# CYBERBULLYING in Asia

By Christine Suniti Bhat, Shih-Hua Chang, and Moira A. Ragan

I n Japan, a high school male attempted suicide twice and rarely left his room after receiving intimidating messages on his cellphone and having embarrassing photographs posted on the Internet. When a seventeen-year-old female in India started to refuse to go to school, her mother discovered that material of a sexual nature was posted on her social networking site and that her peers were teasing her about it. A young male in India received death threats on his cellphone, warning him of dire consequences if he did not break up with his girlfriend. When stones were hurled at him as he was returning home from school, he finally confided in his father. In Taiwan, a group of young people physically assaulted a fourteen-year-old female, and the assault was filmed and posted on blogs. In Hong Kong, a young female argued with a store manager, filmed the argument, and uploaded it on a blog. She faced a backlash from netizens who began to abuse and berate her for her actions. Although she deleted the video and apologized, they continued to attack her and publicize her photographs, address, and other personal details. The young woman became afraid to leave her home and contemplated suicide. These incidents in some Asian countries are indicative of the increase in cyberbullying as information and communications technology (ICT) becomes more widespread and sophisticated.

## Cyberbullying: An Issue in Asia and Elsewhere

ICT is widely used throughout Asia and is being increasingly embraced by Asian youth. However, the many benefits of ICT are accompanied by problems that arise when ICT is used unethically. Cyberbullying, or online bullying, is one harmful way that ICT for social communication and interaction can be misused. Anonymity, the possibility of multiple aggressors teaming up to victimize, and the rapid dissemination of information or misinformation online all contribute to the potential for great harm to victims.

This essay highlights the magnitude of ICT usage in Asia and reports on recent studies that indicate that cyberbullying is a critical issue in many Asian countries. Cyberbullying and youth roles in cyberbullying situations are explained and defined. Strategies to prevent cyberbullying focused on students, parents, and school personnel are suggested; and initiatives in some Asian countries are highlighted. Recent developments in laws and policies related to bullying and cyberbullying are presented.

## Cyberbullying and Key Roles Defined

Cyberbullying is defined as "the use of information and communications technology to intimidate, harass, victimize, or bully an individual or a group of individuals."[1] Examples of cyberbullying include sending or circulating mean messages or rumors by text, email, or social networking sites; circulating embarrassing pictures or videos; or setting up websites or fake profiles to hurt or humiliate the target.[2] Cyberbullying often involves a sexual component that serves to shame and silence the victim, such as the phenomenon of "sexting," or circulating sexually explicit photos or messages. The psychological toll of cyberbullying can be immense due to the relentless, inescapable assault on victims, and its damaging effects are compounded by the large numbers of people who can become involved in denigrating a victim.

The cyberbully's power may come from anonymity; technological prowess; or knowledge about the victim that, if circulated, could serve to hurt or humiliate the victim. Compared to physical bullying, it is much harder to "catch" cyberbullies; their acts sometimes come to light when targets or bystanders come forward or targets retaliate either online or of-fline. These complex issues make effective intervention a challenge. Approaching intervention from a proactive, preventive, and media literacy perspective is vital.[3]

Four roles are present in cyberbullying situations: active or initiating cyberbully, secondary cyberbully, observer, and target. Consider a hypothetical fake digital profile set up by an initiating cyberbully indicating that a young male is gay, where the student being "outed" or identified as gay is the target. Secondary cyberbullies visit the profile and become engaged by commenting or generating further interest. Finally, observers are students or parents who know about the situation and may be aware of the pain it causes the victim.

Secondary cyberbullies often feel blameless because they did not initiate the cyberbullying; but their commenting, posting, discussing, sharing, or liking the "story" serve to spread it, thereby increasing the harm experienced by the target. Initiating cyberbullies' efforts would be rendered ineffective if there were no secondary cyberbullies or if targets and observers come forward in a timely manner when signs of bullying are present. Prevention and media literacy initiatives should target students in each of these roles because of the ever-increasing levels of Internet and cellphone usage and corresponding cyberbullying opportunities globally—even more so in Asia.

## "Wired" in Asia

ICT is prevalent and increasing worldwide. Of approximately 2.4 billion Internet users worldwide in June 2012, Asia accounts for the greatest proportion, representing nearly 49 percent. Asia has experienced an 842 percent increase in Internet use since 2000.[4] China comprises the world's greatest number of Internet users, with 538 million in 2012 (50 percent of total users in Asia), a remarkable 2,292 percent increase from the 22.5 million in 2000.[5] India and Japan account for another 21 percent of overall Internet users in Asia, with 137 million in India and 101 million in Japan. Certain regions also demonstrate the overall pervasiveness of Internet use, having reached saturation levels in the percentage of the population using the Internet exceeding 70 percent. Those regions with the greatest percentages are South Korea (83 percent), Japan (80 percent), Brunei (78 percent), Taiwan (75 percent), and Hong Kong (74 percent).[6]

Statistics reported by the Chinese government reflected a shift in Internet users and the most predominant types of media. Although Internet use by those aged thirty to thirty-nine has increased considerably in the past five years to 50.5 percent, users in the ten to nineteen and twenty to twenty-nine age ranges continue to dominate overall use (69 percent of those ten to nineteen and 73 percent of those twenty to twenty-nine are Internet users). Internet users in China also indicated changes to types of media access by the end of 2011, including an increase in Internet use on mobile phones and a decrease in conventional programs, such as email, in favor of multimedia applications, such as video and music. Furthermore, the speed of home Internet access has shown marked improvement.[7]

Facebook continues to be a common social networking site throughout the world and certainly in Asia. Hong Kong's 3.7 million Facebook users represent over 54 percent of its overall population and almost 74 percent of Internet users. The two most saturated age cohorts are those twenty-five to thirty-four, followed by eighteen to twenty-four-year olds.[8] Although mainland China's 597,520 Facebook users constitute less than 1 percent of its population, this still keeps China among the top 100 countries where

Facebook is utilized.[9] The country that leads this list is the United States, with 163 million users representing over 53 percent of its total population and 71 percent of its Internet users.[10]

Asia accounts for the highest numbers of mobile phone users in the world. By the end of 2011, there were approximately 14.9 million mobile users in Hong Kong representing a penetration rate of 210 percent, more than double the landline rate of 102 percent.[11] Similarly, Taiwan has 29.4 million mobile users, indicating a penetration rate of 126 percent, which is more than double the landline rate of 53.2 percent.[12] A 2012 report on the *mobiThinking* website indicated that there were 10 countries in which there were over 100 million mobile subscriptions. At the top of the list was China (1.09 billion), followed by India (907 million), with three other Asian countries on the list: Indonesia was ranked fourth, Japan was seventh, and Pakistan was eighth in the "100 Million Club." China and India combined account for 30 percent of mobile phone users in the world.[13] It is not surprising to note that in a recent study, China and India were reported to have high incidences of online bullying.
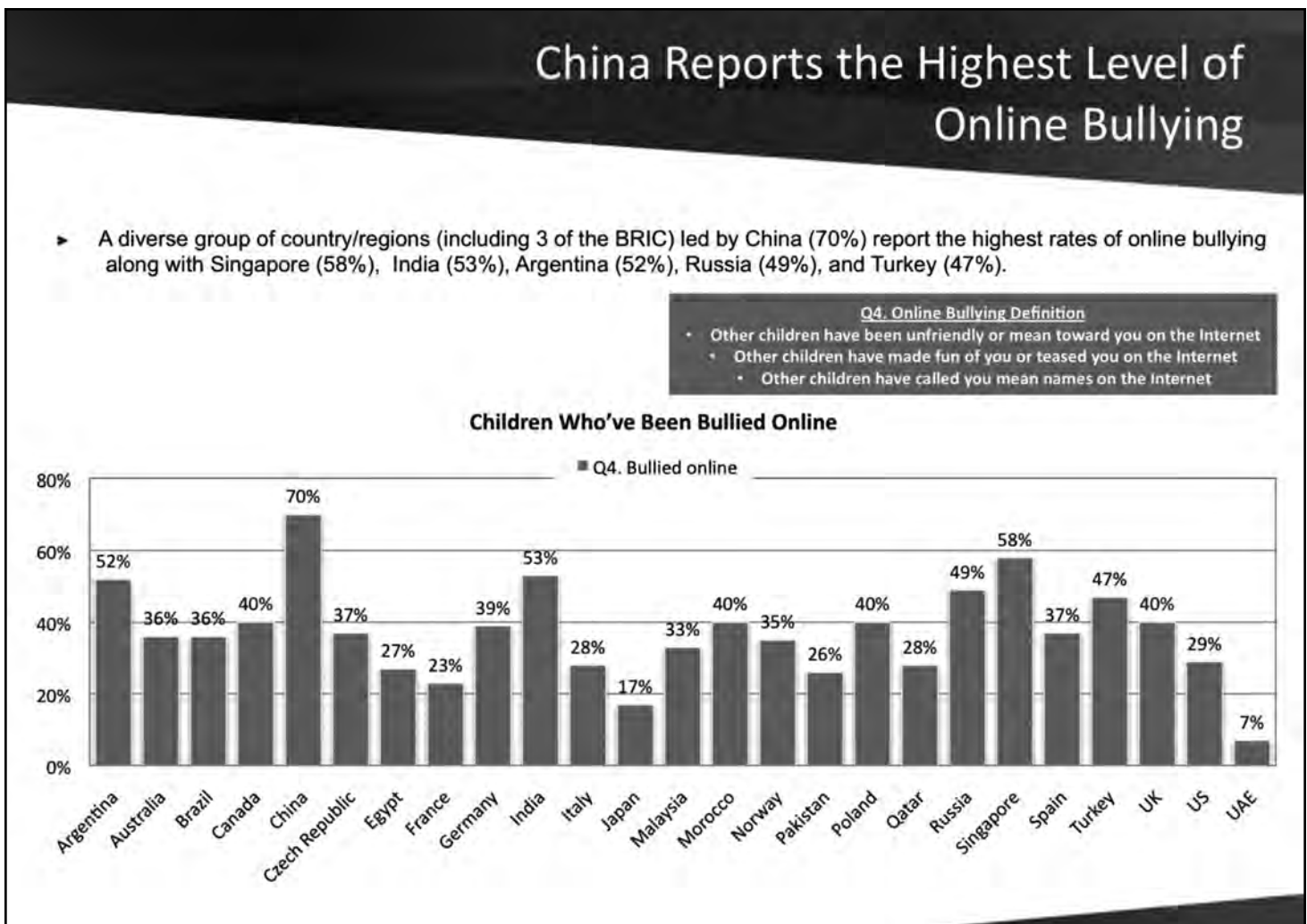
### Recent Studies on Cyberbullying in Asian Countries

Microsoft Corporation conducted a worldwide study on the phenomenon of online bullying with 7,644 youth aged eight to seventeen years in twenty-five countries (approximately 300 respondents per country), including six Asian nations. The researchers chose the term "online bullying" due to concerns that some might misunderstand the term "cyberbullying."[14] Thirty-seven percent of participants reported negative experiences online,

including being called mean names or teased; 58 percent were aware of online bullying; and 54 percent reported being very or somewhat worried about online bullying. The study indicated that youth in the age range of thirteen to seventeen years were at a higher risk of being bullied, as well as being bullies online, when compared to youth aged eight to twelve years. They were also more knowledgeable and worried about online bullying than the younger age group.

Of the 25 countries surveyed in the Microsoft study, the three countries in which participants reported the highest rates of online bullying were China (70 percent), Singapore (58 percent), and India (53 percent). Other Asian countries in the study reported the following percentages of online bullying: Malaysia, 33 percent; Pakistan, 26 percent; and Japan, 17 percent. The same three countries with the highest rates of online bullying also reported the highest rates of having bullied someone online: China, 58 percent; India, 50 percent; and Singapore, 46 percent. These statistics illuminate the great need for media literacy initiatives and for a holistic approach to addressing the issue through programming focused on students and school personnel, parents, and the wider community. The laws need to keep pace with the burgeoning use and abuse of ICT.

Current studies conducted in Hong Kong and Taiwan have shown notable findings on cyberbullying among youth. In a 2010 survey of 2,981 secondary school students in Hong Kong, 30 percent reported being cyberbullied in the past year.[15] The findings of a survey in 2011 on 1,800 secondary school students in years one to five showed that 32 percent of



Page 16 from the Microsoft PowerPoint presentation *Online Bullying WW Among Children 8-17*. BRIC stands for Brazil, Russia, India, and China. The presentation may be downloaded at http://tiny.cc/d7bczw.

students had cyberbullied others in the previous six months. The reasons for cyberbullying reported included making fun or joking (almost 45 percent), being quick and easy (almost 42 percent), underestimating the consequences (33 percent), and for peer recognition (33 percent). [16] In a recent national survey conducted in Taiwan among 1,539 students ages ten to eighteen, 37 percent reported having witnessed cyberbullying, 18 percent had cyberbullied others, 40 percent had been secondary bullies, and 12 percent had been the targets or victims of cyberbullying. [17] For those who had been cyberbullied, more than half (almost 58 percent) felt angry, almost 47 percent felt sad, and 12 percent had reported thoughts of suicide. Regarding effective ways to resolve cyberbullying, youths indicated first anti-cyberbullying regulations (64 percent endorsed) and second, improving prevention and education on Internet safety (over 50 percent endorsed).

### Media Literacy

Simply defined, media literacy is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms." [18] Media literacy involves skills in understanding and using media for purposes such as information, entertainment, enrichment, growth, empowerment, and communication. [19] Social media literacy is a subset of media literacy and has been defined as "having the proficiency to communicate appropriately, responsibly, and to evaluate conversations critically within the realm of socially based technologies." [20]

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter provide youth opportunities for self-presentation, learning, widening circles of relationships, and managing privacy and intimacy. It also provides risks, including loss of privacy, bullying, and harmful contacts. [21] Young people need to learn not only the mechanics of ICT but its safe and ethical use to maximize benefits and minimize harm and risks. An educational and preventive approach to this issue is preferable to a reactive and punitive one. Part of this education must, however, include the social and legal consequences of engaging in harmful uses of ICT.

### Prevention Strategies to Address Cyberbullying in Schools

Schools around the world are increasingly coming under pressure to provide education and prevention programming to reduce bullying and cyberbullying. Education and prevention with students should incorporate a definition of cyberbullying with behavioral examples; the safety features of ICT that are commonly used by youth; the roles of active or initiating cyberbully, secondary cyberbully, observer, and target; what can be done to prevent or address cyberbullying in each role; actions to be taken when one is cyberbullied; the harmful psychological, social, and academic consequences of cyberbullying; and clear consequences for those who engage in cyberbullying. [22]

Although not the case in many countries, education departments in some Asian countries are taking the initiative to develop and offer prevention programming. In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau developed both policies and resources to address bullying and cyberbullying in schools. These initiatives target students, parents, and teachers. [23] In 2012, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan passed "Regulations on the Prevention of School Bullying" to provide definitions, guidelines, and procedures for school personnel to prevent and address school bullying. Online resources for students, parents, and teachers are also available on the web page under the MOE. [24] Both teachers and parents are crucial in preventing cyberbullying and intervening effectively when it does happen.

### The Role of Parents in Addressing Cyberbullying

As the adults who provide and pay for ICT for their children, parents must be actively engaged in teaching, modeling, and monitoring the ethical and positive uses of these powerful means of communication. In addition, parents should be aware that they may be legally liable for the actions of their minor children in some countries. For example, parents in Taiwan who are negligent in their duty of supervision are jointly liable under the Civil Code

for injury caused by the acts of their minor children. Parent-child contracts are one way that parents can make their expectations for the use of ICT clear. For example, concerning the use of social networking sites such as Facebook, parents should establish the amount of time the child can spend on the site; discuss online "friends" and possible dangers; understand privacy settings and account profiles; communicate how they will monitor their child's account; discuss appropriate and inappropriate content to share online; and be clear about behavioral expectations and discuss inappropriate behaviors, such as saying rude or mean things about people, bullying or ganging up on someone, or making up or spreading rumors. Clear consequences for failure to abide by agreed-upon contracts should be discussed, and these consequences should be consistently enforced. It is imperative that parents educate themselves about how youth use ICT and continue to discuss the safe and ethical use of such technology. Parents and youth should be well aware of current policy or law regarding cyberbullying.

### Anti-Cyberbullying Policy and Law

In the USA, anti-bullying legislation has gained great momentum in recent years, often propelled by high-profile cases of suicide due to bullying. [25] Nearly all states to date have enacted laws meant to deter bullying and hold bullies accountable, with the exception of Montana, which has developed and documented definitions and statewide procedures related to bullying. In addition to state law, similar policies are also in effect in 41 other states, as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. The remaining eight states have legislation but no such policies. [26] Most of these laws or policies have incorporated cyberbullying as a type of bullying. Whether legislation or guidelines, such documents typically contain a definition of bullying behavior and outlines of procedures and action plans.

Anti-cyberbullying legislation is being discussed and implemented in several Asian countries. South Korea instituted a policy requiring people to provide their real names when communicating in chat rooms after the suicides of two celebrities who were victimized online. Later efforts to institute a cyber defamation law in South Korea have not been successful. [27] In Singapore, anti-cyberbullying legislation was debated, but lawmakers instead decided that education and prevention efforts would be more helpful. [28] In Taiwan, specific anti-cyberbullying policy is included only in the "Regulations on the Prevention of School Bullying." [29] Thus far, there is no anti-cyberbullying legislation in Taiwan, and cyberbullying is addressed using the Criminal Code as a guide in offenses against reputation and credit, for example.

### Conclusion

The saturation of ICT necessitates proactive and comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies. Central to efforts are the education and edification of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and members of the community. Fundamental to effectively preventing cyberbullying are clearly defining actions and behaviors, as well as their consequences, and increasing overall media literacy. Programming should increase knowledge and understanding of issues and effects of irresponsible Internet use generally and cyberbullying specifically. Further, legislation must catch up with a quickly evolving electronic age, taking into account both the positive and negative opportunities afforded by it.

Education and legislation should focus on both prevention and intervention. Students must learn to responsibly use the Internet and understand the implications of cyberbullying, regardless of which roles they play or their levels of participation. Students must also learn the importance of coming forward and informing parents or teachers when cyberbullying has occurred. Teachers and parents must know how to effectively handle instances of cyberbullying, as well as follow through on consequences. Finally, all parties involved should understand the different roles they play and the significance of compliance within the realm of cyberbullying. Prevention and intervention efforts must permeate schools in accordance with the inundation of technology in society. ∎

## NOTES

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**CHRISTINE SUNITI BHAT** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at Ohio University and was previously on the faculty at California State University, Long Beach. She is a graduate of the PhD program in Counselor Education and Supervision at Ohio University. Christine has experience as an educator, counselor, and psychologist in India, Australia, and the US in diverse work environments such as the Australian military, non-profit agencies, schools, and universities. She is widely published and presents regularly at state, regional, national, and international conferences on bullying and cyberbullying.

**SHIH-HUA CHANG** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling in the National Taiwan Normal University. She was previously a college counselor and has been in the counseling field in Taiwan for more than twelve years. Shih-Hua earned a PhD in Counselor Education from Ohio University in the United States in 2010. In addition to her interest in cyberbullying, her research and publications are on codependency, group counseling, and counseling licensure.

**MOIRA A. RAGAN** is currently a doctoral student in the Educational Research and Evaluation program at Ohio University. She also serves as Managing Director of Measuremental LLC, a measurement-based company. Her research interests are in developing psychometrically sound anti-bullying measures and programs that moderate bullying behaviors.