years, the penetration rate is 11.5%. Based on a survey by the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (ETDA), school students and university students are the group that has the highest internet penetration rate of 76% and spend 12.43 hours per day. Thailand is suffering from not only internet addiction, but also cyberbullying, in which people are both bullies and victims. There are various forms of cyberbullying that involve different motivations, impacts and reactions. However, few studies have focused on young adults' perception of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is defined as “...involves the use of information and communication technologies such as email, cellphone and text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal websites, and defamatory online personal polling websites to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others (Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009). Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon in our society with the technological advancement. Harassment and hostility continue to be evident on digital media in society.

Cyberbullying hurts victims physically and emotionally. The feeling of embarrassment causes the victim to isolate himself from friends and family, losing self-esteem and experiencing depression. Many victims blame themselves for being different and lose sleep and appetite. In severe cases, victimized persons may hurt themselves or commit suicide. Hence, communities and concerned authority need to pay attention, taking on a very important role in grooming adolescences to be digitally literate and capable of managing cyberbullying.

University students were chosen for this study because adolescence is an age period when physical aggression increases in frequency and intensity; it has been labeled a brutalizing period. This period also witnesses a series of abrupt changes in the social lives of youngsters.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to collect useful data on the university students, their usage of social media and their perception on cyber bullying in order to add up more insight information for any related organizations to plan an effective policy to prevent and/or remedy cyber bullying. Specifically, the objectives of this study are the following:

1. To compare male and female university students' experiences in relation to cyberbullying;
2. To explore their perceptions associated with cyber bullying; and
3. To investigate the gender difference on perceptions associated with cyberbullying.

## **3. Related Literature Review**

### **3.1 Cyberbullying and Its Impacts**

Cyberbullying can occur in blogs, websites, emails, chats, instant messaging, and text/digital image messaging via mobile devices. It can relate to gender, racial, religious, and cultural biases. Digital technology inadvertently becomes bullies' weapon, sending mean messages to targets easier, faster, more intensely and more publicly involved. Bullies can use fake identity on social media to attack victims repeatedly.

The literature suggests that victims of cyberbullying generally manifest psychological problems such as depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, school phobias and social anxiety (Akcil, 2018). Under great emotional stress, victims of cyberbullying are unable to concentrate on their studies, and thus their academic progress is adversely affected (Akcil, 2018). Moreover, research findings have shown that cyber bullying causes emotional and physiological damage to defenseless victims as well as psycho-social difficulties including behavior problems (Akbulut and Eristi, 2011). Since the victims are often hurt psychologically, the depressive effect of cyberbullying prevents students from excelling in their studies (Faryadi, 2011). The overall presence of cyberbullying victimization among university students was found to be significantly related to the experience of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, low self-esteem, interpersonal problems, family tensions and academic underperformance (Mason, 2018).

### **3.2 Cyberbullying and Its Motivations**

Researchers have investigated motivations for cyberbullying. Two common and inter-related motivations include anonymity and the disinhibiting effect (Faryadi, 2011). Mason (2018) described how anonymity breeds

disinhibition due to the distance provided by electronic communication. Additional motivations include homophobia, racial intolerance, and revenge (Mason 2018). In this study the motivation for cyberbullying was defined as the reasons for cyberbullying provoked by the characteristics of the cyber victim or by something specific to the situation. They are “no consequences”, “non-confrontational”, and “target was different” (Molluzzo and Lawler, 2012).

- “No consequences” is the cyberbully’s feeling that he or she can get away with cyberbullying without fear of ramifications, physical retaliation from the victim, a permanent consequence (e.g., jail time), or witnessing an emotional reaction from the victim.
- “Non-confrontational” is identified when a cyber bully does not want to have a face-to-face encounter with the victim or expresses fear of facing the person; people often feel that cyberspace is impersonal, and they can therefore say whatever they want.
- “Target was different” is referred to a cyberbully’s motivation based on the victim appearing different, having a negative reputation, or standing out in a way that the cyberbully perceives as negative.

### **3.3 Cyberbullying and Its Reactions**

The reacting behaviors that the victims display against the aggression or the aggressor because of their emotional state are a very important issue. The type of reaction can turn the existing situation into a more complicated one, or even a non-proportional reaction can convert the victim into a bully (Eristi & Akbulut 2017). Several classification headlines regarding the reactions exhibited by the victims, which include seeking vengeance from the bully (Eristi & Akbulut 2017), establishing dialogue with the bully, forgiving (Safaria et al. 2016), ignoring the attack, and avoiding (Cao & Lin 2015). Eristi (2019) used four factors: revenge, precaution, dialogue, and avoidance in his research. Additionally, there are numerous variables being influential over the reactions that victims can adopt against cyberbullying, which include the type and severity of bullying behavior (Beran et al. 2012), personality traits of the victim (Elledge, 2013), previous experience with such an aggression (Beran et al. 2012), gender (Hinduja & Patchin 2011), and age (Sourander et al. 2010). In this research the reactions used are precaution, ignoring, avoidance, and revenge.

### **3.4 Cyberbullying in Thailand**

Thailand’s National Report 2020 published by Child Online Safety Index (COSI) indicates that Thai children aged 8-19 years old encounter cyber risks at a much higher rate than their counterparts in other countries (47% to 37%). Thai boys are at greater risk than girls (53% to 41%). And almost half of Thai children aged 8-12 years old have been bullied or witnessed bullying online while the global average is 29%. Besides cyberbullying, COSI also reports the other cyber risks against children including disordered use of technology, risky contents, risky contacts, cyber threats, and reputational risk. The other study shows that around 43% of Thais aged between 12 and 24 years have been victims of online bullying. (Unintentional & Intentional Cyberbullying, 2021)

There were many gender differences, with girls recommending telling and reporting more, for both traditional and cyber victimization. Girls also recommended ignoring it more, or blocking messages; while boys recommended fighting back, but also making new friends. There were few differences by religion. Victims were

more likely to recommend passive strategies such as avoiding the cyberbully, or risky ones such as fighting back (Ruthaychonnee and Smith, 2018).

In addition, one study produced direct evidence regarding cyberbullying in Thailand. A report on cyberbullying by Boonoon (2019), in an online newspaper 'The Nation', discussed findings from a survey conducted in August 2019 by the Wisdom Society for Public Opinion Research of Thailand, a private organization concerned about the welfare of Thai children. This report cited cyberbullying as a situation when a child or teenager is repeatedly tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed, or otherwise targeted by another child or teenager using text messaging, e-mail, instant messaging or any other type of digital technology. The survey involved 2,500 students around the country, aged 12 to 24 years; 970 were vocational students and 1,530 were general students. It was found that 43% of students had been threatened over the Internet. Most of them, studying at high school, declined to disclose details, but said they had been annoyed by the cyberbullying and particularly by attempts to lure them into offline meetings. Few parents or teachers were told of bullying episodes.

Songsiri and Musikaphan (2011) reported findings from 1,200 pupils aged mostly 14-16 years, from 21 schools in Bangkok. The date of the survey is not reported. For this sample, ICT penetration was very high; 96% owned a mobile phone, and 95% used the internet. Seven types of cyberbullying were reported: electronic messages with angry and vulgar language; repeatedly sending nasty, mean and insulting messages; talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online; sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships; pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships; repeated intense harassment and denigration including threats; and intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group. Of these, the first two were the most frequent. However, their frequency measures are difficult to interpret, as they included both the experiencing these yourself, or the hearing about them occurring to their friends; in addition, no definition of cyberbullying is given. Duration of internet use and aspects of family relationships (exposure to violence; family income) were found to relate to the cyberbullying measures, but no details of these findings are presented.

### **3.5 Gender and Cyberbullying**

The nature of information and communication technology makes it possible for cyberbullying to occur more secretly, spread more rapidly, and be easily preserved. Cyberbullying indeed occurs; yet it is unclear whether gender plays a role in cyberbullying. The term gender, in addition to recognizing the influence of biological factors, includes cultural and experiential factors to explain aggressive behavior. Thus, gender not only implies the categorization of people into male or female groups, but also refers to the gender typing process in which they acquire those motives, values and behaviors viewed as appropriate for males and females within a given culture (Yehuda, 2019).

Gender studies on cyberbullying have attempted to determine which gender is more involved in cyberbullying victimization and perpetration. However, research has shown mixed results and we cannot affirm that cyber bullying is a gender-specific behavior. Wong et.al (2018) found that both cyberbullying victimization

and perceived online disinhibiting enhance the intention to perpetrate cyberbullying. But the factors influencing cyberbullying differ in strength for male and female students. However, there was no significant difference between the proportions of male and female young adults who reported being cyberbullied.

#### 4. Research Methods

This study used a cross-sectional study design, carried out in 2021. We assessed demographic information, ICT use, students' perceptions of the motivations for cyberbullying, the cyber-victim's emotions, and reactions. The sample for this study was obtained through the online survey in Thailand. An online survey questionnaire was sent to university students aged 17-25 years, with a final 18.4% response rate (n = 388). Students received an invitation to participate in the survey. One of the limitations of using an online survey is the potential low response rate (Dillman, 2007). However, due to the sheer number of the population, it was the most cost-efficient choice. The final sample size is more than enough large for a study of this magnitude with 95% confidence level. The sample consisted of 184 females (47.42%) and 204 males (52.58%), aged 17 to 25 years. The mean age was 20.73 years (SD = 2.14).

#### 5. Results

We first examined the extent to which students experience cyberbullying in order to gain a basic understanding of the issue. Overall, close to 62 percent of the students were cyberbully victims. Over 48 percent of the students had cyberbullied the others. In addition, 65 percent of the students reported that they knew someone being cyberbullied. When male and female students' experiences were considered separately, it was found that over 26 percent of males and close to 24 percent of females were cyberbullying. However, 42 percent of males and 39 percent of females reported that they were cyberbullied. Table 1 provides details of male and female students reported experiences.

Table 1: Percentages of student experiences of cyberbullying

	Male	Female
Cyberbully	26.3	23.9
Cyberbully victim	42.2	39.3
Aware of cyberbullying	57.2	55.6

n = 388

##### 5.1 Do male and female adolescents have different cyberbullying experiences?

According to a chi-square test of independence, there was no significant difference between the proportions of male and female young adults who reported cyberbullying ( $\chi^2 = 13.01, p < .05$ ). However, as can be seen in Table 1, more males (26.3%) reported cyberbullying on a social media site than females (23.9%).

Additionally, there was no significant difference between the proportions of male and female young adults who reported being cyberbullied ( $\chi^2 = 12.83, p < .05$ ). However, as can be seen in Table 1, more males (42.2%) reported being bullied on a social media site than females (41.3%).

### 5.2 Students' perceptions of the motivation for cyberbullying

Frequencies were run to gain percentages for the data. "non-confrontational" (49%) had the largest percentage of perceived motivation while "target was different" had the lowest percentage (24%). These results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Motivation for Cyberbullying

Motivation for Cyberbullying	Percent
non-confrontational	49
no consequences	32
target was different	24

#### *Gender Differences of Motivation for Cyberbullying*

Responses regarding a specific motivation to cyberbullying ranged from 1 (very untrue of me) to 5 (very true of me). Results of the independent samples t-test show that mean scores of "non-confrontational" differ between females (mean = 2.85, SD = .89) and males (mean = 2.41, SD = .57) at the .05 level of significance [ $t(386) = 2.18, df = 386, p = .05, 95\% \text{ CI for mean difference: } -.18 \text{ to } .27$ ]. On average, females tend to perceive "non-confrontational" as motivation to cyberbullying more than males.

Table 3: Independent samples t-test comparing gender on "non-confrontational" motivation to cyberbullying

	Gender						t	df
	Male			Female				
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
non-confrontational	2.41	.57	204	2.85	.89	184	2.18*	386

\* $p < .05$

### 5.3 Students' perceptions of the cyber-victim's emotions

Many victims of cyberbullying will get angry about what is happening to them. In fact, research indicates that anger is the most common response to cyberbullying followed by being anxious. When cyberbullying occurs, the nasty posts, messages, or texts can be shared with multitudes of people. The sheer volume of people that know about the bullying can lead to intense feelings of humiliation. Cyberbullying sometimes causes students to be excluded at university. Consequently, they often feel alone and isolated. Victims of cyberbullying often find it difficult to feel safe. They may feel vulnerable and powerless.

Frequencies were run to gain percentages for the data. Anxiety (30%) had the largest percentage of perceived emotions of cyber-victims while isolation had the lowest percentage (15%). These results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Cyber-victim's emotions

cyber-victim's emotions	Percent
Anger	27
Anxiety	30
Humiliation	21
Isolation	15
Powerlessness	17

The students have different perceptions of cyber-victim's emotions. The results of this study indicated that 30% of students perceived anxiety, 27% of students perceived anger, and so on. Isolation had the lowest percentage of 15%.

*Gender Differences on Perception of Cyber-victim's Emotions*

Responses regarding a specific emotion to cyberbullying ranged from 1 (very untrue of me) to 5 (very true of me). Results of the independent samples t-test show that mean scores of anxiety and powerlessness differ between males and females as shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

From Table 5, females (mean = 3.02, SD = .72) and males (mean = 2.81, SD = .71) differ at the .05 level of significance [ $t(386) = 2.05$ ,  $df = 386$ ,  $p = .05$ , 95% CI for mean difference: -.28 to .32]. On average, females tend to perceive anxiety emotion to cyberbullying more than males.

From Table 6, females (mean = 2.82, SD = .74) and males (mean = 3.15, SD = .93) differ at the .05 level of significance [ $t(386) = 1.99$ ,  $df = 386$ ,  $p = .05$ , 95% CI for mean difference: -.39 to .38]. On average, males tend to perceive emotion of powerlessness to cyberbullying more than females.

Table 5: Independent samples t-test comparing gender on anxiety to cyberbullying

	Gender						t	df
	Male			Female				
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
Anxiety	2.81	.71	204	3.02	0.72	184	2.05*	386

\* $p < .05$

Table 6: Independent samples t-test comparing gender on powerlessness to cyberbullying

	Gender						t	df
	Male			Female				
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
Powerlessness	3.15	.93	204	2.82	.74	184	1.99*	386

\* $p < .05$

#### 5.4 Students' perceptions of the cyber-victim's reactions

Responses regarding a specific reaction to cyberbullying ranged from 1 (very untrue of me) to 5 (very true of me). Results of the independent samples t-test show that mean scores of avoidance differ between males and females as shown in Table 7.

From Table 7, females (mean = 3.04, SD = 0.66) and males (mean = 2.71, SD = .62) at the .05 level of significance [ $t(386) = 2.24$ ,  $df = 386$ ,  $p = .05$ , 95% CI for mean difference: -.24 to .36]. On average, females tend to perceive avoidance reaction to cyberbullying more than males.

Table 7: Independent samples t-test comparing gender on avoidance to cyberbullying

	Gender						t	df
	Male			Female				
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
Avoidance	2.71	.62	204	3.04	0.66	184	2.24*	386

\* $p < .05$

## 6. Discussion of the Findings

There is no difference between the proportions of male and female university students' reporting both cyberbullying the others or being a victim of cyberbullying. More males reported being cyberbullying and being a victim of cyberbullying compared to females, which is similar to the results found by Kasahara et.al (2019). However, Li (2006) reported differently that males were more likely to be cyberbullies than their female counterparts.

From the finding, this study concludes that "non-confrontational" is the perceived motivation with the highest percentage. In addition, the motivations for cyberbullying statistically varies across genders. Female perceived "non-confrontational" as cyberbullying motivation more than males. This finding is consistent with the other research's findings that the most important characteristic of electronic bullying that appeals to cyberbullies is the anonymity and the low probability of detection and punishment (Kasahara et.al, 2019).

This study found that mean scores of anxiety and powerlessness differ between males and females. Females tend to perceive anxiety emotion to cyberbullying more than males; while males tend to perceive emotion of powerlessness to cyberbullying more than females. These findings are consistent with other research findings that cyberbullying causes emotional and physiological damage to defenseless victims (Akbulut and Eristi, 2011). Beebe (2010) found that the overall presence of cyberbullying victimization among undergraduate college students was found to be significantly related to the experience of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, low self-esteem, interpersonal problems, family tensions and academic underperformance (Beebe, 2010).

Aiming to determine perceived reactions by cyber victims, this study concludes that the avoidance reaction against cyberbullying varies at a statistically significant level across genders. It is perceived that female victims employ avoidance reaction against cyberbullying more often than males. The findings of other studies



also conclude that males and females demonstrate different reactions to cyberbullying, and gender is a critical antecedent of behavioral reactions (Wong et al. 2018).

## 7. Recommendations

This paper demonstrates the perception of university students on cyber bullying in Thailand. The results of this study can be used to make recommendations to institutions to prevent cyberbullying and its consequences for adolescents. To reduce cyberbullying, it is important to avoid attribution of blame and focus more on prevention. The study and the possibility to understand the phenomenon should guarantee its inclusion in the education of young people. There should be the promotion of collaboration between family, university, and territory to counter the spread of cyberbullying and to provide socio-educational tools for parents, teachers and students; implementing communication and confidence among youths and adults and developing new space to train parents and teachers in recognizing cyberbullying.

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