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Cambodian Youth Perspectives

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FUTURE FORUM

The World We Want

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Chapter 6 | To a Cyberbullying Free Future

Socheata VINH

Future Scenario

It's Friday evening and after saying goodbye to her colleagues, Kunthea can't stop smiling ear to ear; she is excited for her father's surprise birthday party tonight. She takes a detour on her way home to stop at a bakery she found on Facebook to pick up the cake that she has custom-ordered. She scans her Facebook profile at the front desk so that the staff can identify her order and after confirming with a simple tap that they have the right cake she confirms the payment via Facebook on her smartphone.

To prepare for the surprise party, Kunthea's mom leaves work early to decorate the dining room and cook her father's favorite dishes for dinner. Kunthea and her younger brother Vitou, who is turning ten this year, help their mom set the table. Suddenly, they hear their father opening the front door and they run to turn off the light. Once her father opens the door, he sees a holograph of a group of cute kids singing Happy Birthday for him. He smiles and says: "I actually knew what you guys were up to because I saw Kunthea share a post from a bakery page on Facebook. But thanks for the party! I love you all."

Later that night, Kunthea is looking at the photos of their family. She has the perfect caption for the photos. Just as she finishes typing in the caption on Facebook, she hesitates about whether to post the photos. Her reluctance can be traced back to what happened ten years ago. It was 2025, the then thirteen-year-old Kunthea was being bullied by a dozen of her Facebook friends on social media; some of them were from her high school and others were acquaintances. They would leave mean comments criticizing Kunthea's appearance below her photos. Her other friends tried to defend her and pointed out that the bullies were probably jealous of Kunthea who was well known for being an outstanding student. However, the harassers continued to leave hurtful comments and send mean texts to Kunthea. The situation went on for two years without her parents and teachers knowing. As her usual bright smiles and cheerful words disappeared, her academic performance dropped as well. That was when her parents started to pay attention to her mental health. After receiving psychological therapy for six months, she started to get better, but she quit using social media.

It was not until two years ago, when she graduated from university, that she registered for a Facebook account. There was a viral campaign online six years ago, in 2029, to fight cyberbullying

after the suicide of a nine-year-old boy. He was bullied online so much and so often that he decided to end his young life. After his mother published some of the devastating private messages he received alongside his diary, more and more social media users stood up for him. Hundreds of thousands of social media users pled for a safer cyber space using the hashtag #fightbullying. The news was all over the media. Every parent started to worry about their children's experience online. Other kids opened up about similar experiences they had endured. Social media campaigns were launched explaining the definition of cyberbullying, its effects, and how it should be dealt with.

Kunthea had mixed feelings about this incident. She would have liked to join the movement and make some changes while she was still receiving treatment. Two years ago, she decided that she was ready to rejoin social media. Because of her bitter experience and maturity, she is cautious about her social media usage. Just as she is contemplating the photos of her family, she receives a message from her brother. As she opens the message, a holograph of her brother appears above her phone. Smiling with his cute dimples, he says: "Don't forget to tag me in the photos when you post it. My friends wouldn't believe that I have a sister. So this time I can show them your photo. Please…," showing off his tiny muscle, he continues: "If anyone dares to say anything bad to you, I will be the one to protect you." Kunthea chuckles softly and presses '*post*'.

Introduction

Bullying has long been a problem occurring in schools. With the proliferation of internet accessibility, cyberbullying has developed as a new form of bullying. Extending from the construct of bullying which is acts with a hostile intention, violence, repetition and power imbalance (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006), cyberbullying is defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). There are different forms of cyberbullying such as: spreading rumors, sending hostile and offensive messages, posting embarrassing information, photos or videos, tricking people in order to obtain personal information and share it publicly, interacting online by using a fake identity and so on.

The experience of being the victim of a cyberbully is found to be associated with negative emotions such as anger, sadness, loneliness, helplessness and isolation (Ortega et al., 2009). Moreover, it is associated with more serious mental distress such as loss of self-esteem, social anxiety, depression, poor academic performance and problems with anger management (Musharraf and Anis-ul-Haque, 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

Even though cyberbullying has been extensively researched and discussed in some countries, it is still overlooked in Cambodia. However, due to the increasing internet penetration rate and the

popularity of social media in the country, it is worthy of examination. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the internet has become a part of the new normal life for almost everyone.

Combating cyberbullying needs to start from empowering the young generation in general education. To maximize the effectiveness of any intervention will need effort and involvement from everyone working in the education sector. Secondly, to further protect social media users, the current draft Cybercrime Law should dedicate an article to rule the act of cyberbullying as a crime if done at a certain level. Last but not least, the social media companies have to share responsibility for the problems caused by their platforms by spreading awareness of this issue and enforcing punishments on those found to be bullying other users.

Context Analysis

The Growing Risk of Cyberbullying in Cambodia

Many countries have acknowledged the serious negative outcomes caused by school bullying and implemented interventions and set anti-bullying regulations at schools (Ananiadou and Smith, 2002). In a study on school accountability in Cambodia by No and Heng (2015), students expressed their concern about the frequent violence and bullying incidents happening at their schools and they requested the school to take action and provide a safer learning environment. Since the study was done in primary and secondary schools, it showed how bullying remains a common problem. Unfortunately, there are no local studies dedicated specifically to cyberbullying in Cambodia yet.

Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests cyberbullying is a problem. Cyberbullying is enabled by the availability of the internet and digital devices. The internet penetration rate in Cambodia has grown from 45% in 2017 to more than half of the population being internet users (52.6%) in 2021, while the percentage of social media users has increased from 31% in 2017 to 71.3% in 2021 (Kemp, 2017; Kemp, 2021). The number of social media users may not represent a unique individual as one person may have multiple account, which is why it exceeds the percentage of internet users, but it illustrates the significant increase in social media usage nationwide. This phenomenon is also boosted by the availability of low-price smartphones and the accessibility of cheap mobile data plans, which have enabled more people to gain access to the internet.

The internet has become an important tool and even more so since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic which has introduced a "new normal" in most people's lifestyle. For instance, online teaching and learning have been implemented from primary to tertiary level; office workers have to take turns working in the office and working from home at other times; e-commerce and

delivery services have become a safe and popular shopping option. These changes have introduced the use of internet and social media such as Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Zoom and Microsoft Teams to children as young as six years old all the way up to adults who need to use them at work. This illustrates that the internet and social media usage has almost become a necessity to adapt to daily life in Cambodia during the pandemic. The wide adoption of the internet and social media in daily life has brought several advantages such as convenient and low-cost communication without the restrictions of time and space, but the internet can also be a double-edged sword when it is used with ill intention.

Although no local study is available to provide an overall view of the prevalence of cyberbullying in Cambodia yet, according to a 2019 UNICEF poll and youth talks conducted in more than 160 countries, 85.7% of Cambodian youths who are between 15 and 25 years old face cyberbullying (UNICEF, 2019, p.1). Responding to these findings, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Information said he found the findings unbelievable and had doubts about the polling methods, while the spokespeople of the Telecommunication Regulator of Cambodia, and Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport expressed the need to investigate deeper into this issue so that a suitable policy could be drafted (Long, 2019). On the other hand, a year after the study was released and after the national implementation of online learning, the Ministry of Interior's Information Technology Department expressed their concerns about cyberbullying. The Ministry called for parents and guardians to educate their children about the effects of cyberbullying and for school managers and teachers to create rules and regulations to fight its occurrence (Nov, 2020).

The increasing internet penetration rate and the implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have escalated the potential exposure to cyberbullying. However, a UNDP digital literacy report on three groups of youth: high school students, university students and working youth, indicated that digital literacy across all groups can be classified as low to below average (Vamoeurn, 2020). The same study discovered that the respondents with higher educational levels scored higher in the digital literacy exam than those at lower educational levels. The report also found that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) curriculum of grade 11 and grade 12 covers basic knowledge of computer skills and digital communication which are insufficient to equip students with the skills to use the internet correctly and safely (Vamoeurn, 2020). Unlike university students, the majority of whom need to complete their school work using computers and the Internet, high school students have less experience with ICT which places high school students in a vulnerable position with respect to cyberbullying.

Bullying and Cyberbullying Interventions

Although cyberbullying is a relatively new issue in Cambodia, recommendations and policies have already been put forth in other contexts to deal with this problem. In a study reviewing anti-bullying/anti-cyberbullying policies in universities, the authors found the three most common types of such policies are: codes of conduct and discipline of students, policies related to electronic communication and policies about harassment or discrimination at school (Faucher et al., 2015). The same report pointed out that the first type of policy overlooked the fact that the perpetrators can be teaching or non-teaching staff and faculty members as well as other students. The effectiveness of electronic communication policies was found to be questionable as they punish students by denying them access to the use of electronic communication technology on campus, a futile gesture given the high number of students owning smartphones and other electronic devices. Finally, the third type of policies categorize harassment and discrimination such as sexual harassment, racism, hate speech and so on as a type of cyberbullying (Faucher et al., 2015). The authors noted that this type of policies are aligned with previous studies that suggested cyberbullying as a gendered issue and might be influenced by sexuality. The common characteristic of these policies is that they provide varied conflict resolution models to deal with reports of harassment and discrimination. The intervention of conflict resolution models is a suitable solution to such cases as it could prevent reoccurrence in the future.

In addition to school-based policies, many individuals and organizations advocate for victims to adopt coping strategies to deal with cyberbullying such as cutting off any contact with the bully including blocking the perpetrator, changing one's own online identity or phone number, and avoiding reading anonymous messages (Slonje et al., 2012; Smith, et al., 2008). These strategies align with recommendations from UNICEF who also suggest the victim report the cases to their parents, teachers, close family members or trusted adults (UNICEF, n.d.). Since the perpetrators could be anyone online, cyberbullying could be criminal. Therefore, other suggested actions to take against cyberbullying are: noting the time and date of receiving the bullying message, reporting to the local internet service provider, reporting to the police if the messages involve threatening and avoiding replying to the abusive messages (Youth Era, n.d.). On the other hand, this type of coping mechanisms has put the victims in the spotlight, even though it happened because of the misconduct of the cyberbullies. It is unfair for the victims to bear the emotional harms and have to take the responsibility to protect themselves. Moreover, it does not contribute to tackling cyberbullying directly. When a cyberbully is blocked by a victim, he or she can easily find another victim and though a victim might successfully escape from a cyberbully, he or she might face more cyberbullies in the future.

There are a few articles in the Criminal Code of Cambodia which condemn offenses that can be carried out through digital means, including threatening, indecent exposure, defamation, defamation through the media, public insult and insult through the media (Criminal Code of Cambodia, 2009). However, cyberbullying can be day-to-day communication or indirect acts which are not counted as crimes such as verbally abusive one-on-one communication, singling out someone, spreading rumors, sending hostile and offensive messages, posting embarrassing information, photos or videos, tricking people in order to obtain personal information and share it publicly, interacting online by using a fake identity and more.

Besides the Criminal Code, the drafting of the Cybercrime Law announced in 2010 presents an opportunity to tackle the cyberbullying situation on a legal level. The first chapter of the draft law states that its purpose is to "determine education, prevention measures and combat all kinds of offense commit by computer system" (Cybercrime Law Formulation Working Group, n.d., p. 4).[1] In Chapter 3: Offenses, there are five types of offenses related to the content published online in Article 28: Contents and Websites. The offenses are categorized as "publications that deemed damaging to the moral and cultural values of the society". Those offenses are "a. Information that incites or instigates prejudice on race or clans, color, gender, language, religion, beliefs or political views, origin of race or nationality, and not limited to levels or class in society; b. Writings or pixilation that deemed to display inappropriate activities of persons, copulations between humans or animals, or devalue the moral of family values and pixilation that deemed to display domestic violence; c. Manipulation, defamation, and slanders; d. Drawings, pictorials, or pixilation that deemed to slander or defame human beings or commoners of the state performing activities unbecoming, with animals of any species," (Cybercrime Law Formulation Working Group, n.d., p. 13). In the same article, it is stated that "Publicizing with the intent to threatened and commit a crime not limited to one form of felonies or other felonies with the intent to interrupt a person or persons wellbeings is punishable of incarceration from one to three years and fined 2,000,000.00 Riels (Two Million Riels) and up to 6,000,000.00 Riels (Six Million Riels). In the case of with the intent to threaten shall be treated as such law that is currently being enforced." It is noticeable that the above mentioned offenses target the publication in writing or pixilation, which do not include one-on-one online communication that is one of the main channels through which cyberbullying takes place. Moreover, the offenses focus more on consequences at a societal level rather than on an individual level; the damages mentioned were more on reputation and social values rather than on psychological, emotional and mental aspects. The damages done at an individual level were not sufficiently considered and included to make the draft law comprehensively address cyberbullying.

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[1] Note: Errors in original

An example of an effective legal solution to cyberbullying would be the Harmful Digital Communication Act which was introduced by the New Zealand government in 2015. The purpose of the Act is "to (a) deter, prevent, and mitigate harm caused to individuals by digital communications; and (b) provide victims of harmful digital communications with a quick and efficient means of redress" (Ministry of Justice, 2015, p. 3-4). In the Act, "harm" is defined as "serious emotional distress"; digital communication is defined as "a). means any form of electronic communication; and b) includes any text message, writing, photograph, picture, recording, or other matter that is communicated electronically" (Ministry of Justice, 2015, p. 4). The Act has set ten principles that a digital communication must not breach (Ministry of Justice, 2015, p. 4). The tenth Communication Principle of the Act states that "a digital communication should not denigrate an individual by reason of his or her colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability". Moreover, the ten principles tackle cyberbullying in various forms, such as revealing embarrassing information about an individual, threatening, sending offensive messages, making false allegations, encouraging others to harm an individual by sending message and more. The ten principles describe the actual actions which are counted as harmful digital communication in simple and clear wording; therefore, it is comprehensible for the general public to understand and obey.

On social networking sites, which are the main spaces where cyberbullying takes place, there are certain community standards. These sets of rules list the types of expression that the platform limits. Users who encounter content that they believe does not adhere to these standards can report the case to the platform and block or unfollow the users that posted or sent such content. On Facebook, the Community Standards are lengthy and explanative (see Facebook, n.d.). In the bullying section, the page provides resources for parents, educators, and teens to take action against bullying. However, it is not straightforward for users to discover these rules, unless the users are searching for them. It requires them to have knowledge about bullying for the victim to identify the message or post directed at them as bullying and realize that he or she can seek help on the social media platform. The majority of young social media users in Cambodia do not yet have this level of awareness.

Bullying has long been a problem happening at schools but the proliferation of the internet and social media enable it to occur online. When a student is being bullied at school, the solution is to report the incident to their parents or homeroom teacher for the teacher to intervene and impose punishment on the bully. However, the bully might take revenge in another form that is out of the authority of the school. In other words, the bullies might not understand why their behaviors are wrong, so they will not stop bullying, but will look for ways to avoid the punishment. In addition, the victims might choose to seek revenge by themselves, which continues the bullying cycle. While bullying is already a difficult issue to deal with, cyberbullying

is an even harder problem to solve, as it has no time and space barrier as long as the victims are connected via phones or the internet.

In Cambodia, bullying and cyberbullying are not explicitly included in public high school's internal rules, according to Prakas No. 2786 on Internal Rules of Public High School released in 2009 by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. Behaviors such as annoying classmates or other students, bringing weapons to school, or causing dangerous incidents at school are forbidden. The rules also advise students to report any negative incident and accident to teachers or directors of the school. In 2020, two violent incidents happened in a private high school and a public high school, which resulted in one female student severely injured and one male student deceased. These incidents were widely reported and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport released a press release on January 20, 2020 to call for the strict implementation and improvement on the students' code of conduct (Long, 2020). These two notorious bullying cases gained the public's and the government's attention only because one of them was fatal and the other was filmed and uploaded on social media. It is unclear how many bullying cases, not to mention cyberbullying cases, are never reported and thus, never addressed.

In the era of online learning, students are safe from physical bullying at school; however, digital communications can be the next tools the bullies can utilize. Acknowledging that cyberbullying is an urgent issue, in March 2021, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications launched a digital campaign "Kit Kou Kon" which means "thinking for children", to raise awareness among parents, guardians, teachers and the general public of the risks children face in the digital sphere in order to protect them (Chea, 2021). In June 2021, representatives from several ministries including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Post and Telecommunications and the Ministry of Interior held a meeting with non-governmental organizations such as Plan International and UNICEF, who also called for parents to pay attention to their children's digital usage and report to the local authority if their children are being threatened or abused (Sen, 2021).

Policy Recommendations

Awareness and Regulations about Cyberbullying at School

To prevent and address cyberbullying, the changes need to start early. The process of socialization starts as soon as a child is old enough to interact with people around them. School is a place where children engage with people who are not their family members and siblings. In an analysis of cyberbullying cases among teens by Hoff and Mitchell (2009), one major contributing factor leading to cyberbullying is the incapacity to deal with social tensions in relationships. Therefore, creating a safe environment in schools for young children to learn about positive interaction with their peers is very important.

Faculty members, teaching and non-teaching staff should understand the issue of bullying, be sensitive enough to identify signs of bullying in class and handle the situation by educating the bullies about their wrongdoings, as cyberbullying can be an extension of traditional bullying. Moreover, school staff should create an open environment for the students to discuss bullying and cyberbullying. This should even apply to primary students who have not started using social networking sites yet. For faculty members, teaching and non-teaching staff working in high schools, their knowledge and attention should address cyberbullying and digital literacy directly. Not only do they need to understand clearly what cyberbullying is but also, they have to be able to educate the students about what it is, as well as strategies to protect themselves. At the same time, the homeroom teacher and any teaching/non-teaching personnel who interact closely with the bully should understand the causes of the behavior of the bully. Cyberbullying is found to be associated with the justification of violence; for instance, bullies think that their victims deserve such treatment, and the use of proactive aggression is a tactic bullies use to reach their goals (Calvete et al., 2010). Cyberbullying might stem from feelings of envy, intolerance or being ganged up on in a group (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009). Hence, it is essential to explore beyond the act of cyberbullying and resolve the root causes.

To be able to achieve these initiatives in schools, firstly, knowledge about cyberbullying and caring for students' mental well-being have to be included in the pedagogy training content to equip the teaching staff with necessary knowledge, since depression and low self-esteem were found to be predictors for cyberbullying involvement (Modeki et al., 2012). Education personnel or a counseling psychologist at the school must be aware of the strategies to address bullying and have sufficient time to discover the mental or psychological state of the bullies so that they can consult directly with the bullies. Moreover, the school management has to continuously pay attention to the issue of bullying and cyberbullying by holding regular meetings or workshops on this issue for teachers so they remain well informed and ready to intervene. Raising the salary of education personnel is necessary to ensure teachers have the time to dedicate to these issues. Teachers working in public schools receive a low salary compared to how important their role is in educating the future human resources of the nation. To compensate for their low income, teachers often take on private tutoring for additional income (No and Heng, 2015). Hence, raising the income of teachers is crucial for them to achieve their best performance as full-time education personnel.

With the cooperation of teachers and other staff at school, the students will receive better care and guidance regarding fighting against cyberbullying. Digital literacy skills such as basic knowledge about how the internet works, digital privacy, and cyber security should be integrated into the general education curriculum so that the students have enough knowledge to use the internet safely, while interacting responsibly with other people in the digital realm.

There is a need to set a unified rule to combat cyberbullying in all educational institutions. Along with digital literacy skills as a part of the curriculum, regulations which dictate that any act of cyberbullying will be punished serves as a real-life application of what they learned. The rule needs to state clearly what cyberbullying is and why it is forbidden.

Social Media Companies

Social media companies, as the ones who earn revenue from having a large number of users, must take the users' mental wellbeing into account. It is true that they are doing whatever they can to hold the users' attention as long as possible. However, they are also obligated to protect their consumers. While social networking sites may have a set of community standards or rules that guide the users in what is considered appropriate use, the sites do not make it explicit enough for the users to discover. Therefore, each social media site should regularly remind their users about the community standards by separating the information into smaller chunks and in an attractive format such as an infographic or short videos and run it as campaigns on its own platform.

As for receiving reported cases, the sites should impose strict punishments for perpetrators beyond simply deleting the posts, such as warning the users and sending them the community standards in their first offense, restricting their use of a certain function, for example, posting status or photos, and banning the users after the third offense. If the banned user wishes to log in using their old account, they need to pass a test on community standards of the social networking site. While registering a new account is easy, social networking sites can consider passing the community standards test as a requirement to register a new account. Therefore, even if the same person creates a new account when their old one is banned, they still need to learn the community standards before rejoining and they still face the possibility of being banned if they repeatedly violate the rules.

Cyber Crime Law

Besides combating cyberbullying at school, a law to protect internet users is also important. Currently, the Cybercrime Law is being drafted in Cambodia. Although there are concerns that the draft law will put more limits on the freedom of expression (Sun, 2020), it is a good opportunity for lawmakers to insert cyberbullying-related articles into the law.

Currently, the draft law focuses on offenses regarding the illegal access or manipulation of computer system data and publication of inappropriate writing or pixilation. The law does not address cyberbullying directly by providing a definition or listing down the acts deemed as cyber aggression. To provide a safe and free digital space for Cambodians, there must be a clear line between intentional bullying directed at an individual and personal opinion supported by

freedom of expression and digital rights. To ensure these rights for citizens, lawmakers must consult with human rights experts and digital rights experts during the drafting of the law. After the law has been put forth, the law enforcement process needs to be as transparent as possible, especially if the case involves politicians.

Conclusion

In this digital era, online interaction is almost unavoidable. Social networking sites can be a double-edge sword. If used mindfully, the users enjoy the benefits of keeping in touch with friends, collaborating with colleagues, and studying in online classes in the comfort of their own home. However, they can escalate the prevalence of aggression across time and space. As the age of the social media users become younger and younger, it is important to educate them about the risk of cyberbullying when using social media to prevent possible negative impacts on their well-being. Firstly, education personnel have a responsibility to help protect children while they are at school, so faculty members, teachers and non-teaching staff should be knowledgeable about cyberbullying and create an open and safe environment as well as have the skills to properly intervene and prevent bullying and cyberbullying. Secondly, social media companies should be obligated to protect their consumers from harm that occurs on their platforms. Lastly, the Cyber Crime Law must effectively address cyberbullying in order to set legal solutions for addressing this crime. Despite the work that should be done by the stakeholders, every social media user is responsible to communicate with kindness and mindfulness to create a safe and friendly digital communication environment for everyone.

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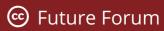
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