

## Linguistic features of Cyberbullying

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### ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is basically bullying perpetrated on electronic or social media. This form of bullying is often overlooked and yet, it can be just as damaging as face-to-face bullying. This paper proposes a study on provocative linguistic features used in online bullying among Malaysian youths. Significant keywords or phrases used by tertiary level Malaysian students who have had the experience of being cyberbullied or have bullied others or are merely bystanders in social media platforms are elicited. Data collection comes in two phases; the first is through a survey using the BuLI questionnaire while the second involves analysing streamed data from Twitter using Twitter API and R statistical software. The analysis of the data adopted here is a corpus-based approach to identify Keyword in Context and clusters to indicate frequency and significance of usage. Themes are deduced using SPSS Statistics 23 and this is complemented with qualitative interpretation. Initial results pointed towards indications of linguistic categories of insult in relation to intelligence, physical appearance and worthiness. The linguistic realizations of these categories of bullying are a mixed code of Malay and English with innovative, marked (unusual) words and phrases that have crept into the lexicon of online insults. The preferred terms that are used are also uniquely related to the cultural concept of face' in the Malay culture.

**Keywords:** Bully, Corpus, Key Word, Perpetrators, Social Media

### Introduction

This study originates from the issue of escalating numbers of aggressive acts occurring via the social media available in Malaysia which leads to cyberbullying activities in cyberspace. A study conducted by a team of six Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia experts and lecturers found that 53.5% of teens have moderate to high tendencies of being a cyberbully, 36% of teens were likely to experience aggressive online behavior, whilst 35% of teens were being moderately to severely victimized online. (Yuan, Lee, & Say, 2018) Teens are considered as cyber users who are at risk of being cyberbullied due to the following reasons: most of them are digital literates relying heavily on the internet for their studies, they can easily access internet and computer facilities for free at their colleges, and the learning approach that has shifted to web-based and mobile learning approaches have demanded that they spend more hours online (Lai et al., 2017). This study indicates that 66% of students (470 out of 712 public and private college and university students in Malaysia) have been cyberbullied and this is considered of high prevalence.

## **Purpose**

As cyberbullying normally involves three parties (bully, victim and bystander), this study takes the initiative to understand the cyberbullying behaviors of the three parties. It explores the language of cyberbullying, specifically the language used by the bullies, victims and bystanders in cyberbullying activities that occurred in two popular social media platforms in Malaysia (namely Instagram and Twitter).

## **Methodology**

A survey was conducted using a BuLI (Bashing using the language of the internet) questionnaire (Appendix) to elicit cyberbullying related key words from the experiences of victims, perpetrators and bystanders. It was designed to invite respondents to share their experiences of cyberbullying through the language typically used in social media. There are 10 questions in the questionnaire, four of which are objective in nature while the rest are open-ended and subjective in nature. Tables and figures should be numbered and references to them must be in the text. Acceptable labeling for a table is Tab.1 and Fig. 1 for a figure.

The objective part which covers Question 1 to Question 2 elicits demographic information. Respondents are to provide basic information such as gender and age. Question 3 is to establish whether the respondent is a victim or perpetrator or bystander. The ensuing core questions, i.e., Questions 4-8 are designed as open ended-types to invite respondents to provide as many responses as they can and not to restrict their answers in any way. Essentially, the key phrases and words used in responses to textual as well as visual stimuli are the main targets

There are two main phases to the research: Phase 1- identifying key words or phrases, Phase 2- Identifying themes that these key words or phrases typically occur in.

### **Phase 1**

To elicit key words or phrases having to do with cyberbullying from the perspective of the victim, perpetrator and bystander. The results are later categorized into discernible themes.

### **Procedure**

The BuLi questionnaire is distributed to undergraduate students in the main lecture hall of a public university in Malaysia. A protocol is in operation so that none of the subject has prior knowledge of the study in order to obtain the most honest feedback reflective of their social reality. Selection is made on the basis of availability and representativeness of Malaysian racial diversity among the respondents. After the introduction and a statement of intent, general consent was obtained from respective students and lecturers. Further instructions were given after the Research Assistants completed the distribution of the BuLi Questionnaire to students. A short duration of 15 minutes was allocated for the students to fill in the questionnaire as a measure to avoid students from overthinking and to provide the most direct and spontaneous answer according to their relevant experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The study seeks to isolate the key terms used in cyberbullying among Malaysian social media users. The responses gathered were keyed-in and tabulated using SPSS Statistics 23. Responses for Questions 4 - 10 were further analyzed. Manual-coding was done to group keywords which fall under the same categories. Eight main categories were identified by running the data for clusters and n-grams analysis in Wordsmith. The most frequently occurring n-grams and functional lexical bundles that are insult-related are identified. These key words and phrases that have similar semantic connotations are clustered under similar themes of intelligence, physical appearance & worthiness. Three themes being INTELLIGENCE, PHYSICAL APPEARANCE & WORTHINESS were elicited out of the eight for further utilization in data extraction during the **Phase 2** weighing from their usefulness and universality.

## Findings

Three thematic categories of insults were evident from the analysis. They were key phrases to do with Intellect Insults, Physical Appearance Insults and Worthiness Insults. These categories are the most appropriate, most prevalent and most socially relatable in Malaysian context.

### Phase 2

To examine the contexts of which these three themes of Intellect, Physical Appearance and Worthiness Insults occur.

#### Procedure

Twitter, a mini-blog platform, was chosen because demographic of its users tended to skew towards the younger generation, the age group which are more susceptible to cyberbullying as both victims and perpetrators, compared with other social media outlets such as Facebook. The nature of the said platform which is direct and concise makes it easier for analysis. The context of which the keywords occurred are collected from both English and Malay entries. They are analyzed based on the 3 different themes of Intellect, Physical Appearance and Worthiness Insults. These themes were earlier identified from the analysis of a survey done prior to the aforementioned.

In this manner, the prior study using the BuLI survey provided key terms and phrases for the elicitation of themes. These themes provided a relevant scope to the study, making it better focused and more useful in its findings.

#### Data Collection

A large data was streamed using Twitter API and R statistical software from 18 – 25 April 2018. The weekly data has approximately 42, 000 entries of various lengths and themes. The tweets were streamed based on a few criteria

- a. that the tweets were geographically constrained to Malaysia ONLY;
- b. that Tweets were issued from ACTIVE user; and
- c. that Tweets were to utilize ENGLISH and MALAY as the medium

## Data Analysis

The collected 42,000 Tweets were transferred to SPSS Statistics 23 for annotation and were analyzed in three stages. The first stage of analysis is done by using keywords that indicated the 3 themes from Phase 1, INTELLECT, PHYSICAL APPEARANCE and WORTHINESS, deduced from the questionnaire to select and identify related tweets. In the second stage of analysis, the recorded tweets were categorized under those three categories for further annotation.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The findings are discussed under the 3 thematic categories of insults- Intellect, Physical appearance and Worthiness. Keywords that are particularly marked from the researchers' point of view are isolated to be discussed.

For Intellect Insults, the recurring words that fall into this category are 'noob' and its equivalents, 'sengal', and 'kepala' with all its derivatives.

The word 'noob' owes its origin from the online gaming community where it serves the meaning of being a novice, unskilled and a loser. Usually the term is used to entice anger and to humiliate the opponent team after their defeat especially if judged to be unworthy of a rival throughout the game such that the winning is easy. The term is also used as a form of distraction to prod players of the rival team to make as many mistakes as possible. However, the meaning morphed as its usage developed especially once its existence is accepted out of its niche environment of online gaming into the cyber sphere. Now, it has been reduced to basically expressing anger and frustration to what is deemed to be a lack of intelligence on the part of a third party.

The word 'noob' has many equivalents such as 'nob', 'nub', 'nOOB', and 'noobies' all which serve the same meaning. As can be appreciated from the result yielded, the word 'noob' is used sometimes quite liberally from its original intention, some of which refers to the state of physical appearance of a person such as their 'sorry old face'. But generally, the context of which the word is used is confined to that of intellectual inferiority, of being knowledgeable or social awkwardness and a lack of skill.

Another word that recurred in the corpus was 'sengal' which is the Malay word for paresthesia, the state where the muscle stops functioning for a while due to lack of blood reaching it. In the context of its general usage, it is suggestive that the organ which is referred to is the brain instead of any bodily muscle. A quick survey on the urban dictionary online shows that the word 'sengal' is used to acknowledge that one is stupid. However, it is not deemed as too vulgar of a word; it is in fact perhaps the toning down of the word 'bodoh' which is Malay for stupid, to make it more palatable for the audience being the intended party or not. It is almost a euphemism but not quite. However, the intensity of the word might be increased by coupling it with other words of derogatory nature such as 'semak' or 'bongok'. In these instances, it no longer possesses the soft nature that it originally has.

The last of this category is the word 'kepala', Malay for head and all of its derivative. There are all sorts of abusive remarks that start with 'kepala' such as 'kepala bana', 'kepala bapak', 'kepala hotok' and 'kelapa butoh'. The list is by no means exhaustive but these are all the derivative which were elicited from the present corpus. That 'kepala' has a lot of derogatory derivations says something crucial about the Malay conception of 'kepala'. (Rezvan et al., 2018)

opined that the head is the most sacred part of the body. Traditional Malay belief holds the head in highest esteem because this is where the “semangat” –natural energies of the person reside. Thus, it is taboo to touch someone’s head or to pass objects over the head as any imbalance to the “semangat” will bring illness or even death to the person. As the head is highly guarded and respected in Malay culture, any insult to this part of one’s body is regarded to be one of the harshest. This is accompanied by the fact that the word ‘kepala’ is never used as a single word but always as a phrase of two or more, as is evident from the listing above. Carefully crafted to elicit the highest degree of insult possible, the word ‘kepala’ is usually juxtaposed with genitalia parts such as ‘bana’, Malay for the head of the penis, and ‘butoh’, a unisex word applicable to both men and women’s genitalia which is crude and offensive. Another variation ‘kepala bapak’ is also regarded as very offensive since it is not only an insult to one’s intellect but also that of his/her father’s (bapak is Malay for father) and this insult continues to implicate the whole family too as the father is the head of the family.

A lot more is registered in the Physical Appearance section which might point to some aspect of the Malaysian culture that focuses more on a person’s looks and first impressions. The discussion on the cultural aspect of this is not within the scope of this paper. However, we could appreciate from the corpus that insults pertaining to physical appearances usually come in few identifiable trends being references to local fruits and food delicacies, things and foreign entities. In the first instance, we could see the references to ‘jambu’, ‘potato’, ‘cekodok’ and ‘pau’ just to name a few. The label ‘jambu’ or specifically ‘jambu air’ Malay for water apple is seen as a recurring label in describing the lady-like facial qualities of a male. The stereotypical description of Malaysian masculinity is deemed inconsistent with the features of a water apple/ ‘jambu’ which is smooth, soft and tinged with redness as if blushing. Highlighting these features in describing a Malaysian male is deemed to be derogatory. It is understandable then if the ‘potato’ and ‘cekodok’ (Malay for fritters- usually round in shape) are used to highlight the flaws in one’s face owing to their nature of being wrinkled, uneven, and burnt (in the case of ‘cekodok’, referring to one’s dark complexion which is stereotypically not desirable). References to day to day household items were also registered such as references to being like a ‘penyapu’ (Malay for broom). A broom is considered a bad omen and taboo in certain cultures. Likewise, in Malay culture, brooms are considered dirty objects as they come in contact with dust, dirt and rubbish. Thus, referring to one’s face as broom-like is highly condescending.

The Collins English Dictionary defined ‘worthless’ as “something that is of no real value or use”, and “someone who is considered to have no good qualities or skills”. According to (Winter, 2017), the longest-lasting and most universal feeling of worthlessness arises from a feeling that we’re somehow not being loved by others. However, it is important to note that, the feeling of being worthless is unusual, as it is actually being projected by someone else onto us (Thomas, 2018). Thomas added that people who suffer shortcomings in life can end up feeling like they have no value and meaning in life and this normally leads to a sense of being insignificant to others. This ‘worthlessness’ syndrome is one of the other causes for depression and suicide. Building on Thomas’s work, we could see that a significant bulk of cyberbullying is set to wear down the victims off their self-value and self-esteem by eliciting certain labels and qualifiers such as

‘worst’, ‘trash’, ‘slut’, ‘sampah’ (Malay for rubbish/trash) and ‘pathetic’. The word ‘worst’ paradoxically is not the worst of all the terms used for it might be used in reference to a certain trait or work of a person and not necessarily one’s self, making it a harsh criticism but yet it falls short of being a cyberbullying remark. Thus, it can be inferred that the nature of certain words, though they inherently bring about negative denotation, might not necessarily be insults but rather they must be understood from the way they are used in a sentence vis-à-vis the social context.

One important aspect that needs to be discussed here is the code-switch from English to Malay and vice versa in the corpus. The reasons which influence instances of code-switching might be related to three reasons why we code switch (Crystal, 1987). Firstly, being to convey specific attitudes to the listeners; secondly, to create social bonding or thirdly, to what (Hashim, Soopar, & Hamid, 2017) claimed as a tool in assisting someone to overcome his or her incapability of expression. It is important to notice here that most Malaysians, especially youths who actively engage with social media, are bilingual speakers of Malay and English. Malaysians usually converse using interlingual code-mixing and code switching due to their social environments which are ethnically and linguistically diverse in nature (Stapa & Khan, 2016). In fact, the disparities of social background was claimed to be among the causes of why people are showing less sensitivity to offensive words (Azman, Farveez, Maros, & A. Bakar, 2017). Despite all of this, the language people use online essentially indicates their thoughts, emotional states and intentions (Habsah, Tan, & Darus, 2016). In this case where it concerns Twitter users, code-switching might be used to create rapport and solidarity. From the tweets, we can see that “*intersentential switching*” was employed. *Intersentential switching* as (Poplack, 2001) defines it is a type of code-switch that happens in between a clause, a sentence or between sentences. Code switching has already been observed in the Intellect insult Section

Some examples drawn from code switching in the Intellect insult Section:

Table 1: Extracts of Intellect Insult

Post no	Tweets
1034	apa benda la muka dh ke main lawa kata rupa mcm <u>potato</u> ? ada ke patut dia <u>potatokannya</u>
8079	Teringat bila nampak dia berlakon babak selekeh, cakap dengan adik ."Muka dia macam <u>Alien</u> " ðŸ˜ˆ, Tak tahu la kenapa duâ€¦  <a href="https://t.co/YRByHo87T4">https://t.co/YRByHo87T4</a>
13458	Sebab muka aku <u>average</u> je <u>so next time</u> aku nak hampar semua <u>results</u> aku sebagai cara melamar. Harap menjadi

However, it should be noted that criticisms might border the demarcation of bullying remarks especially after considering the Malaysian concept of a ‘face’. In Malaysian culture, doing something inappropriate can bring ‘malu’ (shame, shyness and embarrassment) upon an individual (Evason, 2016). Thus, understandably, by complimenting people, displaying respect to others or doing something to increase their self-esteem can give them (Malaysians) face.

Someone's face is the representative of their whole selfhood. Especially so in this region of the world, the 'face' is the quality set in most Asian cultures that designates someone's status, authority, worthiness and pride. Therefore, not only are Malaysians usually sensible in their actions and keeping things in check as to safeguard their self-worth and peer perception, but they are also very cognizant of when, where and how criticisms are deployed.

*"Face can be lost by openly criticizing, insulting, or putting someone on the spot; doing something that brings shame to the group; challenging someone in authority, especially if this is done in public; showing anger at another person; refusing a request; not keeping a promise; or disagreeing with someone publicly"* (Awareness, 2015).

The rapid progress and development of cyber sphere where the old generation seems to have failed to catch up with has created a vacuum of mentoring among the younger generation who are the 'occupants' of this new territory. They shape the discourse therein the social media and in return are shaped by it. This perpetual and cyclical nature of online discourse creates a generation that is so out of touch from their cultural identity and societal norms such that they have forgotten the concept of "saving someone's face". Rather than commenting using harsh words, "saving someone's face" normally involves discussing about the matter privately rather than in public places and there is tendency to suppress negative opinions and emotions about a particular person or subject as a sign of respect. This can also prevent someone from humiliating others (Tang,R. 2017). The fact that the traditional ways seem to be quite inefficient in terms of effort labored and time spent has proved to be unpopular in the later generation. The selection made in the present paper to collect and analyze data from Twitter is also deemed beneficial in this regard for it being a mini-blog platform. Twitter, where its users are only permitted to express their views and criticism in a short passage of 140-280 characters, is the epitome of the modern fast-paced lifestyle.

## Conclusion

The present paper has shown that the focal points of cyberbullying are the Intellect Insults, Physical Appearances Insults, and Worthiness Insults. Analysis was done to bring out the most prevalent features of each type of insults and to demonstrate its social relevance and origins in the context of Malaysian social media users. Some discussions has been made in regards to the strategy employed by the perpetrators as well as the apparent disengagement of the younger generation with what is deemed to be the Malaysian traditional norms of articulation.

As this study is limited to the corpus yielded from Twitter API and R software, the utility of its analysis is capped by the age group of the youth of Malaysia since this platform is more popular among them. However, as it is apparent from cursory survey of different social media, the activity appropriate of being termed cyberbullying is also highly prevalent among the older section of the society especially in relation to politics or anything that is political in nature. Hence, to capture the totality of the phenomenon at hand, future studies and analyses are highly recommended to be conducted using different platforms that relate more to the senior citizens of Malaysia, one of the

obvious being Facebook – a media that keeps people bonded with families, friends and old acquaintances (Destiana & Salman, 2015).

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## Appendix

### BuLI Questionnaire

Cyberbullying is when someone (typically teens), bully or harass others on social media sites. Harmful bullying behavior can include posting rumours, threats, sexual remarks, a victim's personal information, or pejorative labels (i.e., hate speech).

Please complete the following questionnaire.

Kindly tick ( / ) for your answer.

1. Gender

Male

Female

2. How old are you?

18 – 20 years old

21 – 23 years old

24 – 26 years old

26+ years old

3. Have you been bullied?

Yes

No

If you choose 'YES', please proceed to No 4 and 5. If 'NO', please answer NO 6 and 7.

4. If you have been bullied on the internet through text messages, what are the word(s) or sentence(s) the cyberbully sent you? (eg: stupid, you go kill yourself etc)

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5. If you have been bullied on the internet through visual messages (pictures/video clips etc), what are the kinds of visual message(s) the bully sent you? (eg: your personal picture has been photo shopped unpleasantly etc).

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6. If you have seen or heard of anyone being bullied on the internet, can you give some examples of those messages? It can be word(s) or sentence(s) that have been sent to him/her.

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7. If you have seen anyone being bullied on the internet through visual messages, you can describe what kind of visual messages (pictures/images/videos etc) that he/she received? (eg: someone sent a video of "slapping face" to that person/ someone sent her 'POOP' emoticons etc)

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8. Have you cyberbullied other person(s)?

Yes

No

9. If yes, what are the word(s) or sentence(s) that you send to the person? (eg: b\*\*\*\*, kau tu gila! etc)

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10. If you have used visual messages, what are the types of pictures/images/videos that you send to the other person? (eg: you send him a picture of F\*\*\* finger etc)

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