

DOCTORAL THESIS

Mitigating cyberbullying: essays on understanding proactive coping and intervention strategies

Wong, Yee Man

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ABSTRACT

While bringing tremendous benefits to individuals worldwide, the proliferation of online social networks has also given rise to undesirable online harassment behavior. Although users can respond in various ways, little attention has been paid so far to the use of online coping strategies on social media, more specifically, how individuals respond to online harassment by using the available features on social media. This thesis sought to understand individuals' use of online coping strategies. This thesis aims to tackle these challenges to advance the understanding of *whether*, *how*, and *why* individuals use online coping strategies in response to online harassment.

Essay 1 develops a typology of online coping strategies based on users' focus of response (i.e., self or initiator) and mode of response (i.e., avoidance or approach). This essay serves as a conceptual background for the two subsequent empirical studies (Essay 2 and Essay 3) that focus on two critical roles involved in online harassment (e.g., victims and bystanders). These two studies are conducted in the social media context.

Essay 2 investigates *whether* and *how* individuals use online coping strategies in response to online harassment on social media. Results from a scenario-based experiment showed that victims would be more likely to adopt self-focused and approach strategies (e.g., seclusion, mediation, and reporting) when they perceived a high threat of the incident. Confidence in executing the platform functions would increase victims' use of the initiators-focused strategies in both modes (e.g., blocking and reporting) but reduce their use of self-focused avoidance strategy (e.g., seclusion). Trust in social media would lead victims to the self-focused approach strategy (e.g., mediation). Victims with the intensified fear of the

incident would be more likely to use the self-focused and avoidance strategies (e.g., seclusion, mediation, and blocking).

While Essay 2 focuses on the role of victims, Essay 3 concentrates on the role of bystanders and reporting strategy, which is one of the online coping strategies on social media that support bystanders' interventions. Essay 3 explains *why* individuals report witnessing online harassment. The results found that four contextualized factors (perceived emergency of the online harassment incident, perceived responsibility to report, perceived self-efficacy in using built-in reporting functions, and perceived outcome effectiveness of built-in reporting functions for tackling online harassment) are important factors for shaping bystander reporting interventions, while the presence of others as an inhibitor that discourages bystanders' willingness to help. This essay also found that socio-environmental and technological factors exert a significant effect on bystanders' willingness to intervene.

In sum, this thesis contributes to the area of online harassment by breaking new ground for the study of users' prosocial responses to online harassment on social media. It not only furthers our understanding of online coping strategies but also provides valuable insights for practitioners to design effective coping features to combat online harassment.

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