

# **Perception Differences of Parents and Instructors in Cyberbullying of University Students in Thailand: The Protective Factors for Preventing and Reducing Cyberbullying**

**Assistant Professor Supavadee Nontakao, Ph.D.**

**Sritapum University International College**

**E-mail: supavadee.no@spu.ac.th**

## **ABSTRACT**

Cyberbullying is increasing along with the increasing number of Internet users. Cyberbullying occurs anywhere and at any time, which can obscure the boundaries of supervision and responsibility of adults. The complexities of cyberspace make it difficult for any one individual or stakeholder group to prevent or respond to cyberbullying on their own. All parties involved need to work together to prevent and reduce cyberbullying. This study focuses on protective factors at personal level and situational level perceived by two important stakeholders, parents and university instructors. The data was collected through questionnaire, of which the sample group was parents and instructors of undergraduate students in Thailand. There were 396 respondents, comprising of 205 parents and 191 university instructors. Chi-square and t test are used to compare the means of these two groups. It was found that there is no difference in cyberbullying awareness between parents and university instructors. Instructors tend to perceive self-esteem as a personal protective factor to cyberbullying more than parents. Instructors tend to perceive open conversation about cyberbullying, a parent-child relationship, as a situational protective factor more than parents. Both stakeholders perceive school climate can isolate students from a violent environment, turning it into a safe place to learn and develop.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying, protective factors, parents, university instructors, emotional intelligence, parent-child relationship, school climate

## **1. Introduction**

Information and communication technology (ICT) has changed the way individuals communicate with each other. Together with the development of ICT, a new incident - cyberbullying, emerged. Cyberbullying, using electronic media meant to harm or discomfort others, has been considered more pervasive and impactful than traditional bullying since perpetrators can remain anonymous online and are not bound by time or place. Cyberbullying incidents have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (António, 2023). All activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as studying and working, were carried out online at home.

Cyberbullying is caused by several factors, namely family factors related to parenting, internal factors related to individual self-control, and external factors related to social factors such as friends and the school environment (Zhu et al., 2021). Cyberbullying behaviors carried out by students include flaming, abuse, denigration, impersonation, outing and trickery, stalking, and exclusion (Broll, 2016). Cyberbullying has very worrying psychological impacts, such as low self-esteem and anxiety, and depression. The results of a study showed that adolescents who experienced cyberbullying showed reduced mental health, such as anti-sociality, stress, and depression (Cassidy et al., 2018). Another study stated that the impacts of cyberbullying were reduced academic achievement, low self-esteem, anxiety, and violent behavior (Zhu et al., 2021).

Efforts to prevent and reduce the negative impact of cyberbullying can be undertaken by parents, teachers, and others. Parents have the role as educators and supervisors in their children's Internet use at home. Teachers have a role in establishing a mutually supportive school environment for the development of students. While the presence and growth of cyberbullying is continuing, enhancing communication, and understanding between parents and educators in finding effective intervention coping strategies and preventive factors have gained interest.

Eujarusphan (2021) examined the Internet usage behavior in Thailand in 2019 and revealed that in the past decade, Thais have increased their use of the Internet by 150%. This has resulted in Thailand having 47.5 million people or 70% of the population online. Thailand ranks in the world's top countries for social media usage (Saengcharoensap & Rujiprak, 2021) and, thus, inevitably faces cyberbullying problems. Notakao & Pitchayachananon (2019) examined the extent to which university students in Thailand experienced cyberbullying and found that close to 60 percent of the students were cyberbully victims; 45 percent of the students had cyberbullied others; and 62 percent of the students reported that they knew someone being cyberbullied. There were many previous studies on cyberbullying in Thailand (Saengcharoensap & Rujiprak, 2021, Sittichai & Smith, 2018); however, studies on the preventive factors of cyberbullying are still scarce.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to examine perception differences between parents and instructors concerning protective factors of cyberbullying among undergraduate students in Thailand. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. to explore awareness of cyberbullying of university students in Thailand by parents and instructors
2. to investigate the perception difference towards protective factors at personal level of parents and instructors
3. to investigate the perception difference towards protective factors at situational level, parent-child relationship, of parents and instructors
4. to investigate the perception difference towards protective factors at situational level, school climate, of parents and instructors

### **3. Related Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Collaboration between Parents and Instructors**

The complexities of cyberspace make it difficult for any one individual or stakeholder group to prevent or respond to cyberbullying on their own. Schools and families are among the most important risk factors as well as protective factors in cyberbullying. Parents are aware that their children can be both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying. They need encouragement to take action when they suspect their child is being cyberbullied or is bullying someone else. They need communication skills to talk to their children and to seek help from other parents, teachers, or others, and to cooperate to find possible ways of dealing with cyber-attacks. Teachers need to contact parents when appropriate, and to increase parental and community awareness about cyberbullying. They also need active collaboration with parents to establish strategies for dealing with cyberbullying.

Broll (2016) has highlighted the limitations of relevant stakeholders in addressing cyberbullying since parents and educators have different perceptions concerning cyberbullying and possess unique expertise. Coordinated interventions are not a new phenomenon suggested in response to cyberbullying. However, collaborative responses to cyberbullying are still fragmented; perception differences inhibit effective collaboration. The study of Sittichai & Smith (2018) found that good relationships between family members and school personnel could help solve the problem.

#### **3.2 Protective Factors**

The comprehensive review of Zhu et al., (2021) highlighted both personal and situational factors as the protective factors associated with cyberbullying among adolescents. Personal factors include emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-esteem. Situational factors consisted of parent-child relationship and school climate. At the personal level, high emotional intelligence, an ability for emotional self-control and empathy, were associated with lower rates of cyberbullying (Zhu et al., 2021). At the situational level, a parent's role is seen as critical. For example, intimate parent-child relationships and open active communication were demonstrated to be related to lower experiences of cyberbullying and perpetration (Larranaga, et al., 2016). Some scholars argued that parental supervision and monitoring of children's online activities can reduce their tendency to participate in some negative activities associated with cyberbullying. They further claimed that an authoritative parental style protects youths against cyberbullying (Rao et al., 2019). Conversely, another study evidenced that parents' supervision of Internet usage was meaningless (Larranaga, et al., 2016). In addition to conflicting roles of parental supervision, Zhu et al., (2021) have also looked into the role of schools and posited that positive school climates contribute to less cyberbullying experiences.

##### **3.2.1 Protective Factors at Personal Level**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is one of the personal variables that has received the most attention with respect to cyberbullying. The concept of emotional intelligence refers to the ability to accurately perceive, regulate, and express emotions, as well as the ability to generate and access emotions during the thinking process, the ability to understand the emotion and the underlying emotional knowledge, and the ability to organize emotions in a way that promotes the emotional and mental growth of the individual (Al-Sarayra, 2022).

Cyberbullying was related to difficulties in regulating one's emotions. The characteristics of EI make it one of the most powerful protective factors against the appearance of cyberbullying. Al-Sarayra (2022) revealed that dimensions of emotional intelligence predicted participation in cyberbullying as both a victim and perpetrator. Specifically, it indicated that low emotional regulation and high excessive attention to one's feelings increases the probability of being a victim of cyberbullying, while low emotional understanding increases the probability of being a perpetrator. Students with a high ability to understand and regulate their emotions reveal high levels of nonparticipation in cyberbullying behavior (Zhu et al., 2021).

Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self. Self-esteem is a perception, that one's belief as to his or her personal value and affected by one's participation in the social world (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). A person with high self-esteem is usually assertive, pleased, and self-respecting, whereas those who have low self-esteem are anxious, lacking confidence, and self-critical. In general, self-esteem tends to rise when a youth experiences positive life events such as success and favorable opinions among peers. Youths in the consistently high self-esteem profile seemed to be more protected against cyberbullying and victimization/cybervictimization behaviors compared to those in the self-derogation profile (Zhu et al, 2018). Self-esteem may acquire a fundamental motivational function that can either activate or inhibit certain aspects of a person's developmental trajectories (Palermi et al., 2017), with high levels of self-esteem operating as protective factors and low levels increasing vulnerability to peer aggression and mental health problems. Palermi et al. (2017) found that subjects with a low level of self-esteem were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying risks. Cyberbullying victims and perpetrators reported significantly lower self-esteem than youth who had not experienced cyberbullying.

Empathy, ability to share and understand emotional states of others, is defined as the process through which an individual understands the emotions of others by generating an isomorphic affective state and knowing that the cause of one's emotional state belong to the other person (Morese et al., 2018). Morese et al., (2018) mentioned that being able to understand the mind and emotional states of the others was fundamental to life, contributed to the success of social relationships because it allowed us to communicate, understand and predict the behaviors and reactions of others; this ability allows a better understanding and the ability to promote prosocial behaviors. It was found that there was a negative relationship between antisocial behavior and empathy: a negative relationship between empathy and cyberbullying (Zhu et al., 2021). Perpetrators demonstrated less empathic responsiveness than non-perpetrators. It has been noted that elevated levels of empathy are associated with prosocial behavior. A lack of empathy might be a risk factor for cyberbullying behavior. A number of bullying intervention programs have incorporated empathy as an essential element to reduce bullying (Morese et al., 2018).

### **3.2.2 Protective Factors at Situational Level**

#### **Parent-Child Relationships**

Parents have an important role in preventing cyberbullying. Supervision and parenting by parents to children are an important part of preventing and reducing the impact of cyberbullying. Family cohesion acts

as a protective factor against cyberbullying. Parental involvement influences the child's personality to avoid juvenile deviant behavior. Previous studies have shown that parenting style has a positive relationship with adolescent self-control (Yosep et al., 2023). A previous study conducted by Yosep et al., (2023) showed that the lack of involvement and warmth provided by parents and overly permissive parenting had an influence on cyberbullying behavior. Barón et al., (2019) indicated that adolescents involved in cyberbullying as perpetrators or victims have less open and more avoidant communication with their parents than adolescents who are not involved in cyberbullying. Yosep et al., (2023) found that high school students who experience cyberbullying are not given education about how to use the Internet and social media from their parents. This can cause students to become perpetrators of cyberbullying and victims of cyberbullying. Parents as the first teachers at home have a big role in preventing cyberbullying by improving knowledge about cyberbullying and how to solve the negative impact of cyberbullying. In conclusion, several research findings stated the protective factor, parent-child relationships, to cyberbullying (Yosep et al., 2023, Barón et al., 2019, Cassidy et al., 2018, Zhu et al., 2018) with the following dimensions: open conversation about cyberbullying, close parent-child relationship, and usage monitor.

#### **School Climate**

The external factor that affects cyberbullying is the school climate (Baron & Caballero, 2016). It is said that the school environment, social support from teachers, and friendship between students are indispensable for students to have when they are in school. Technology has also been integrated more within schools increasing the likelihood of cyberbullying experiences. Positive experiences of school climate have a positive impact on adolescent development such as increased school connectedness and engagement, improved academic performance, better behavioral and mental health, and better psychological well-being (Baron et al., 2019). Wigati et al., (2020) found that students who engage in cyberbullying assess their school environment as less positive, and alternatively, adolescents who are not involved in bullying, both through cyberspace and at school, view school and teachers as having a more positive role. These findings emphasize that creating a positive school atmosphere can help reduce violent behavior, specifically bullying both at school and in cyberspace. School climate consists of all aspects related to school experience such as the quality of teaching and learning, social relationships, structural systems, values and norms. In conclusion, school climate from Wigati et al., (2020) and Baron et al., (2019) are adopted in this research as follows: sense of belonging, support from school, and student-teacher relationship.

#### **4. Research Methods**

This study used a cross-sectional study design, carried out in April- June of 2023. This study assessed demographic information, forms of cyberbullying, consequences of cyberbullying, and parents' and instructors' perceptions of protective factors to cyberbullying.

### **Participants and Sample Size**

The population of this study is parents and instructors of university students in Thailand. There are 1,676,982 students studying in higher education institutions in 2021 (MHESI, 2021). The final sample size of 396 is large enough for a study of this magnitude. The sample consisted of 205 parents (51.76%) and 191 university instructors (48.23%).

### **Sampling Procedure**

The researcher disseminated the surveys online using convenience sampling by posting on social media platform LINE, which ranked second among the leading social media networks in Thailand as of February 2022, with the penetration rate of around 92.8 percent (Statista, 2022). Respondents received an invitation to participate in the survey. One of the limitations of using an online survey is lack of quality random sampling. However, due to the sheer number of the population, it was the most cost-efficient choice. The other advantage is the ability to access to parents and instructors in remote locations.

### **Hypotheses**

- Hypothesis 1: There is no difference in awareness of cyberbullying of university students in Thailand by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 2: There is no perception difference towards personal protective factor, emotional intelligence (EI), to cyberbullying by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 3: There is no perception difference towards personal protective factor, self-esteem, to cyberbullying by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 4: There is no perception difference towards personal protective factor, empathy, to cyberbullying by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 5: There is no perception difference towards situational protective factors, open conversation about cyberbullying, by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 6: There is no perception difference towards situational protective factors, close relationship, by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 7: There is no perception difference towards situational protective factors, usage monitor, by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 8: There is no perception difference towards situational protective factors, sense of belonging, by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 9: There is no perception difference towards situational protective factors, support from school, by parents and instructors
- Hypothesis 10: There is no perception difference towards situational protective factors, student-teacher relationship, by parents and instructors

## 5. Results

### 5.1 The awareness of cyberbullying of university students in Thailand by parents and instructors

There is no difference in awareness of cyberbullying experience of Thai university students by parents and instructors. Table 1 presents the observed frequency distribution. According to a chi-square test of independence, there is no significant difference between the proportions of parents and instructors who reported awareness of cyberbully perpetrator ( $\chi^2 = 3.05, p > .05$ ). However, more instructors (37.0 percent) reported awareness of cyberbully perpetrator than parents (34.8 percent). Also, there is no significant difference between the proportions of parents and teachers who reported awareness of cyberbully victim ( $\chi^2 = 3.23, p > .05$ ). However, more instructors (45.5 percent) reported awareness of cyberbully victims than parents (40.5 percent).

Table 1: Frequency distribution of awareness of students' cyberbullying experiences by parents and instructors

	Awareness of Students' Cyberbullying Experiences	
	Cyberbully perpetrator	Cyberbully victim
Parents	72 (34.8%)	84 (40.5%)
Instructors	70 (37.0%)	86 (45.5%)

n = 396

The forms through which cyberbullying can occur are diverse, including harassment, exclusion, outing, trickery, cyber-stalking, and sexting. Parents and instructors have similar perceptions on several negative psychosocial, physical, and mental health consequences, such as depression, suicidal attempts, anxiety, loneliness, substance abuse, and lower academic achievement. Hypothesis 1 fails to reject.

### 5.2 The perception difference towards personal protective factor to cyberbullying by parents and instructors

Responses regarding a specific protective factor at personal level to cyberbullying ranged from 1 (very disagree) to 5 (very agree). Results of the independent samples t-test show that mean scores of "self-esteem" differ between parents (mean = 2.41, SD = .89) and instructors (mean = 2.85, SD = .57) at the .05 level of significance [ $t(394) = 2.23$ , degree of freedom (df) = 394,  $p = .05$ , 95% CI for mean difference: -.38 to -.77]. On average, instructors tend to perceive "self-esteem" as a specific protective factor to cyberbullying more than parents. Table 3 presents the summary of the tests regarding personal protective factor. Hence, hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 4 fail to reject. Hypothesis 3 is rejected.

Table 3: Independent samples t-test on perceived personal protective factor

	Parents			Instructor			t	df
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
Emotional intelligence	2.33	.41	205	2.41	.34	191	1.45*	394
Self-esteem	2.41	.89	205	2.85	.57	191	2.23**	394
Empathy	2.64	.47	205	2.75	.42	191	1.59*	394

\*p>.05, \*\*p < .05

### 5.3 The perception difference towards situational protective factors, parent-child relationship, by parents and instructors

Responses regarding a specific parent-child relationship ranged from 1 (very disagree) to 5 (very agree). Results of the independent samples t-test show that mean scores of “open conversation about cyberbullying” differ between parents (mean = 2.56, SD = .45) and instructors (mean = 2.84, SD = .39) at the .05 level of significance [t (394) = 2.34, df = 394, p = .05, 95% CI for mean difference: -.27 to -.53]. On average, instructors tend to perceive “open conversation about cyberbullying” as a dimension of parent-child relationship to cyberbullying more than parents. Table 4 presents the summary of the tests regarding parent-child relationship. Hence, hypothesis 6 and hypothesis 7 fail to reject. Hypothesis 5 is rejected.

Table 4: Independent samples t-test on perceived situational protective factor, parent-child relationship

	Parents			Instructor			t	df
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
open conversation about cyberbullying	2.56	.45	205	2.84	.39	191	2.31**	394
Close relationship	2.41	.54	205	2.55	.59	191	1.76*	394
Usage monitor	2.64	.42	205	2.73	.39	191	1.68*	394

\*p>.05, \*\*p < .05

### 5.4 The perception difference towards protective factors, school climate, by parents and instructors

Results of the independent samples t-test show that mean score of sense of belongings, mean score of support from school, and mean score of student-teacher relationship do not differ between parents and instructors at the .05 level of significance. Table 5 presents the summary of the tests regarding school climate. Therefore, hypotheses 8 – 10 are rejected.



Table 5: Independent samples t-test on perceived protective factors, school climate

School Climate	Parents			Instructor			t	df
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n		
sense of belonging	2.31	.34	205	2.42	.38	191	1.42*	394
support from school	2.52	.42	205	2.66	.35	191	1.36*	394
student-teacher relationship	2.74	.44	205	2.83	.42	191	1.79*	394

\*p>.05

## 6. Discussion of the Findings

There is no difference between the proportions of parents' and university instructors' reporting awareness of cyberbullying as perpetrators or victims since cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent around the world and it seems to increase during the pandemic. From the finding, this study concludes that "emotional intelligence" is the perceived personal preventive factor with the highest percentage. In addition, the personal preventive factor for cyberbullying statistically varies between parents and instructors. Instructors perceived "self-esteem" as a personal preventive factor for cyberbullying more than parents. This finding is consistent with the other research's findings that students who experienced cyberbullying, both as a victim and an offender, had significantly lower self-esteem than those who had little or no experience with cyberbullying (António et al., 2023).

This study found that "close relationship" is the perceived situational preventive factor with the highest percentage. In addition, open conversation about cyberbullying, a preventive factor for cyberbullying statistically varies between parents and instructors. The mean scores of "open conversation about cyberbullying" differ between parents and instructors. Instructors tend to perceive open conversation about cyberbullying as a preventive factor more than parents. These findings are consistent with other research findings that adolescents involved in cyberbullying as perpetrators or victims have less open and more avoidant communication with their parents than adolescents who are not involved in cyberbullying (Baron et al., 2019).

However, based on another situational preventive factor, school climate, there are no differences in perceptions of parents and instructors. Support from school has the highest frequency and sense of belonging has the lowest frequency. This implies that the school climate is the social atmosphere of the learning environment where students grow and develop. Schools with a positive school climate can influence the formation of better teacher student relationships; decrease the quantity of student delinquency, decrease victimization violence, increase academic performance, and decrease bullying and ethnic discrimination/racial discrimination (Wigati et al., 2020)

## 7. Recommendations

The results of this study can be used to make recommendations to institutions to prevent cyberbullying and its consequences for adolescents. It shows that both parents and instructors perceive the importance of

emotional intelligence and empathy to be preventive factors of cyberbullying at personal level though there is perception difference in self-esteem. High emotional intelligence, an ability for emotional self-control and empathy were associated with lower rates of cyberbullying. Hence, the concerned stakeholders should consider the emotional intelligence development in adolescents.

The parent-child relationship is also an important preventive factor at situation level. Parents perceived less important on “open conversation about cyberbullying” than instructors. However, both stakeholders perceived the importance of close relationships. This implies that intimate parent-child relationships and open active communication should be encouraged. Family cohesion acts as a protective factor against cyberbullying.

The educational institutions should develop the positive school climate, which has multiple aspects, such as clear rules, fair discipline, empathic communication, the formation of better teacher-student relationships, and healthy interpersonal relationships, including a safe school environment. Positive school climate can isolate students from a violent environment, turning it into a safe place to learn and develop. In addition, there should be a counseling service in place for the students to receive complaints concerning cyberbullying, and to soothe the feelings of the victims.

Qualitative study to understand opinions and experiences of these stakeholders and to gather in-depth insights into cyberbullying problems are recommended for future research.

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