

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS (SMIS) AND CYBERBULLYING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE COPING STRATEGIES USED BY SMIS AS CYBERBULLYING VICTIMS ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

Faridah Hanem Ab Rashid*, Nurliyana Kamilah Khairul Anuar, Farah Hazween Amanah, Amirah Hassan@Asan, Muhammad Azril Izuan Ramlan, Mohd Firdauz Mohd Fathir
Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Negeri Sembilan
*fhanem@uitm.edu.my

Received Date: 30/7/2024

Accepted Date: 21/10/2024

Published Date: 30/10/2024

Abstract

The increase in social media use has shifted plenty of communication from the physical world to cyberspace. Via the unprecedented interactivity of social media, Social Media Influencers can build a strong relationship with followers. Social Media Influencers have significant followers, including enthusiastic, engaged people who appreciate their opinions and detractors. While they benefit from the chances to become brand endorsers or opinion leaders due to their influences, they are also potential victims of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying among Social Media Influencers can be considered a growing disease in today's social media. Thus, this qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of ten Social Media Influencers who were victims of cyberbullying on social media. This study focuses on exploring the strategies used by Social Media Influencers on coping with cyberbullying. In this study, informants shared in-depth experiences through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. The transactional Model of Stress and Coping was used to guide the study. The data analysis resulted in the identification of three themes problem-focused coping strategies: emotion-focused coping strategies, and cyber coping strategies. Overall, the current study has narrowed the gap in the literature and resulted in a greater understanding of lived experiences of cyberbullying and effective coping strategies on social media among public figures, namely Social Media Influencers.

Keywords: *Social media, cyberbullying, social media Influencers, coping strategies*

1.0 Introduction

The social media influencers industry on social media is always portrayed as a popular and rich lifestyle. social media influencers are said to impact purchase decisions such as lifestyle choices, eating habits or fashion icons towards society on social media or their followers. According to Abidin [1] many young people pursue celebrity on the Internet as a profession, with commercial benefits, cross-platform visibility, and established marketable personas that function as highly relatable Influencers. Influencers generally begin as ordinary social media users who, through publishing highly curated content and updates about their lifestyles, come to accumulate followers whose viewership can be monetised for advertorials [1]. As SMIs continue to embrace social media, cyberbullying by haters has become a more common occurrence and a substantial concern. In today's online world, Influencers are among the most prominent, crucial, and controversial victims of cyberbullying [2].

Sticca and Perren [3] stressed out, the adverse effect of anonymous cyberbullying was rated worse than known perpetrator or private incidence. Besides that, these public figures are among the victims of the horrible comments from anonymous attackers [4]. Nowadays, Influencers have been viewed as opinion leaders by young internet users and have millions of followers on social media [5]. Influencers communicate with followers through their effective digital strategies applied across various potentially integrated digital platforms. These Influencers initiate trends over social networks, and they play a significant role in shaping the opinions of users on the Internet [6]. As Influencers, their opinions play an essential role in the lifestyles of young adults as they are viewed as the dominant users [7] on social networking such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube.

Often, cyberbullying related to celebrities highlights their role in supporting a good cause in preventing cyberbullying [8]. These influencers somehow manage to inspire their users to do something new, i.e., influencing their opinion on their lifestyle or buying a new product [5]. Serman and Sims [9] also believe that Influencers have the power to influence others through their lifestyle, buying habits, attitude, and behaviour. In other words, the Influencers can connect with the netizens on such a level that they are willing to let them affect their decision-making process.

Having said that, knowing the SMIs' coping strategies that they used to overcome cyberbullying may help other victims use the same strategies. In addition, it can also help netizens equip their knowledge on cyberbullying issues to avoid becoming the next perpetrator or victim of cyberbullying on social media. Therefore, the following research question was implemented to guide this study: *How do Social Media Influencers (SMIs) who have been victims of cyberbullying on social media describe their lived experiences of coping strategies to overcome cyberbullying?*

2.0 Literature Review

Conceptualization Of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying emerged with the onset of the regular use of information communication technologies. The rapid expansion of information and communication technology (ICT) left one to conclude that the application of any information communication technology provided an avenue for cyberbullying [10]. A universal definition for cyberbullying remains under debate by scholars and researchers in the field [11] and often differs conceptually depending on the study. One reason for this argument is that researchers who conducted studies early on used the definition of traditional bullying, which includes the fundamental aspects of intentional harm, repetition, and an imbalance of power, as a model to develop their definitions of cyberbullying and to guide their inquiries [12].

As moving forward, the word brings a specific definition, and the interpretation might lead to a different understanding. This study further investigates the cyberbullying that is being “acceptance” in our community worldwide [13]. Researchers have defined cyberbullying also known as electronic bullying, online bullying, and online social cruelty that uses technology in communicating with others with the intention to embarrass, harass, intimidate, threaten, or harm others or to cause fear or emotional distress [14].

Social Media as A Platform to Facilitate Cyberbullying

The emergence of social media facilitates information exchange among people from vast geographical, social, and demographic boundaries [15]. Social media have transformed social interactions among users. They offer a competitive communication landscape [16], from personal and academic communications to

professional and health-related communications [17]. The social change brought on by technology was recognised, particularly by capturing the attention of many with popular SNSs (e.g., Facebook & LinkedIn) [18]. The SNSs have drastically altered the ways people exchange social information and assess world happenings daily. According to the most recent data from We Are Social and Hootsuite's Digital 2023 Report, there are 4.76 billion active social network users worldwide, accounting for approximately 59.4% of the global population, a 3% increase over the previous year. Based on the data, Facebook has the most users, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram [59].

Malaysians and Cyberbullying on Social Media

Malaysia is a peaceful country, with its citizens tolerant of all races and religions. Malaysia is a multicultural and multiracial country that adheres to various religions. Malaysia is a unique nation because of the diverse cultures represented by its three major races: Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic groups from Sabah and Sarawak [19]. With the rise of technology and social media, this country's multiracial foundation of unity and harmony is eroding. Regrettably, this situation occurs not among other races but within the races themselves. Cases of cyberbullying, particularly on social media, are on the rise and cause concern among Malaysians of all ages [20], [21], [22]. According to the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA), based on 500 calls are received by the association every month through the helpline [23].

Statcounter Globalstats in 2022 highlighted that Facebook has been the most visited social media platform in Malaysia, with 85.04 % of users. Meanwhile, Facebook also serves as the first-place social media platform for cyberbullying activities among Malaysians [24]. An example of a cyberbullying case in Malaysia that creates attention to cyberbullying on social media refers to the viral video (posted on Facebook) interview with Natasha Qisty Mohd Ridzuan, who scored 9A+s in her Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), as she was subjected to a torrent of humiliating attacks online and abusive comments for speaking Malay with an English accent [25].

These victims were forced to feel that they were at fault and that their wrongdoing had caused the perpetrators to attack them [26]. On the other hand, on March 29, 2017, the News Straits Times newspaper reported that Faiz Subri, a Malaysian football player who won the Puskas Award, received nasty comments on Facebook when he was condemned for his poor English proficiency. Sivabalan, Ahmad Zaki, and Choo [27] highlighted cyberbullying as a growing public health issue for Malaysian adolescents in a survey that assessed the prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents. Malaysia's cyber security unit revealed that 60 % of reported cases involved cyberbullying on SNSs [28].

In the year 2020, Malaysia once again was shocked by the news when Thivyaanayagi Rajendran, who was only 20-year-old, committed suicide after becoming the victim of cyberbullying when her Tik Tok video of her and her Nepali friend drew criticist on Facebook and went viral [29]. However, in Malaysia, while such cases of cyberbullying leading to death have not significantly made national news, people must be aware that there may be many cases of unreported suicide mainly because of the shame and stigma brought about by deeply held socio-cultural and religious sensitivities related to suicide in Malaysian society [30].

Furthermore, the latest cyberbullying on social media in Malaysia took place at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics when a Ukrainian shot putter, Maksym Koval, who won a gold medal after protests over the victory of national athlete Muhammad Ziyad Zolkefli, had to open a new Instagram account [20]. This cyberbullying incident, which involved a victim from another country, proves the notion highlighted by IPSOS (2018) that placed Malaysia as the first cyberbullying country in Asia and ranked fifth place globally.

The mixed results of these studies suggest the importance of conducting additional research in this field. It is crucial to highlight the danger of this phenomenon as Malaysians also did not see anything wrong with “liking” such offensive comments or forwarding those remarks to others online. A study presented by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lecturers revealed that 53.5% of the teen respondents had moderate to high tendencies of being cyberbullied instead of becoming a victim on social media [22]. Clearly, cyberbullying on social media in Malaysia is a serious issue that must be addressed [24], [27].

Social Media Influencers: The New Era of Celebrity on Social Media

With the advent of the Internet, young women have actively used social media to develop “microcelebrity personas” as their careers. Microcelebrity, as defined by Senft [31], denotes “a new style of online performance involving people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web by using technologies (video, blogs, & SNSs)” (p.25). Unlike entertainment industry celebrities who become public icons with large-scale followers, microcelebrity “is a state of being famous to a niche group of people” and involves curating a persona that feels authentic to readers. In addition, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are a subset of digital content creators defined by their significant online following, distinctive brand persona, and patterned relationships with commercial sponsors [32]. SMIs turn famous through social media presence, unlike entertainment industry celebrities who emerge from television shows, film, and music [4]. The uniqueness of micro-celebrities is manifested by the way they connect with audiences and the interpersonal intimacy deeper than appearing in TV shows or mainstream movies [33].

Hence, researchers have applied many terms to define SMIs, signifying inconsistent terms. Influencers [1], SMIs [32], digital media influencers [34], micro-celebrity [31], and micro-influencers [4] can be used interchangeably. These terms are nearly conceptually identical, with the main differences being large numbers of followers, active engagement, and promotion of products or brands [35]. Khamis et al. [4] mentioned that SMIs have high-level credibility, are popular on social media, and can shape, influence, or persuade other people’s attitudes.

The SMIs are known to establish their brand on social media. Personal branding or self-branding refers to developing a distinguishing public image for cultural capital and commercial gain [9]. Khamis et al. [4] claimed that endorsement by SMIs is critical for brand association psychology and influencing their admiring and obsessed consumers. SMIs have sizable social media followers who follow their lifestyle, interact with them on physical and digital platforms, pay them to appear at events, and earn money by inserting “advertorials” into their social media posts or blogs. These are how they earn money [34]. Influencers are more genuine or trustworthy sources of information and advice; their communicative practises appeal to a broader cultural desire for authenticity. Generally, Influencers have been portrayed as individuals “just like us”; they transform their brand messages with references to reality and everyday life [32].

Social Media Influencers’ Experiences with Cyberbullying

Even though popular content categories, such as fashion, food, or parenting, are frequently centered on a single subject, Influencers in the “lifestyle” genre rely on developments in their personal lives to cultivate connections with followers and establish their self-branding. Without a commercial objective or area of expertise to act as a buffer between them and their audience, such female Influencers frequently face criticism for their bodies, internet personae, and imagined private lives [1]. Given these Influencers’ beauty standards, their deliberate publicity, and their zeal for attracting attention, it is possible that many people believe they deserve the criticism they receive for being ‘attention whores’ [4]. As a result,

influencers are particularly vulnerable to becoming targets and victims of cyberbullying, and they receive little public sympathy as a result [2]. Earlier research has indicated that online aggression directed at celebrities has a negligible effect on them [36]. However, the study by Abidin [2] demonstrates that celebrities do suffer adverse consequences as a result of cyberbullying.

Coping Strategies

Coping, which refers to handling what one perceives as a stressful situation, has multiple definitions. For instance, Lazarus and Folkman [37] defined coping as the act of using actions, thoughts, and feelings to adapt to and deal with daily occurring events. This process is complex in nature and sensitive to both the environment and the person [38]. This process can depend on one's access to resources, such as social, spiritual, psychological, material, or the problem's nature [39]. Coping denotes behaviour or ongoing responses that happen when despite demands exceeding resources, the demands must be catered to [40]. One tends to make multiple behavioural and cognitive attempts to cope or to manage external or internal stressors, or even both [37].

In this study, coping is defined as managing environmental changes, creating the means to resolve imbalances from internal and external stimuli, and being aware of and knowing how to master, minimise, reduce, or tolerate stress or conflict. This definition derives from a consolidation of the work done by Weiten, Dunn and Hammer [41], Alipan, Skues & Theiler [42], and Lee, Lim, and Heath [43]. In coping with stress, [41] asserted that people "may apply the following three copings; appraisal-, problem-, and emotion-focused coping."

Coping Strategies for Cyberbullying

Finding effective coping strategies is salient as experiencing cyberbullying can escalate stress levels for adolescents [44], potentially threatening their well-being [45]. Specific coping strategies that work for cyberbullying may be effective for traditional bullying and vice versa. A victim of traditional bullying can run away from the scene when there is a chance, but impractical for cyberbullying [3]. In fact, problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies [42] are adequate to address cyberbullying and hinder its recurrence [17], [42], [43].

Both problem and emotion-focused coping styles [37] are elaborated in detail within the cyberbullying literature [46]. Those who deploy problem-focused coping ways seek adaptive and positive results, whereas those who apply emotion-focused coping styles (avoidance approach) yield maladaptive results and less effective adjustments [47]. Similarly, Chamizo-Nieto & Rey [47] found that the emotion-focused coping approach was mainly deployed to lower stress levels due to cyberbullying. For instance, gaining support from family and friends is an effective strategy [48]. However, cyberbullying victims seldom resort to confrontation and retaliation to resolve their issues [3].

Technical solutions or cyber-specific coping strategies are linked with the TMSC initiated by Lazarus and Folkman [37]. These technological solutions are meant to halt cyberbullying [49]. Alipan et al. [42] conducted six focused group studies in Australia with 39 emerging adults ages 18 to 25 years old. The sample represented 36 university students currently enrolled in an undergraduate (n = 9) or postgraduate (n = 7) degree in Melbourne. Alipan et al. [42] reported the strategies recommended by participants for coping with cyberbullying, which were categorized as either problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) TMSC. Alipan et al. [42] also found that some participants mentioned cyber-specific technological coping solutions. When participants attempt to stop cyberbullying with technical solutions such as blocking the perpetrators on a social media site, changing their privacy settings, reporting the bullying to the platform or site moderator, attempting to avoid going online or

deleting their social media accounts, they are engaging in cyber-specific technological coping. Participants recommended that blocking bullies was much easier and more common than taking drastic measures to delete their accounts and avoid online interactions [42].

Past studies have listed the cyber-specific coping strategies used by adolescents, including reporting to the website administrator, blocking the perpetrator, and ignoring nasty messages [50], [3]. These technical solutions effectively address cyberbullying and other related behaviour [42], [17]. Other types of coping strategies, but lack efficacy evidence, include ignoring the whole situation and staying offline [51], [52]. As most studies looked into the context of adolescents, this present study tapped into the efficacy of coping strategies for SMIs when faced with cyberbullying events.

Notably, there are some methodological issues in capturing information about the coping approaches employed by cyberbullying victims. Prior studies mostly looked into the context of cyber-victimization to assess coping strategies for any form of cyberbullying by using hypothetical situations [17], [3]. In addressing this issue, Armstrong et. al. [53] asked their respondents on the efficacy of the coping strategies used to avoid cyberbullying. Evidently, such measurement is often indirect and may involve respondents who never experienced severe cyberbullying. In fact, it is challenging to identify how the victims perceive if a coping strategy is effective based on the severity of their experiences, which may not be reflected in hypothetical scenarios. Hence, it is crucial to interview actual cyberbullying victims as the efficacy of a strategy may be perceived differently by them compared to an observer [54].

3.0 Methodology

The transcendental descriptive phenomenological method proved to be suitable for this study, which aimed to comprehend a relatively sensitive study area and the meanings underlying informants' descriptions by examining their lived experiences from unique viewpoints. In this vein, the researcher could thoroughly examine the informants' experiences parallel to the study questions. This research thoroughly explored and justified actual experiences of being cyberbullied on social media and their coping mechanisms from SMIs' perspectives with descriptive phenomenology. The data derived from this method could provide enriched and relevant information on informants' emotions and the implications of such experiences on their lives [55].

The current study phenomenon constitutes Malaysian SMIs' lived experiences of cyberbullying on social media and subsequent countermeasures. In the study setting, coping encompasses victims' processes and behaviours to resolve cyberbullying and identify the preventive measures for SMIs who have been victimised. As Smith [55] claimed reality to be reliant on individual viewpoints and interpretations under qualitative research, and researchers need to report such realities as undergone by informants.

3.1 Informants and Procedure

The informants were required to fulfil specific inclusion prerequisites pre-study. A total of 10 Malaysian SMIs with the shared experience of having been cyberbullied in the past 2 years on Facebook were involved in this research. The current study incorporated purposive sampling to elicit "information-rich cases" following the qualitative phenomenology method [56] and specifically recruit SMIs who were victimised by cyberbullying on social media. The selected sampling technique ensured that the research informants have explicitly experienced the phenomenon with the necessary information to address the study questions insightfully. The informants (SMIs) who were recruited through purposive sampling were contacted by e-mail, direct message (DM) or telephone calls to request their participation in this study upon obtaining approval from the university ethical board. An informed consent form entailing elaborations on

the potential candidates' rights as study informants was digitally distributed through e-mail. The consent form stipulated voluntary engagement where informants could withdraw at any point in time without being penalised and extensively discussed the potential risks of becoming involved in the research. An appointment was scheduled for a face-to-face semi-structured interview for eligible candidates who consented to participate in this study. The researcher conducted the interviews each lasting around 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the responses and answers given by the informants based on the interview guide questions of this research.

3.2 Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, organize and offer insight into patterns of meaning within the information provided by the informants. The primary data collection source constitutes 12 in-depth semi-structured interview questions as the "researcher must allow the subjects to speak, in their own way and their own time, about those aspects of the experience in question that seem relevant to them". Data saturation was attained upon the sixth interview where no novel themes could be elicited. Given that sample sizes between six and 12 informants in phenomenological research result in optimal data saturation following Boddy [57], a small sample size was employed in this study to derive in-depth informant experiences rather than a surface analysis with large-scale samples [56], [58]. Gender-wise, the congruent number of male and female informants led to a fair sample representation. The SMIs were deliberately chosen with purposeful sampling to ensure that the data entailed the shared (actual) experiences of SMIs who were cyberbullied and sought to manage such adverse occurrences on social media. All the informants have been influencers for three years or more and resided in the *Klang Valley*, an urban area located in Malaysia.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The research data were evaluated with Moustakas's modified SCK method for phenomenological analysis. The themes were elicited by evaluating all 10 informants enriched and in-depth answers to the interview questions. In order to give voice to informants' narratives concerning their lived experiences and coping strategies on cyberbullying, direct quotes have been presented as frequently as possible to illustrate the views of the SMIs with as much clarity as possible. The study results are based on SMIs' lived experiences using in-depth semi-structured and face-to-face online interviews with open-ended questions. The research question asked how Social Media Influencers (SMIs) who victims of cyberbullying on social media have been described their lived experiences of coping strategies to overcome cyberbullying. The analysis yielded three themes (i) problem-focused coping strategies; (ii) emotion-focused coping strategies and (iii) cyber coping strategies were recommended to resolve cyberbullying [37].

Based on the study outcomes, the SMIs in this study actively employed a broad spectrum of coping mechanisms. In terms of problem-focused coping mechanisms, the informants could seek assistance and pertinent solutions, deliberately disregard cyberbullying acts, and remain positive. Concerning cyber-specific technological coping counterparts, all 10 SMIs opted to block their perpetrators, seven chose to close the comment section, and a few temporarily deactivated their social media accounts. All the study informants shared similar experiences of cyberbullying-related coping mechanisms. The problem-focused coping approach would be utilised if they failed to alter or mitigate the adversities and distress through the emotion-focused counterpart.

i. *Problem-focused coping strategies*

Support system. An optimal support system could offer practical or emotional support for victims of cyberbullying. This statement was conceded by all the informants. Specifically, family members and close friends have aided in the alleviation of cyberbullying effects. SMI1 elaborated as follows:

“My friends are very supportive, my family is loving, and they motivated me, and my friends entertained me” (SMI1, 32, lines 140-144).

Another victim, SMI2 similarly opined that sharing her victimisation with loved ones, such as parents and friends, assisted her recovery from cyberbullying. Overall, trust implies the key determinant in utilising problem-solving coping mechanisms. This informant stated as follows:

“... I’m also lucky because my parents and family trust me, and they know me better than the haters or other people” (SMI2, 24, lines 315-319).

This coping mechanism paralleled studies by [3], [46] and [40] where a comprehensive support system entailing family members and close friends aided a quick recovery and enabled them to resume their SMI activities. In line with the notion of having friends as a support system, SMI3 mentioned friendship as a significant element that fortified her emotionally, consoled her, and loved her when she was cyberbullied.

“I didn’t realise that I had many good friends until the cyberbullying experiences occurred. I feel happy as I’m able to share my misery (cyberbullied). It makes me less pain when they lend their ears” (SMI3, 31, lines 274-276).

People who incorporate problem-focused coping methods successfully adapt to stressful circumstances compared to counterparts who employ emotion-focused coping techniques following Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress (1987). Regarding cyber-specific technologies, it is deemed beneficial to resolve an issue rather than denying and avoiding the problem. As SMIs, these individuals do not have the liberty to simply confront the cyberbully and ask them to stop their cyberbullying on social media, which only worsened the situation. In this regard, a sound support system could efficiently facilitate SMIs towards cyberbullying management. Family members’, friends, or other trusted companions’ capacity to (emotionally and instrumentally) support SMIs proved useful in mitigating cyberbullying acts. In Perren et al. [60], a comprehensive support network could be the most optimal coping mechanism that could deliver the highest success probability.

ii. *Emotion-focused strategy*

The SMIs implementing specific coping methods strived to protect individuals from harm with techniques that enable them to avoid cyberbullying incidents and its adverse implications, divert from such adversities, and offer emotional support. The relevant methods chosen by SMIs entail emotion-focused coping techniques by a) pretending to ignore the incident or denying the seriousness of the issue and b) remaining positive. Meanwhile, emotion-focused coping methods serves to alter individual thoughts and emotions rather than the circumstance [37].

Avoiding. All 10 study informants acknowledged the essentiality of avoiding or disregarding the issue as an initial means of cyberbullying management. For example, SMI6 aimed to avoid the adverse implications of cyberbullying and explained as follows:

“I chose to stop looking at my Facebook and did not even try to read or see any feedback or comments for a while. This is how I want to stay away from being stressed about cyberbullying. When I’m being bullied on any issue, I will stop scrolling my Facebook” (SMI6, 26, lines 313-315).

Another informant, SMI4 proposed that victims of cyberbullying should disregard such adversities as the first step in managing the situation. She made the following recommendation:

“Just ignore them! You know what they are said is not right. I normally avoid reading evil and nasty comments. Let alone what they have to say. Don’t reply to such comments. We will never win with bullies” (SMI4, 19, lines 315-317).

SMI1 also disregarded the instigators: one of the most straightforward means of alleviating cyberbullying. He elaborated as follows:

“I tried to focus on something else to avoid thinking about what happened. Just act like that this issue didn’t bother you” (SMI,32, lines 321-322).

Other SMIs use the avoidance strategy to resolve cyberbullying and prevent cyberbullying incidents from worsening. All the study informants recognise that it is deemed challenging to completely eradicate cyberbullying on social media. Based on the researcher’s observation, most SMIs shied away from public engagement post-victimisation. Only one of the informants had called for a press conference to emphasise that the cyberbullying issues associated with him had cost him his job. Although Forns, Kirchner, Abad and Amador [50] asserted that this form of coping self-regulates one’s emotional state of distress through circumstantial avoidance, such incidents of victimisation remain prevalent.

Typically, individuals tend to avoid threatening or uncomfortable circumstances [61] for minimal possibilities of friction. The informants employed avoidance in this research to resolve cyberbullying incidents. Most informants denoted this coping method to be a temporary solution to cope with cyberbullying as SMIs are constantly required to interact with netizens. Nevertheless, two-thirds of the informants could manage their experiences of being cyberbullied with such emotionally supportive strategies, whereas half of them were able to end cyberbullying incidents [42].

Remaining positive. The SMIs acknowledged the essentiality of retaining their positivity to towards effective cyberbullying management. Intriguingly, informants are advised not to allow cyberbullying to compromise their confidence level. All the study informants felt that this strategy type could manage and mitigate cyberbullying. Positivity catalyses kindness, comprehension, support, and compassion towards oneself in the wake of adverse circumstances [62]. SMI3 and SMI7 realised that being positive lowered their stress levels and negative vibes post-victimisation, whereas SMI3 emphasised the essentiality of being positive and self-confident despite the occurrence of negative situations. SMI3 mentioned as follows:

“No matter how bad the situation is, just be calm and be positive.....So, what do we need to punish ourselves? Let it go and we can be happy’ (SMI3, 31, lines 291-294).

Furthermore, SMI8 indicated positivity as an emotion-coping approach for him to share with his followers, netizens, and cyberbullies and demonstrate that cyberbullying did not implicitly influence him. He denoted as follows:

“I also think that the important thing is yourself. You have to think positively and avoid a negative mindset.” (SMI8, 23, lines 148-150).

Advice on remaining enthusiastic, optimistic, and taking such adversities in one’s stride was highlighted by SMI6, who disregarded the perpetrator’s nasty comments and threats and ensuing negativities to ensure that his daily routine remains unaffected. This informant stated as follows:

“My mother always reminds me to be patient and always be positive because I choose to be an influencer” (SMI6, 26, lines 332-334).

iii. Cyber coping strategies

The study informants proposed cyber coping strategies to manage cyberbullying on social media apart from the previously discussed general coping styles. Based on the data analysis, distinct cyber coping strategies facilitated the mitigation of cyberbullying acts and engaged relevant countermeasures to prevent cyberbullying.

Blocking. Blocking could be regarded as a productive problem-solving method to promptly end cyberbullying [63]. Conversely, blocking could be unproductive as cyber victimisation could be perpetuated with other mechanisms: emails or text messages [46]. Nevertheless, the study informants perceived this technique to be a convenient first line of defence for cyber victimisation while contemplating other alternatives. SMI9 affirmed that blocking cyberbullies enabled her to end cyberbullying. She stated as follows:

“I blocked people on my Facebook friends or followers who were sending me mean comments. need time to recover from cyberbullying. If I don’t shut my Facebook, I still tend to read and browse it” (SMI9, 24, lines 373-376).

SMI2 stated that cyberbullying could be mitigated by blocking or unfriending the perpetrators to prevent them from attacking his social media. Also, SMI10 asserted that blocking enabled her to manage cyberbullying incidents. For example, this informant promptly blocked the perpetrator and stabilised her emotions regarding the occurrence in the short run. She explained as follows:

“To me, just ignore, delete, and immediately block it. I see my friends doing the same thing. Most of them choose to block because frequently during a live session, haters will come, and we can read comments during the live streaming, so it becomes an eyesore” (SMI10, 19, lines 343-346).

Closed comment section. The comment section on SMIs’ social media could be closed as another form of coping strategy, thus eradicating the occurrence of cyberbullying acts on their social media. SMI4 recounted that this method is the easiest means of avoiding victimisation through cyberbullying on social media. She stated as follows:

“The easiest way to cope is by closing the comment section. It is helpful to avoid cyberbullying. I don’t need to read negative comments. Frankly, if I read, of course, it will jeopardise my mental health” (SMI4, 30, 360-362).

Although this strategy might positively impact the influencer-follower connection, SMI6 chose to prioritise his mental and emotional health. Hassan explained as follows: On another note, his profession deters him from negative communication with netizens:

“It could cost me a job. I always try to settle the situation (cyberbullying incidents) with a positive attitude. So, closing the comment section should be the best way” (SMI6, 26, lines 366-367)

Deleting the victim’s social media account temporarily. Six out of the 10 study informants utilised this approach by temporarily deleting their (SMIs’) social media accounts, which has become a channel for the occurrence of cyberbullying issues. This option is available on specific social media platforms, such as Facebook. Individuals could subsequently reactivate their account when an individual wishes to re-access their account. Their profile would remain intact as it was pre-deactivation [46]. For example, SMI1 mentioned deactivating his Facebook page for nearly six months. He clarified as follows:

“I stopped for a while, took a breather, and relaxed, and then, in that first month, I figured out my priority, which was my health, my physical and mental health” (SMI1, 32, lines 183-186).

On another note, SMI4 emphasised that deleting her social media account enabled her to rearrange her life, conceptualise an appropriate plan infused with positivity, and experience more well-being than before she was victimised. She stated as follows:

“When you take a break from social media, that is a positive move, rearrange your life. You’re not a loser, but you’re a warrior” (SMI4, 30, lines 355-356)

SMI3 also selected this approach to distance himself from his followers with no concern about the possibility of losing his followers provided that he could avoid cyberbullying. This informant mentioned as follows:

“So, mainly, I took a break from social media. By doing this, I distanced myself from bad followers and also by blocking them or closing the comment section” (SMI3, 31, lines 310-371).

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the study findings, the transactional model strategies and coping [37] proved insightful to justify how SMIs developed the coping mechanisms employed to manage and resolve cyberbullying acts. The stages of the strategy were established through which SMIs progressed, not unlike Lazarus and Folkman’s [37] series of cognitive appraisals. In the first step, influencers evaluated the personal relevance and perceived control of the situation, related to the forms of cyberbullying. The SMIs decided on the actions and coping mechanisms to execute once the SMIs determined the aforementioned forms [37] to resolve such adversities. The outcome process impacted the extent to which the SMIs depended on their devices to manage cyberbullying. Problem- and emotion-focus coping strategies [37] could outline the mechanisms

employed by SMIs to manage and alleviate cyberbullying. This model proved appropriate to justify cyberbullying management. The additional strategies utilised by SMIs entail cyber coping approaches.

All 10 study informants favoured cyber coping strategies to initiate cyberbullying management following its convenience and easy implementation. This study outcome paralleled a study in mainland China where most victims of cyberbullying incorporated technology to resolve the issue [64]. Notwithstanding, the approaches would be rendered ineffective in the long term given the nature of SMIs' work, which requires explicit social media usage as a professional medium. Cyberbullying attacks could continue through other channels (emails, instant messaging, or mobiles) despite using one technological method in a specified context [65]. Overall, technological solutions should be complemented by other techniques in cyberbullying management.

All 10 informants favoured problem-coping strategies to ascertain the issue and subsequent solutions. Optimal support from family members and friends facilitates SMIs' recovery from cyberbullying and enables them to encounter the stress of cyberbullying. The other techniques involved emotion-solving coping strategies, which proved to be more successful and effective in emotional management. Avoidance and remaining positive eventually alleviated the individuals' stress and depression. Additionally, cyberbullying could be professionally managed with stable emotions. Based on the research findings, victims constituting public figures cope with cyberbullying incidents differently, thus opposing recommendations from past literature where the victims frequently sought to actively counter their perpetrators by shrugging them off, mitigating the attack implications with sarcasm or brief neutral responses, and counterattacks. Consequently, the cyberbullies were labelled as pathetic or cowardly for failing to identify themselves [44].

Conclusively, SMIs' perspectives involving the nature of social media and their status as an influencer affected their coping mechanism type. Notably, such solutions could be implicitly effective to a certain extent on a case-by-case basis. Thus, it is deemed pivotal to match the influencers' coping mechanisms by considering the origins of cyberbullying, individual traits, and knowledge of technology. Figure 1.1 illustrates the themes and sub-themes addressing the research question of this study.

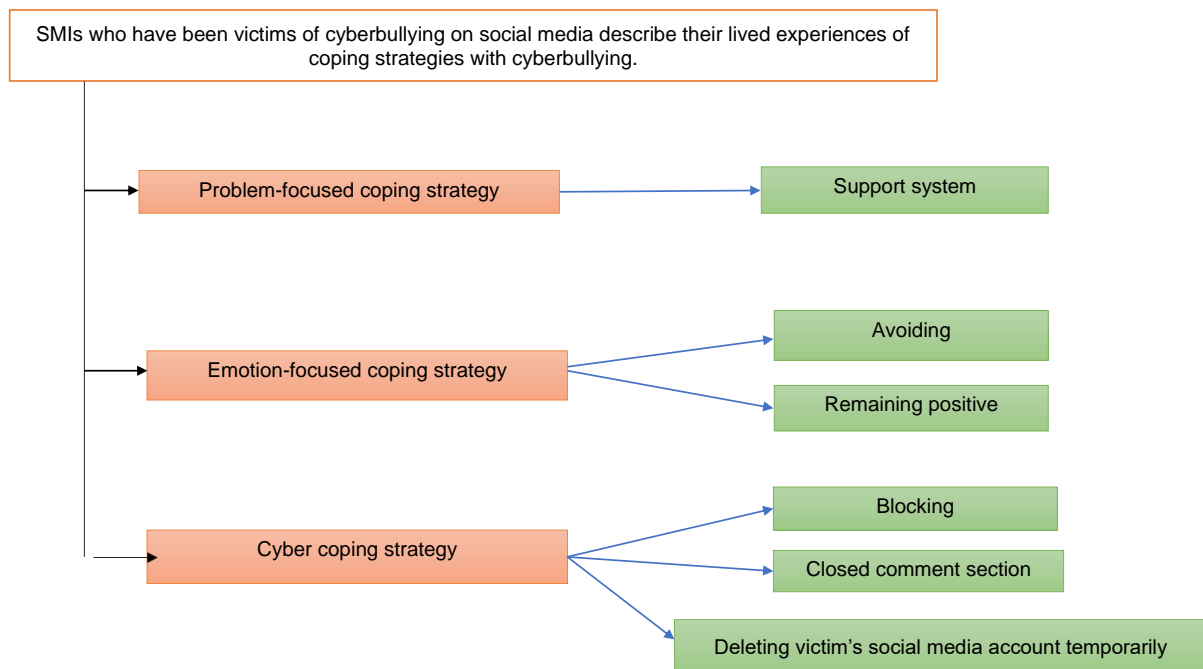


Figure 1.1: *The SMTs' Coping Strategies of Cyberbullying*

6.0 References

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