Should I Intervene? The Case of Cyberbullying on Celebrities from the Perspective of the Bystanders

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ABSTRACT

Celebrities are easily connected to their fans through social media. As the celebrities continue to embrace social media, harassment by the haters has become a more common occurrence and a substantial concern. This study aims to explore the bystanders' behavior of cyberbullying that involves celebrities on social media, particularly on Instagram. We have followed 30 public Instagram accounts of celebrities and 30 public Instagram accounts of their followers for content analysis. In addition, we have interviewed seven celebrities and 10 followers in order to seek further understanding of the bystanders' behavior. The findings show that the bystander chooses to intervene based on their relationship with the celebrities, the result of their prosocial behavior. Meanwhile, bystander effect, uninformed, the level of relationship with victims and unable to notice the severity of the event are amongst the reasons why they do not want to intervene. The preliminary findings could give some insight on how to encourage bystanders to take positive action to stop cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, bystander, social media, celebrity

I   INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying has almost become a norm in digital space. Cyberbullying occurs frequency on social media platforms (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014). For example, Instagram is denoted as the worse social media for cyberbullying, followed by Facebook (Gibbs, 2017). The speed of content distribution (Ismail et al., 2017) and the anonymity on social media contributes the increasing rate of cyberbullying. This characteristic permit bullies to hide behind their screen name (Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2008).

Celebrities are amongst the victims of the horrible comments that come from anonymous attackers (Hartung, 2017). Sometimes the followers purposely provoke the celebrities to see their reactions. This act is also known as trolling. Trolling may come from a range of reasons, such as disagreement, jealousy, or just for the sake of driving a particular conversation towards a particular direction (Otu, 2015). According to Shultz, Heilman, and Hart (2014), it is quite difficult to differentiate trolling from cyberbullying. A joke from the followers could mean different things to the celebrities. This is because a comment could be read in a positive or negative tone.

In many cases, the act of trolling allows a room for cyberbullying. This is because the followers do not realize the impact and the significance of either their comments or actions to the celebrities (Millet, 2014). Shultz et al. (2014) argue that the perceptions and judgments of bystanders to the interaction often used to identify the case of cyberbullying. Bystanders are people who see what is happening between the bully and the victim but do not get involved in the bullying (Online Sense, 2018). Other than the bully and the victim, bystander is listed by many research as the character involved in the bullying cycle (Niblack, 2013; Oh and Hazler, 2009; Thornberg et al., 2012; Espelage, Green, and Polanin, 2011; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004).

The role of bystanders is found to be important in cyberbullying intervention (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Barlinska, Szuster, and Winiewski (2013) in their research found that bystanders in cyberbullying are found to be more likely to act in favor of the perpetrator, strengthen his or her power, or choose to be passive. In addition, there are often more bystanders than there are victims, with over 70% of Internet users having witnessed cyberbullying (Duggan, 2014). Thus, there is a need to understand how online bystanders perceive (Kazerooni, Taylor, Bazarova, & Whitlock, 2018) and react to cyberbullying.

This study aims to explore the bystanders' perspective on the cyberbullying, particularly the followers of the celebrities. Based on these gaps found in the literature, we will answer the following research question: Why are the bystanders chose to intervene or not to intervene the cyberbullying targeted to the celebrities.

II   LITERATURE REVIEW

Online social media is the most powerful platform for relationship building and leveraging brands (Hackworth & Kunz, 2010; Monseau, 2009; Selina & Milz, 2009), therefore it becomes the medium for the celebrities to create their personal branding. This

means that having a social media accounts are important as is helps the celebrities to market their works as well as attracting the producers or advertising companies to cast them in new projects. Nonetheless, social media also allows a room for a harassment as everyone can play a more active role in the construction of online content (McDougall and Dixon 2009). This situation permits a plenty of options for celebrity critiquing (Ouvrein, Vandebosch & De Backer, 2017), which could lead to online harassment and cyberbullying. A research finding from Ouvrein et al. (2017) shows that although the participants disapproved of the negative comments on celebrities, they were blaming the celebrity for getting the critiques from the public.

Many researchers have addressed the cyberbullying. The research were focusing on the (i) role of parental & norms (Sasson & Mesch, 2017), (ii) social media (Sterner & Felmlee, 2017; Görzig & Frumkin, 2013), (iii) empathy (Zych et al, 2018), (iv) prevention and resilience (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017), (v) mental health (Kim et al., 2018), (vi) prediction (Chen et al., 2017), (vii) cross cultural (Shapka et al., 2018), (viii) prevention (Espelage & Hong, 2017), (ix) higher education students (Heiman & Olenik, 2015), (x) bystander behavior (Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2017; Patterson et al., 2017), (xi) socio-emotional (Heiman et al., 2015), (xii) role of celebrities (Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013; Xu et al., 2012; Marvick & Boyd, 2011). Most of these researchers are focusing on teens and young adults.

Bystanders have been highlighted in many research Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2017; Patterson et al., 2017). The bystander plays many different roles (Niblack, 2013), which includes (i) the reinforcers – siding with the bully (Oh and Hazler, 2009; Thornberg et al., 2012), (ii) the outsiders - remain uninvolved by not taking sides or defending the victim (Oh and Hazler, 2009; Thornberg et. al., 2012; Stueve et al., 2006), and the (iii) defenders or upstanders - siding with the victim (Dunn, 2009; Espelage, Green, and Polanin, 2011; Thornberg et. al., 2012; Thornberg et. al., 2012).

Bystanders' goals and behaviors inclusive of five types, which includes (i) the oblivious/distant bystander, (ii) the entertained bystander, (iii) the conspiring bystander, (iv) the unintentional instigating bystander, and (v) the active/empowered bystander (Jones, 2014). Several researchers have identified the underlying factors and motivations that prompt bystanders to confront or support, remain silent, or contribute to the victimization. The factors include (i) personality traits), (ii) sense of responsibility to help, (iii) having an emotional

response to the cyberbullying (iv) the level of harm, (v) their belief that they could help improve the outcome, (vii) prosocial behavior, (viii) closeness to cyber victim (ix) Severity of cyberbullying (x) surrounding and (xi) awareness of other bystanders (DeSmet et al., 2014; Freis & Gurung, 2013; Polyhonen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Thornberg et al., 2012; Jones, 2014).

Meanwhile the bystanders were not influenced to react positively when witnessing cyberbullying due to the following factors (i) did not know the victim, (ii) lacked the knowledge or skills to help, (iii) feared being bullied themselves, (iv) could not assess the timing or severity of the situation (v) blaming the victim (Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014; Jones, 2014).

As mentioned before, many research have explore the bystander behavior (Niblack, 2013; Oh and Hazler, 2009; Thornberg et al., 2012; Stueve et al., 2006; Dunn, 2009; Espelage et al., 2011; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004; Barlinska et al., 2013), nonetheless, there is lack of cyberbullying research focusing on a bystander who may or may not be a stranger on a specific social media platform. This study believes that there could be other bystanders' action that we are not aware of. Therefore, it is vital to focus on bystanders' behavior in a different setting, which is in this case, related to celebrities.

In addition, we argue that it is necessary for researchers to include different type of bystanders. The majority of research focusing on cyberbullying bystander behaviors have scoped the research on children and adolescents, while there is limited information about other types of bystanders (Gahagan, Vaterlaus, & Frost, 2016). Focusing solely on teenagers and adolescents may lead researchers to miss some important findings related to different age groups. The decision of the bystanders from different age groups may be influenced by their experience. Elders may act differently from a younger generation. In this current research, the bystanders are the netizens which inclusive of a bigger age range.

Moreover, we argue that past research has neglected the case of cyberbullying towards celebrities. Often, cyberbullying related to celebrities highlighted the role take by them to support a good cause on preventing cyberbullying (Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013; Xu et al., 2012; Marvick & Boyd, 2011).

III   **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Data collection was conducted with the combination of content analysis and interview technique. The purpose of the content analysis is for describing and quantifying the phenomena (Krippendorff 1980, Downe-Wamboldt 1992, Sandelowski 1995). It is

also known as a method of analyzing documents. The content analysis is vital in order to further understand the bystander behavior in social media.

We followed 30 celebrities on Instagram within 2 months to identify (i) the followers who witnesses cyberbullying (ii) the reaction by the followers as the victims and bystanders. We have also followed 30 Instagram's accounts of the bystanders. Only those celebrities and bystanders with public accounts were selected to address the ethical issues. The celebrities account were chosen based on a recent case of cyberbullying published on a web portal, while the bystanders' accounts were chosen base on their comments on the celebrities page. Any relevant comments to the context of this study were recorded.

In addition, we have interviewed seven celebrities and 10 of their followers in order to investigate their experiences of cyberbullying, as well as their views on the role of bystanders. The participants were asked to share their experiences as a bystander of cyberbullying, particularly how do they handle the situation and why do they choose to intervene or not to intervene in the cyberbullying cycle.

The data from both content analysis and interview techniques were coded, analyzed and grouped into certain themes. The coding was mainly based on the theme created for interview data to ensure consistency. As for the data reduction stage, the analysis was done in a deductive manner, whereby the coding was done based on the existing literature. Furthermore, new constructs and themes were also developed based on the data. This process describes the combination of inductive and deductive coding. Unnecessary data that was not related to the research questions were also coded in order to see if there are any meanings behind the data.

The relationship amongst the data was mapped to identify the core meaning of the data in order to draw conclusions. A comparison was made for both celebrities and followers data to identify the similarity and dissimilarity of the findings. In addition, any meaningful or symbolic content that was beyond the context of the study was also highlighted in order to draw conclusions. This process was repeated until a state of saturation was achieved where further analysis produced minimal or no changes to the existing concepts or categories.

IV   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In general, data from content analysis shows that there are two groups of a bystander. Those who sided with the celebrities and those who sided with the bully. Next, this section will discuss the findings of this research based on the research questions.

Why bystanders chose to intervene?

The reasons why the bystanders chose to intervene are as follows: (i) avid fan, (ii) reciprocity and (iii) sense of obligation. Table 1 shows the reasons why the bystanders chose to intervene.

Table 1: The reasons why the bystanders chose to intervene

Reason	Sample Data
Reciprocity	*"I believe that if we help others, one day when we are in need, someone will help us too"*
Sense of Obligation	*"As a Muslim, we should reminds others of their inappropriate actions"*
Avid Fan	Content analysis: Characteristics of a fan was determined by their behavior. i.e. (i) Followed more than two Instagram's accounts related to particular celebrities; and (ii) Personal posts on Instagram are related to a particular celebrity. i.e. photos of the followers attending fan events; celebrities' activities etc.

We found that those who intervene are mostly an avid fan of the celebrities. This can be interpreted from the content analysis data, where the bystander followed more than two Instagram's accounts related to those particular celebrities (i.e. celebrities' fan pages). In addition, the bystander has also posted the information related to that particular celebrity on their personal Instagram. This evidence can be seen by photos of that particular bystander attending fan events celebrities' activities and so on.

These findings are expected as many avid fans will try their best to 'protect' their favorite celebrities. This finding supports the claim from Giles and Maltby (2004) and McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002) where fans may develop interests in favored celebrities that they often involved in the attempts to approach and/or contact the celebrities. This is shown by the message the leave to console the celebrities who are victimized by the bullies.

In addition, the datasets show that the reason for trying to intervene the cyberbullying is due to reciprocity and sense of obligation to help. These findings are related to their prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is any action intended to help others, which is motivated by altruism, or the desire to help others with no expectation of reward (Byod, 2018). Prosocial behaviors refer to a broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself, such as helping, comforting, sharing and cooperation (Batson & Powell, 2003). Behaviors that can be described as prosocial include feeling empathy and concern for others and behaving in ways to help or benefit other people.

Why bystanders chose not to intervene?

Table 2 shows the reasons why the bystanders chose not to intervene.

Table 2: The reasons why the bystanders chose not to intervene

Reasons	Sample
Bystanders effect	*"I think there will always be someone else.. I mean other followers who will take the responsibility to educate the bullies"*
Uninformed	*"No because I don't know about the real story and I don't know if it is serious"*
Not close to the victims	*"I dont want to be part of it. And the person got nothing to do with me. Not in my friends and family list"*
Don't want to make it worse	*"It won't work. It is not easy to educate the netizens. It's not just the younger generation. Sadly I have seen middle age lady who keeps on posting harsh comments on the Instagram. I just don't want to mess with them"*
Not comfortable to take sides	*"No, I do not feel comfortable voicing my opinions publicly"*
Not a serious matter	*"No, because I assume that the issue will resolve and people will somehow stop to provoke people."*

Firstly, we found that participants in this study are hoping someone else on the social media will help the victims. This is referred to as bystanders effect. The bystander effect refers to the phenomenon that an individual's likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in a critical situation (Darley & Latané´, 1968; Latané´ & Darley, 1968, 1970; Latané´ & Nida, 1981).

Secondly, some of the bystanders are not sure of the root and cause of the cyberbullying. Therefore, they don't want to intervene, due to the lack of information about the cyberbullying case. Being uninformed, they do not know the severity of the case. We also found that the bystanders perceived the act of cyberbullying will somehow stop after a while without the needs for intervention. This finding shows that bystanders are not so sure whether or not certain harsh comment is considered as a cyberbully, therefore they do not want to intervene. This support the claim by Bastiaensens et al. (2014) who found that bystanders had higher behavioral intentions to help the victim when they witnessed a more severe incident.

Thirdly, we found that the relationships with the victims will influence the behavior of the bystanders. If the victims are not a family members/ close friends to the bystanders, many of the bystanders do not want to get involved. This finding confirms the earlier works by Macháčková et al. (2013) who found that bystanders would provide bits of help if they have a good relationship with the victims.

Finally, the reason for not getting involved is the participants are afraid of becoming the next victim. It has been shown by the content analysis datasets if the bystander tries to intervene, they will be attacked by the bully. This situation usually led to another bullying cycle. This finding extends the earlier works by Arslan et al. (2012) who found that cyberbullies place themselves at a greater risk of being bullied in return and a vicious cycle is induced. They argue that being a cyberbully contributes to a twenty-fold increase of also being a victim. Our findings show that the bystander could also become the victim of the cyberbully, especially from the haters of the celebrities.

In addition, the findings also extend the work by Kowalski et al. (2014) who found that cyberbullying victims have a greater risk of becoming bullies themselves. Our dataset shows that the bystander is also at a greater risk of being bullied. This findings confirm the argument made by (Junoven and Gross, 2008; Rivers and Noret, 2013) where the consequences of cyberbullying are not limited to those who are victims, but also to the bystanders. Bystanders are found to be experiencing emotional and psychological issues as a result of being involved (Junoven and Gross, 2008; Rivers and Noret, 2013). In addition, we found that bystanders are not comfortable to take sides. This is likely because they do not want their online activities being exposed to other people who know them. Commenting on Instagram will allow the bystanders' followers to read their comments.

V CONCLUSION

A celebrity is someone who is recognized for being well known (Boorstin, 1961). The celebrity status may be achieved through involvement in many different fields, including entertainment (McCutcheon, et al., 2002). Celebrities are generally been perceived as having a higher social status within a community, therefore having social media accounts is necessary, as part of creating and maintaining their follower base (Soo, 2016). Hence their lives are exposed to be judged and critiques not only from mass media but also from their followers. This paper provides preliminary findings on the cyberbullying issues of celebrities which is expected to expose the idea of how do bystanders perceived the problems. This study contributes to the existing literature on cyberbullying, particularly on the bystanders' role for the cyberbullying case towards celebrities.

The paper also contributes to knowledge by identifying the reasons behind bystanders reaction to cyberbullying. Each of them is further characterized

and discussed by presenting the bystanders' behavior in order to help the celebrity while facing cyberbullies. This is to identify the growing importance role of bystanders on online social media in terms of celebrity cyberbullying. In conclusion, this research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge of bystanders' behavior on social media, while providing standards for other netizens in Malaysia on their behavior on social media.

The current research has certain limitations. Firstly, the current data were collected with a limited number of participants as the data collection is still ongoing. Ideally, more participants should have been interviewed to get more diverse data. More participants would have provided more insight in order to achieve more comprehensive findings. Nonetheless, the combination of content analysis and interview technique have strengthened the research findings. Secondly, the study was conducted by only focusing on cyberbullying on Instagram accounts, which reflect the usage of a single case. Therefore, the interpretations of the findings are specific to the views and experiences of the participants that were being studied as generalization can't be made to the wider population of all celebrities who use social media.

Our future work will improve these limitations. More precisely, future work should include more participants and extend to include other platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Further, we also plan to extend our work by collecting data from different countries, which increase the generalization of the research.

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