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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cyber Bullying: A General Islamic Outlook and Response

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Che Hasniza Che Noh, Asyraf Hj Ab Rahman: Cyber Bullying: A General Islamic Outlook and Response

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses cyber bullying that includes any communications seeking to intimidate, control, manipulate, discredit, or humiliate the recipient. From the criminal perspective, the term refers to a situation when the internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person. Using content analysis approach, and document analysis of the secondary data, the study tends to show how spiritual and environmental approaches suggested by Islam would play a significant role in preventing this form of bullying, besides decreasing one's tendency of involving in cyber bullying circles.

Key words: *Cyber Bullying, Islam, Parent-Child Relations*

Introduction

Today's society has easy access to communication technologies, including email, blogs, cell phones and social networks. Faced with these current technological developments, an issue that emerges especially among adolescents is the issue of cyber bullying; a high-tech form of harassment that involves the use of words through various form of channel such as internet, cell phones or other devices. They occur repeatedly where the victims feel uncomfortable and harassed with various forms of bad words or messages purposively directed towards him. At the workplace for instance, social-media services like facebook, twitter and youtube are used to intimidate and harass subordinates and their rivals. Similar situations may happen amongst lovers when their romantic relationships go sour, aggrieved lovers tend to turn to social-media services to stalk or embarrass an estranged partner.

Cyber bullying is defined as the use of technology-based communication, including cellular phones, email, instant messaging, and social networks, which aims to create a nuisance or threat to individuals via message or online expression (Brady, 2010). Generally, offenders are not known in cyberspace. They send content messages intended to hurt or insult the victim. This form of bullying is different from face to face bullying happen at schools when the risk might be high. This risk however does not exist in cyberspace. In the past few years cyber bullying has received a lot of attention from the public media, as well as from those concerned adults and teens. These technologies become an important part of many people's social lives, but to enjoy the positive benefits of this electronic communication, it is necessary to prevent or stop cyber bullying. Recent studies conducted by Cyber Bullying Research Centre USA in 2010 demonstrate that those between the ages of 10 and 18 from a large school district in the southern United States became victims of the bullying. Cell phones continue to be the most popular technology utilized by adolescents with almost 83% of youth in the sample report having used one at least weekly. From the study it is noted that a greater proportion of adolescents are now using Facebook compared to MySpace, and twitter remains unpopular among most youth. (<http://www.cyberbullying.us/research.php>).

In Southeast Asian Country like Malaysia, the rapid growth of internet or other ICT devices users also become one of the contributing factors to the cyber bullying incidents. Based on cybercrime reports in Malaysia, there was an increase sharply over the last four years as reported by CyberSecurity Malaysia (CSM). A review of computer security incidents and trends in the country based on complaints lodged to the agency showed an increase of 4,526 cases or 127 per cent in 2010 from the previous year. The upward trend continued in 2011 when an increase of 7,128 cases or 88% was recorded (Borneo Post 21 June 2012). According to President of the Information Security Professionals Association Malaysia, the evolution of laws governing the Internet in Malaysia progresses much slower than the current development in the Internet world itself. However, he said,

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there are considerably sufficient laws and regulations in Malaysia at the moment although there is a need for further improvement (Borneo Post 21 June 2012).

Review of Literature:

Recent studies (Cankaya, 2010, Eksi, 2012 & Topcu, et.al, 2010) show that there are numbers of cyber bullying happen amongst the teenagers in particular. In the context of the global scale, this incident occurred in countries like United States, Canada, Japan, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom, as well as Australia and New Zealand (Accordino, *et al*, 2011). Despite the fact that traditional bullying is different from cyber bullying but, the latter was seen not to involve physical interaction or borders. Rather, bullying happens in cyberspace is so easy to do without knowing who the culprit is. It spread so fast to the public and in a short time and cannot be eliminated so easily. What is worrying is that it can leave a very deep impression to the victim. One scenario is sufficient to describe how embarrassed a victim is in experiencing the bully; a girl for instance had her picture taken which made her feel uncomfortable. Later that week her friends tell her that the picture has been posted on another student's blog. What should the girl do? Should she fight back?

According to Li (2006), changes in technology have encouraged negative behavior style (e-pornography, cyber theft, Internet addiction) that accelerates to the spread of new forms of crime. The existence of such social sites (internet etc.) attracted the attention of young generation or adolescent and exposing them to cyber bullying situation in a very raw age. Studies by the Global Youth Online Behavior Survey (Microsoft survey) in January 2012 on 7,600 children aged eight to 17 years shows one of three children in Malaysia are victims of cyber bullying. The study also showed that the level of awareness of Malaysian parents on cyber bullying is quite low where only 38% of respondents are concerned with the issue and only 27% of parents ready to talk to their children about the risks of online communication. In addition, only 13% of parents ask their children whether they have bullied on-line (compared to the global average of 30%).

Statistical report by the Cyber Security Malaysia in 2007 showed that 60 cases have been reported involving cyber bullying. Although the report describes some isolated case, but the fact that this issue has happened in many countries in the world. When compared with developed countries like the United States, the problem of cyber bullying in Malaysia is also serious where nearly 40 percent of students in the country have been a victim of cyber bullying. To some extent, there were victims who intend to kill themselves for failing to hold the insults and lies spread by their school friends via email, website and phone messages. (Ahmad Zaharuddin, 2012). The same problem also faced by the British government when there was suggestion by the public so that the government would impose a fine of up to Pound Sterling 1,000 on cyber bullies or on parents whose children involved in making threats to a friend via mobile phone, email, and social networking site on the internet.

According to the report by Cyber Security Malaysia, most cyber bullies and their victims have close contact including their close friends, ex-spouses and former colleagues. Thus, existing problems require serious attention. Based on the study by Norton Online 2010, Malaysian children spent on average 19 hours a week on the internet (Utusan Malaysia, 20/10/2011). The same survey also found that nine out of ten children in Malaysia been exposed to negative experiences or element from the online use.

Methodology:

This study uses analysis of the secondary data related to the cyber bullying issues. Secondary data analysis is defined as "second-hand" analysis. It is the analysis of data or information that was either gathered by someone else (e.g., researchers, institutions, other NGOs, etc.) or for some other purpose than the one currently being considered, or often a combination of the two (Cnossen 1997). Secondary data analysis and review involves collecting and analyzing a vast array of information in regards to cyber bullying and how Islam treat the issue. Some verses of the Quran supported by Hadith of the prophet are mentioned where necessary to support the argument.

Result and Discussion

Causes of Cyber Bullying:

Cyber bullying can be viewed from two perspectives, namely a) factors antecedents cyber bullying and b) the effects of cyber bullying on the victims. Accordino *et al* (2011) stated that the major problem leading to cyber bullying is due to no restrictions on its activity. Willard (2003) clarifies this issue stems from five factors among which include: a) when teens use technology, this means they are on line and cannot be well controlled or seen by their parents, b) cyber bullying occurs without victim knowing how to response to the actors. As a result, the actor will not have any sense of empathy for his victims , c) the current social norms seem to promote

online misconduct, and d) students who feel more comfortable to communicate online will use the medium to take revenge towards those he or she may not like.

According to Ybarra and Mitchell (2004), there are other trigger factor for cyber bullying namely a poor relationship within the family, between parents and their children. When this relationship between both parties was not so strong or intimate, how can the parent be able to communicate properly with their children or vice-versa? Recent studies on parent child relationship by Brian Barber, an associate professor of sociology at Brigham Young University, Hawaii states that there are three general aspects to the parent-child relationship which seem to relate to the most important interactions that parents need to have with their children. Firstly, a connection; secondly, a regulation; and thirdly, a psychological autonomy. Connection has to do with positive emotional experiences parents and children share. "Parents need to spend time with a child, console a child, listen, talk, express love, those kinds of things. And it needs to be stable and consistent." (Richard Tripp, 1997) Children who receive this type of connection, at any age, are confident in their ability to connect with others. Barber's findings also indicate that children who do not experience consistent, reliable connection "are more reserved and private-less willing to initiate relationships." The studies also reveal that children will function optimally when they have some kind of consistent, clear structure or regulation placed around their behaviors. Conversely, when there are no clear rules to follow or limits on acceptable behavior, children are much more prone to deviant behavior (Richard Tripp, 1997). Cyber bullying seems to be caused by this factor as children are ignored and abandoned by their children.

Cankaya & Tan (2011) found that Internet addiction factor leading to the occurrence of cyber bullying. Meanwhile, Eksi, F (2012) found that individuals with narcissistic personalities tend to have an impact on other individuals indirectly through cyber bullying.

Effects of cyber bullying on children and adolescents:

Recent studies show that cyber bullying seem to have a strong relation with a decline in school learning and stress and anxiety (Bauman, 2012). Gender-based studies show that female students who became victims of bullying will lose focus in their study (Goddard, 2008). In addition, cyber bullying can also lead to anger, depression and poor concentration among the victims (Walker, Sockman, Koehn, 2011). To some other extent, it leads to aggressive behavior among the victims. (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

These symptoms resulting from cyber bullying have a great impact on society particularly amongst the teens and thus require urgent solution. Thus, several steps has been suggested amongst which include calling parents to be far more vigilante. Furthermore, parents are advised to have a closer "electronic leash" on their kids and need to be more tuned into the cyberspace trend. There are other views suggesting parents to look for any possible local law enforcement to prevent the existing problems. In this case, parent may lodge report to the police for further investigation, if they felt that was the best solution to the existing problems. Some researchers seem to prefer other alternative including proposing religious approaches as part of the solution and to stop cyber bullying. This include Islamic perspectives in dealing with issues of cyber bullying and how Islam's response to those involved in the cyber bullying.

Cyber bullying in the view of Islam:

There is no such term like cyber bullying being discussed at length by traditional or modern Muslim scholars. However their discussions revolve around the issue of those who are oppressed and not given their rights as a result of ignorance or harmful cultural practices. Bullying is a form of disturbing or oppressing or taking other's right. It may also be considered as *Zulm* in the Arabic word used interchangeably for cruelty or unjust acts of exploitation, oppression, and wrongdoing, whereby a person either deprives others of their rights or does not fulfill his obligations towards them as a fellow man. People who commit *zulm* are called *zalimin* or the wrongdoer. In Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) *Zalim* often regarded as opposite to the concept of *Adl* (justice) which put emphasis on the protection of basic necessities of the human being i.e. religion, life, lineage, dignity, mind and property. The protection of these interests is recognised by all jurists who also maintain that any transgression against these interests is considered unlawful and may be a punishable offence (Zaydan, 1986, p.384). Cyber Bullying therefore is associated with attacking and disturbance to the rights of others through various online mediums discussed earlier.

Islam provides clear guideline in relation to human social interaction and relation. This general principle are called *Daruriyyat al Khamsah* that necessitates every single Muslim to protect his religion (deen), life (nafs), reason or intellect (Aql), lineage (Nasl) and property (Mal). (Wan Ibrahim, Asyraf, Fadzli, 2004). Protection of these principles will bring peace in human society including peace within individual, family and community at large. Any act of disturbance other's right through email, or messages are prohibited. As the Prophet (pbuh) mentions "The Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand other Muslims are safe. The emigrant is one who abandons those things God has prohibited" (Al-Bukhari). This hadith clearly describe who true Muslims are.

They are people of safety and trust, so much so that other Muslims can turn their backs on them without doubt or suspicion. They can entrust a family member to such people without fear, for that person will be absolutely safe from the Muslims' hand or tongue. If they attend or associate with other fellow men in a gathering or meeting, the person can leave in full confidence that no one will gossip about him or her, and neither will he or she have to listen to gossip about others. They even do not live; but they enable others to live and will provide full supports for them as part of Muslim's duty. They will even sacrifice spiritual pleasure for others. These characteristics distinguish those whose act are vice-versa including attacking other's right and have no sensitive to the dignity and honor of other people. So there is no place for cyber bullying within this context since it contradict to positive values mentioned and provided by Islam.

Another characteristic of a Muslim is that he does not give a problem to his other fellow Muslim. That is why preventive approach is much emphasized in Islam in order to avoid bigger disaster in individuals, families and society as a whole. This is evidenced by the following verse of the Quran:

O you who have believed, avoid much (negative) assumption. Indeed, some assumption is sin. And do not spy or backbite each other. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his brother when dead? You would detest it. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is accepting of repentance and Merciful.

The main point of the above verse is to shed some light on the hidden and secretive sins that are prevalent amongst Muslims. The fact that these sins are conducted from within one's self gives it a more lethal effect in destroying Islamic brotherhood at large. Islam therefore, seeks to destroy these evils from the very beginning. Suspicion is the stepping-stone that leads to committing other evils mentioned in the verse, namely; backbiting, gossip and spying. Umar Ibn Khattab said: "If your Muslim brother makes an ambiguous statement to you, you should only think the best and you will find a good explanation for it." (Muwatta Imam Malik 422: 1797)

If suspicion, gossip and spying had already included under the evil acts, and prohibited by Islam, then sending content messages or black email intended to hurt or insult the victims that may cause the destruction of oneself shall be held liable according to Islamic law. There are several steps that may be useful to stop cyber bullying in society. These include:

Respect the rights of fellow human beings:

It become a religious responsibility of a Muslim to treat other fellow men fairly, disagree with them honestly, enjoy their friendship, work together for a common goal and help one another to achieve it. This respect is performed on the basis of religious teaching. It is evidenced in the Islamic history that there was Islamic respect regarding other religions as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and how Islam seeks to establish good relations with other traditions through a profound respect and understanding of the knowledge and major authorities of other people.

ICT as a medium of Da'wah (Islamic Mission):

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a neutral entity which relies on totality with users to describe its meaning, purpose and direction. In this regard, ICT must be seen as a strength which complements Muslims' role and responsibilities as leaders and workers of Islam. Thus, ICT and its infrastructure should be considered as factors or means in the equation of Muslims' duties in the mosques, schools and organizations. There is no place for those who use ICT to insult or bully other fellow human beings. Parents and teachers should stress on this importance in educating their children or students as ICT became parts of their Da'wah mission emphasized by Islam.

Parent's role:

There are many pro-active activities and discussions that parents can do with their children in order to avoid incidents of cyber bullying. This includes talking with their children about negative consequence of involving or being victimized by cyber bullying and how Islam prohibited such activities if it clearly insult other's right. Parents can also teach their children how to behave and communicate politely over the Internet and mobile devices. Importantly, parent should know how much time their children are spending on the Internet and mobile device and how they can control them. Islam looks at parent as those who will be held accountable for this trust on the Day of Judgment. Parents are essentially responsible for the moral, ethical and the basic and essential religious teachings of their children. If they successfully fulfill this responsibility, they will be free of the consequences on the Day of Judgment. The children will become better generation and a pleasure to the eyes of their parents, first in this life, and in the Hereafter. The Quran mentions this: "And those who believed and whose descendants followed them in faith – We will join with them their descendants, and We will not deprive them of anything of their deeds. Every person, for what he earned, is retained..." [Quran 52:21]

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has provided certain guideline when he divided stages of life for a child from the age of infancy to 21 into three stages, each lasting seven years. During the first stage from 0-7 years old, a priority must be given to instil in children the values necessary for a proper upbringing and to work on character building. When children are at the age of 8 to 15 years old, they are taught the steps of prayer and ablution, until eventually at the age of nine they should be able to master prayer. In many texts and traditions, it is mentioned that once a child has learned how to pray, God will forgive the sins of their parents. It is therefore important during this stage to limit and eliminate their exposure to un-Islamic television shows or website, books, and movies due to the large element of anti-religious rhetoric that lies within such things. Furthermore, parent need to work closely with their children or youth at this stage to develop fun and fulfilling alternatives to activities that are forbidden in Islam while also providing them with the reasoning as to why certain activities and television shows are not appropriate for a Muslim to watch (see also Ulwan, 1992)

The Prophet then proposed the final stage of Islamic upbringing that takes place during the ages of 15 to 21, and at this point the community has to play its role and to work together with parents to raise a child and monitor the child's conduct. Parents should act as a "friend" to their child rather than continue in the role of a teacher. They should know and able to remind their teenagers of Islamic answers to the typical teenage problems and concerns. Prophet Muhammad said, "A virtuous child is a flower from the flowers of Paradise." He also said, "Among the good fortunes of a man is the virtuous child."

Conclusion:

Cyber bullying is a serious symptom and should be addressed by all parties and their concerns on the matter are necessary including parents, teachers, and the surrounding community at large. In the past few years cyber bullying has received a lot of attention from the public media, as well as from those concerned adults and teens. Cyber bullying involves sending hurtful, threatening, or embarrassing messages to or about another person using email, blogs, cell phones, social networking sites, and other electronic media. These technologies become an important part of many people's social lives, but to enjoy the positive benefits of this electronic communication, it is necessary to prevent or stop cyber bullying. From the Islamic perspective, preventive action is very important. This includes parents' role in monitoring their children instead of abandoning them. Children should also be educated on how to show respect to other's right and dignity as these element become parts of religious duties. In additions, some guideline as exemplifies by the Prophet (pbuh) should be followed as there are many realistic approaches emphasized by him (pbuh) in dealing with stages of life for a child throughtut their upbringings.

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