

Intimate Partner Violence and Cyberbullying in Malaysia: Exposing the Covert Abusive Behaviours in Digital Era

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Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is systematic violence used by one intimate partner to gain and maintain power and control. It can be divided into physical, emotional and sexual violence [1]. Cyberbullying is bullying with the use of digital technologies. It can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones. This cyberviolence is a repeated behaviour, aimed at scaring, angering or shaming those who are targeted [2]. Living in digital era, at one pole, where communication is often private within the close cybergroup, seal both covert behaviours even tighter. However, at the extreme end, when transgressive behaviours are exposed to public cyberspace, humiliation can lead to suicidal behaviours [3]. In Malaysia, every year, police statistics indicate a worrying prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) [4], but to date, no data to show the occurrence of cyberbullying among IPV cases. Despite the detrimental effects of both IPV and cyberbullying, they are never or underreported, making determining accurate occurrence of such conditions difficult and management to eradicate these behaviours very challenging. Hence, this study provides the bridge to close those gaps.

Objective

The objectives of this study include i) to determine the percentages of the frequency of IPV (physical, emotional and sexual violence) and cyberbullying among the public; ii) to determine the associations between IPV and cyberbullying.

Methods

This study was a cross-sectional online study, using convenient sampling, distributed via Google Forms on social media platforms. Selection criteria include adult aged 18 and above, proficient in Malay, in an intimate relationship, and with internet access. Potential participants were informed of the risks and benefits of the study and those gave implied consent would proceed with the survey. Participants were assessed using i) Women Abuse Screening Tools (WAST) and ii) Cyberbullying Victimization Scale (CVS) for IPV and cyberbullying respectively. Descriptive analysis determined the prevalence of IPV and cyberbullying, while Pearson Chi-squared test and correlation analysis explored the relationships between each subscales and total scores of IPV and cyberbullying.

Results

A total of 3120 participants answered the survey. Refer to Table 1 for the details of their background. More than two third participants had experienced physical, emotional or sexual violence (Figure 1). Of the total participants, 2380 (76.3%) had experienced cyberbullying (Figure 2). Table 2 describes the significant associations between each and every items of WAST and the presence of cyberbullying. There is a positive correlation between total score of WAST and total score of CVS ($r=0.23; p<0.000$) (Figure 3).

Table 1: Background Sociodemography of the Participants

Sociodemographic background	Frequency (n)	%
Gender		
Female	1838	58.9
Male	1282	41.1
Religions		
Muslim	1822	58.4
Hinduism	368	11.8
Christian	481	15.4
Others	34	1.1
No religion	415	13.3
Ethnics		
Malay	1811	58.0
Chinese	775	24.8
Indian	405	13.0
Sabah Bumiputra	44	1.4
Sarawak Bumiputra	36	1.2
Others	49	1.6
Level of Education		
No formal education	47	1.5
Primary School	156	5.0
Secondary School	1506	48.3
Higher (College or University)	1411	45.2
Employment Status		
Working	2601	823.4
Not Working	230	7.4
Retired	146	4.7
Studying	143	4.6
Household Monthly Income		
B40 (Less Than RM 4,850)	818	26.2
M40 (RM 4,850 – RM 10,959)	2078	66.6
T20 (More than RM 10, 959)	224	7.2
Marital Status		
Single	115	3.7
Married	2698	86.5
Widowed	185	5.9
Separated	77	2.5
Divorce	45	1.4

Figure 1: The percentages of IPV

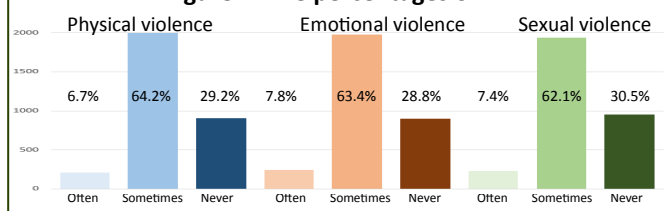
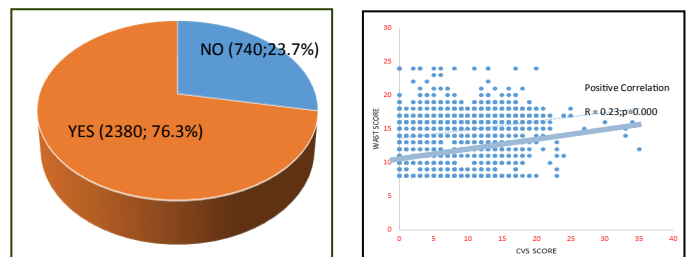


Table 2: Response of WAST Items & Cyberbullying Status

WAST Items	Cyberbullying		X ² p-value
	NO =740 n (%)	YES = 2380 n (%)	
W1. In general, how would you describe your relationship No tension Some Tension A lot of Tension	266 (35.9) 306 (41.4) 168 (22.7)	469 (19.7) 1351 (56.8) 560 (23.5)	88.614 0.000*
W2. Do you and your partner work out arguments with No difficulty Some difficulty Great difficulty	261 (35.3) 449 (60.7) 30 (4.1)	523 (22.0) 1439 (60.5) 418 (17.6)	111.45 0.000*
W3. Do arguments ever result in you feeling put down or bad about yourself? Never Sometimes Often	262 (35.4) 458 (61.9) 20 (2.7)	470 (19.7) 1678 (70.5) 232 (9.7)	99.790 0.000*
W4. Do arguments ever result in hitting, kicking or pushing? Never Sometimes Often	292 (39.5) 433 (58.5) 15 (2.0)	594 (25.0) 1516 (63.7) 270 (11.3)	97.880 0.000*
W5. Do you feel frightened by what your partner says or does? Never Sometimes Often	284 (38.4) 437 (59.1) 19 (2.6)	594 (25.0) 155 (65.2) 234 (9.8)	76.219 0.000*
W6. Has your partner ever abused you physically? Never Sometimes Often	290 (39.2) 441 (59.6) 9 (1.2)	620 (26.1) 1561 (65.6) 199 (8.4)	79.798 0.000*
W7. Has your partner ever abused you emotionally? Never Sometimes Often	281 (38.0) 437 (59.1) 22 (3.0)	617 (25.9) 1541 (64.7) 222 (9.3)	60.506 0.000*
W8. Has your partner ever abused you sexually? Never Sometimes Often	302 (40.8) 425 (57.4) 13 (1.8)	651 (27.4) 1511 (63.5) 218 (9.2)	78.589 0.000*

Fig. 2: Prevalence of Cyberbullying **Fig. 3: Correlation between IPV and Cyberbullying**



Discussion

This study highlights significant percentages of IPV and cyberbullying behaviours against spouse which are higher than common face-to-face methods [2]. Perhaps, the online survey allows survivors of IPV to share without fear their experiences of being treated with violent manner by their spouse. A few experts have also suggested that digital disclosure, help seeking and virtual counselling perhaps beneficial to break the barriers in managing IPV [3]. Almost two-third of the participants shared experiences of being physically, emotionally and sexually abused. The abusive acts not only occur physically, emotionally, sexually but also through cyberbullying. Hence, large screening, urgent detection and early intervention are pivotal to eradicate and manage IPV and cyberbullying. Nevertheless, this study has a few limitations including the use of screening tools and participants who are predominant representation of upper socioeconomic class participants. It is suggested that future study to use diagnostic tools to assess those variables and include all levels of socioeconomic statuses.

Conclusion

There are high prevalence of IPV and cyberbullying experienced by general public, both male and female adults in Malaysia. Cyberbullying and IPV increases the tendency for various detrimental consequences. It is crucial for government and non-governmental agency (NGO) to address IPV and cyberbullying, provide comprehensive support for these vulnerable groups of people. Perhaps, active hotline disclosure, online screening and virtual counselling could be parts of the intervention to eradicate IPV and cyberbullying.