

PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT EXPLORATORY STUDY FROM VIETNAMESE YOUTH

Overall Abstract

In the tech-driven society, the booming of social media has both positive and negative effects on youth development. In this case, the later outweighs the former. Nowadays, a day hardly goes by when we do not hear of some cyberbullying cases, social media scams or broken relationships ignite from social media jealousy happening somewhere in Vietnam. Not all will be covered by media as many go unnoticed. A growing number of literature has started to document the prevalence, predictors and outcomes of these risk but there is still a lack of conclusive statement.

The purpose of this symposium is threefold, which includes 1) thoroughly review relevant published English language journal articles and book chapters from trusted sources and databases which study the effects of social media on youth development, 2) examine the different aspects regarding social media through survey questionnaire and case study in Vietnam and 3) provide agenda for future research. The symposium will also

provide insights on recommendations to individuals, friends and family, authority/policy maker for not only reactive responses but also early prevention.

Three speakers (Mai Huong Nguyen, Khanh Linh Nguyen and Thanh Ha Nguyen) from Viet Nam and Singapore will address the following topics: (1) Social media and youth risk behaviours: A mini-review, (2) Cyber-bullying and its effect on Vietnamese youth, (3) The effects of social media on human relationships – Case study in Viet Nam, and (4) Effectiveness of online peer counselling, psychology first aid and offline self-help workshops in Viet Nam: A case study of Beautiful Mind Vietnam. Each presenter will provide example of actions and further research that psychology can take to move the agenda forward.

Overall, the symposium aims to give a call for action to relevant parties on the importance of youth well-being in Viet Nam and beyond.

ABOUT THE PAPERS

Four full-text papers were presented at the symposium entitled "Social media and youth development" during the First Southeast Asia Regional Conference of Psychology in Hanoi.

These papers were published in the official ISBN Conference Proceeding Book issued by the Vietnam National University Publisher.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOURS: A MINI-REVIEW

Mai Huong Nguyen

In today's world, gadgets have become an essential and integral part of life. However, apart from what seems to be positive about social media, there are visible risks await such as violence related behaviours, substance use, among others. A growing number of literature has started to document the prevalence, predictors and outcomes of these risk but there is still a lack of conclusive statement. The aim of this study is to propose a useful theoretical framework to understand the relationship between social media and risk behaviours among Vietnamese youths, aged from 12 to 20 years old. The study firstly reviews published English language journal articles and book chapters from trusted sources and databases such as American Psychological Association magazines, PsycINFO, Science Direct, etc. Secondly, publicly available statistics are used to evaluate the data more in details. Results from these reviews highlighted three main areas of risk behaviours, include 1) an increasing trend of youths engaging in related violence such as cyberbullying, victimisation, electronic dating aggression through social media 2) social media use correlates to the rise in sexual risk behaviours, and 3) youths tend to engage more in substance use behaviours through the influence from social media. As part of the review, psychological and emotional impacts of abovementioned risk behaviours were evaluated and it suggested that social media affects youths in both positive and negative ways. Finally, the present results uncover areas for future research and relevant agenda which includes the need for early intervention and prevention and the importance of social awareness regarding youth risk behaviours. This hinders that policy makers at large and educational activists should take the topic seriously to protect youth well-beings.

Keywords: sexual risk behaviour, social media, social networking site, substance use, youth, violence

1. Introduction

Connectivity is growing at an impressive and unimaginable rate. Without internet, it is a world that hard to be conceptualised. Based on data in 2013, 40% of internet users in Vietnam was in the age range of 15 to 24 (Statista, 2013). The dominant sites by daily reach in Vietnam as of July 2015 include Facebook (66%), Zalo (a Vietnamese instant messaging platform, 40%), among others (Statista, 2015). Moreover, the number of active Facebook users in Vietnam in 2018 is projected to hit nearly 34 million, which crowns Vietnam the 7th position in the world. In general, Vietnam is said to have 40% active social media penetration rate (Statista, 2017) and the number of active Twitter users in Vietnam in 2019 is expected to reach 7.3 million (Statista, 2017). Youth uses social media for various reasons such as maintaining existing relationships, connecting with friends and relatives overseas, creating new social relationships, etc. However, besides these positive and useful reasons, negative consequences, in particular, youth risk behaviours resulted from social media are catching research's attention.

Operational definitions

Youth: For the purpose of this study, youth is defined as the age group between 12 and 20 years old. This period is when rapid developments happen such as physical, psychological, and social changes.

Social media (social networking site): Social media or social networking site (SNS) interchangeably, refers to the online platform in the internet which allows users create their virtual profiles, social network and relations with other users. For the purpose of this study, SNS covers the mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Youth violence: Violence here refers to aggression which can either be physical, verbal or indirect as the result of extensive use of SNS.

Sexual risk behaviours: Sexual risk behaviours can be defined as, but not limited to, multiple or concurrent sexual partners, unprotected sexual intercourse (condom-less sex), alcohol or drug use during sexual activities, etc. (Black, et al., 2013). Besides these physical risks, posting and viewing of sexually suggestive photos and pornography can also be categorised under a risky behaviour (Young & Jordan, 2013).

Substance use: Substance use refers to the excessive usage of alcohol, illicit drugs, tobacco, or marijuana. The association between substance use and SNS includes frequent substance use related postings which can be either themselves engaging in the activity or their friends.

The aim of this study is to review relevant literature on youth risk behaviours in three main aspects, namely youth related-violence, sexual risk behaviours and substance abuse. After the review, the study will propose a useful theoretical framework to apply in Vietnam context for prevention and intervention.

2. Method

Studies included in the review consisted of published English language journal articles and book chapters from trusted sources/ databases such as American Psychological Association magazines, PsycINFO, Science Direct, and PubMed, etc. Key search terms were used to retrieve relevant articles, such as, “social networking site” and “sexual risk behaviours”, “youth violence”, “substance use”. The age range was incorporated by either adding terms such as “youth”, “teen”, “young adult” or limiting the age range to 12 to 20 years old wherever possible. The search returned 150 unique articles, however not all articles are in PDF files or can be accessed or downloaded in full for free, or directly relevant to this study. Therefore after limiting the condition, 30 articles were chosen to be summarised in this review. The independent researchers, with the help of a gap-year student, screened all articles and highlighted the important findings to include in this study. Moreover, publicly available statistics were also used to evaluate the data for Vietnam context in greater depth. Table below describes the articles reviewed.

	Quasi-experiment	Survey	Review	Qualitative	Case study	Total
Youth violence	8	62	2	2	4	78
Sexual risk behaviour	2	21			1	24
Substance abuse	2	28		8	10	48

3. Results

3.1 Youth violence

The role of social media in related violence

There is growing evidence that SNS plays an integral role in youth violence. Aggressive youth have stronger tendency to seek for violent entertainment, as such they tend to watch more violence-related postings or videos (Huesmann, 2009). The major category of social networking site-involved youth violence is cyberbullying, which is defined as a type of bullying involving the use of online communication such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. Review of literature varies widely as to the percentage of victims of cyber-bullying. However, the general trend suggested that approximately 20% of online users indicated being a victim of cyberbullying at some point in their lives. Moreover, cyberbullying materials can be permanent and available to the public, which makes the pleasure greater than traditional bullying.

Research has shown that short-term exposure to such forms of social media increases the likelihood of physically and verbally antisocial behaviour, thoughts, and emotions (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006). Moreover, the connection between frequent exposure to violent media in childhood and aggression later in life, including physical assaults and spouse abuse was proven by recent longitudinal researches that provide converging evidence for linking (Anderson, et al., 2003).

Findings from youth with age ranging from 10 to 17 years old showed that 14% of them reported to make rude or nasty comments, 1% admitted to harassing or embarrassing someone online. In the same study, 6% self-reported frequently engaging in Internet harassment, and an additional 17% reported limited Internet

harassment (Michele & Ybarra, 2004). In Vietnam, youth took up 25.6% of the population and they are not only benefited from social media but also suffered from psychological detrimental effects as they closely immerse themselves in social media.

Consequence

Continual exposure to SNS evidently generates dire consequences among youths in their daily life and future. Online violence as a source of entertainment continues to increase since they tend to regard these as normal occurrence. Young people engaging in violence through online platforms have a strong tendency to elicit hostile behaviour in real life. In other situations, cyber-violence negatively affects human's emotions, leading to the fact that the young may behave inappropriately to imitate their online role model.

A significant number of young women were engaging in sexual risk behaviours when online and continued this behaviour off-line, which put them at a heightened risk of sexual violence (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002). Moreover, contribution to harmful online activities increase the likelihood of young people behaving aggressively (Dodge, 1980). Social media violence in general can have long-term psychological consequences on youth health.

3.2 Sexual risk behaviours

Few studies have looked into sexual risk behaviour resulted from social networking site such as engaging in online sexual activities and continuing it offline, dirty chat-room or inappropriate profiles in online dating sites. For the purpose of the review on this section, apart from mainstream SNS as indicated above, online dating sites and geo-social networking application were also mentioned. The review grouped sexual risk behaviours into three main categorises with 1 being the least risky to 3 being most risky in term of impacts and consequences: 1) non-arousal activities (e.g., posting and viewing of sexually suggestive photos or information search), 2) solitary-arousal actives (participating in "dirty" chat-room or watching pornography), and 3) partnered arousal activities (multiple or concurrent sexual partners, unprotected sexual intercourse (condom-less sex),

alcohol or drug use during sexual activities, etc.). This grouping was done according to existing studies on online sexual activities (Cooper, Griffin-Shelley, Delmonico, & Mathy, 2001; Shaughnessy, Byers, & Walsh, 2011). Overall, most findings suggested that people who seek for sexual partners online or engage in online sexual activities tend to exhibit these risky behaviours more than people who do not seek for partners online (Romo, et al., 2017).

Non-arousal activities

Wery and Billieux (2016) studied 434 men using online survey circulated, however, the high prevalence rate of pornography website is a hurdle. Most searches using keywords such as "sexual education" or "sexual health" will likely return a pornography website instead (Smith, Gertz, Alvarez, & Lurie, 2000). Ngo, Ross, and Ratliff (2008) studied the internet influences on sexual practices among youth in Hanoi, Vietnam with the age range from 15 to 19 years through focus group, interview and chat scripts. The findings suggested that youth relied on internet to get information about different perspective of sex and sexuality and discuss sexual information without social censure mainly because they can be anonymous online.

Solitary-arousal activities

Numerous studies have explored the frequency of porn viewing in youth and its consequences on youth behaviours. Albright (2008) surveyed 15,246 Americans and among these, seventy-five percent of men and forty-one percent of women reported to have viewed or downloaded erotic images or pornography. The study suggested that men who frequently watched pornography resulted in being more critical of their partners' physical image and less interested in real life sexual activities. Whereas, the female counterpart reported to have lower self-esteem after watching and to be more pressured in actual sex as they feel burdened to act out the same. From another research angle, studies suggested that youth used pornography as a source of sex education to learn about erotic sex positions (Hunter, Figueredo, & Malamuth, 2010). The risk is that online information may not be valid and accurate.

Partnered-arousal activities

The risks from partnered-arousal activities include multiple or concurrent sexual partners, unprotected sexual intercourse (condom-less sex) and alcohol or drug use during sexual activities, which eventually results in sexually transmitted diseases. Internet dating, sex seeking and hook-up sites have grown much popular now than ever. Based on different studies on SNS use in engaging in online sexual activities, most respondents found that SNS is convenient in finding sexual partners and categorising partners in terms of sexual preferences and characteristics (Rosser, Oakes, Horvath, Konstan, Danilenko, & Peterson, 2009; Bull, Breslin, Wright, Black, Levine, & Santelli, 2011). Another reason for the SNS' increasing growth was its ability to connect a community of similar individuals and shield them from the stigmatisation from friends and family. These groups include, but not limited to, men who have sex with men, gay, bisexual, etc (Brown, Maycock, & Burns, 2005).

A survey was done in 273 adolescents with the age from 13 to 19 years old in Florida, USA to examine their online sexual habits. The result suggested that 80% of the participants who met their sexual partners online engaged in early-age vaginal sex, alcohol use during or before sex and even same-sex sexual activity (Buhi, et al., 2013). Seeking for sexual partners online has been increasing as the Internet is becoming widely-used. Another study examined online sexual practices and risk factors such as transmitted diseases and other health threats among young adults who find partners on the Internet. Among the 1234 participants aged 18 to 24 who were surveyed, the data suggested that this group has a significant higher risk for sexually transmitted diseases. This also suggested a positive correlation between online sexual seeking behaviour and potential health risks could be resulted from the bad sexual habits offline. Research has also tried to study specifically women and their online sexual activities. To no surprise, the Internet is a promising sex venue with a high traffic of women using it as a platform to find sex partners. If red light districts are often associated with women, or sex workers, in this era, the internet is an exact virtual duplication of these streets. Moreover, the Internet makes it easier to find potential

sex partners with wider pool and ease of travel (McFarlane, Kachur, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2004). In the same study, responses from 1286 women were analysed. Among those, 544 (43%) responded having sex with a partner they met on the internet for the first time. The findings also suggested that these women may have a higher risk of sexually transmitted infections as they reported to have a high number of partners, not frequently used condoms and engage in dangerous sexual acts.

A meta-analysis was done among men who have sex with men by reviewing 11 studies amounting to 39,602 sexual encounters. The result showed that these men who find their sex partners online are more likely to have unprotected anal intercourse, hence higher risk of sexual risks (Lewnard & Berrang-Ford, 2014). The same results were found in a study on 205 men who have sex with men in Hanoi, Vietnam. It suggested that these men search for their sexual partners via social media because of the societal stigma and discrimination, especially in middle income country like Vietnam. However, they had no or little information about these online partners which expose them to higher risks of getting sexually transmitted diseases (Krishnan, et al., 2017). Furthermore, the use of geo-social networking application such as Tinder was reviewed recently in 11 studies and results suggested that the prevalence of unprotected sex was higher in people who used these apps, ranging from 17.0% to 66.7%. Similarly, the average number of sexual partners among apps users ranged from 1.4 to 2.9 in the last one-month period and shockingly ranged from 46.2 to 79.6 in their lifetime (Choi, Wong, & Fong, 2017).

3.3 Substance use

Alcohol-related postings on SNS takes up to 60-80% of the posts (profiles, photos, status, etc.). Other substance use such as illicit drugs, tobacco, and marijuana are also becoming a bigger problem for youth who spend a lot of their time on these sites. In a study to examine disclosure of substance use on SNS, 314 college students were asked to complete a 40-min-survey with a series of questions about their SNS usage and personal experience with posting alcohol and drugs pictures or videos online.

From this survey, one third of participants reported to have posted pictures of themselves drinking or their friends posted it (32% and 38% respectively). In terms of pictures on smoking marijuana, a much lesser percentage disclosed information about themselves, however, 39% of participants reported that their friends posted a picture before (Morgan, Snelson, & Elison-Bowers, 2010). Numerous studies have also looked into the attitudes towards alcohol consumption and marijuana use. Results found that youth's attitudes towards substance related postings suggested an accepting attitudes towards these behaviours (Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008).

Only a few studies have examined the relationship between exposure to substance use related activity on SNS and the onset use, and these mostly support a positive association. The National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University surveyed more than 2000 youths from the age of 12 to 17 years old over phone and internet in order to identify the possible factors that affect substance abuse. The findings suggested that youth who frequent these SNS reported three times more likely to drink alcohol (26% and 9%), five times more likely to use tobacco (10% and 2%), and twice as likely to use marijuana (13% and 7%) than youth who do not (French, 2011). Studies also suggested that an exposure to substance use imagery is correlated with onset in use (Dal Cin, Stoolmiller, & Sargent, 2012). In other words, youth who used SNS often were more likely to use alcohol, marijuana, etc., and the risk was higher for those who have seen pictures of alcohol or drugs use of other peers. Fewer studies have actually looked at the other substance such as illicit drugs and marijuana as it is hard to verify and testify responses or participants are more reluctant to answer to questionnaire and interview regarding this matter.

4. Discussion and Future research

Discussion

Results from this study highlighted three main areas of risk behaviours. Firstly, the review shows an increasing trend of youths engaging in related violence such as cyberbullying, victimisation, and electronic dating aggression through social media. And youth who are

engaging in violence through online platforms have a strong tendency to elicit hostile behaviour in real life. Secondly, social media use correlates to the rise in sexual risk behaviours. However, as it is a sensitive topic, results are not so conclusive. And lastly, the review also shows that youths tend to engage more in substance use behaviours such as alcohol, marijuana, etc. through the influence from social media.

While the available studies provide important insights on how social media may result in the different youth risk behaviours, there are methodological challenges to all studies. First of all, most studies involving social media rely on self-reported survey responses or interview. Hence the responses may subject to the issues of social desirability and more importantly, self-image of the respondent since these are sensitive disclosures. Secondly, most studies involve viewing and crawling information from SNS profiles, data analysis would not be able to capture the real information if the contents are unavailable or hidden. These largely are dependent on the security settings of respondents' SNS profiles. And lastly, the context of these studies were to determine a relationship between exposure to SNS and behaviours, a seasonal study may not be able to provide conclusive findings and generalise the results to larger population.

At first, the researcher wanted to get more in-depth statistics from General Statistics Office of Viet Nam which are publicly available. However, very little studies or statistics about SNS and its impact on Vietnamese youth using intended keywords could be retrieved. A few research has been done using small samples from different cities in Vietnam or those national wide studies are rather out-dated.

Future research

Given the intensive scope of research in this subject, future work should consider better theoretical framework in order to capture and analyse data more effectively. Big data techniques to crawl information or machine learning based on key word recognition and semantic network algorithm from large data pool can be used to draw conclusive findings national and international wide. Moreover, vast majority described in this review is purely

descriptive, future research can explore and look into it in a more holistic way with qualitative measures.

Furthermore, future work should include consideration to be a platform for prevention and intervention on SNS and its influences such as having awareness programmes and providing educational health information. Subsequent studies could be used as a good gauge for policy makers and educational activists to plan for possible protection to youth well-beings. More research in Vietnam using the sample size of Vietnamese youths should be encouraged in order to provide insights on how these phenomena affect the country. Educational activists and researchers from Vietnamese universities should explore the visibility and opportunity for this stream of research. Either it can be done in a faculty paper (for example, a research paper from psychology department of National University) or national wide.

5. Acknowledgement

The author would like to express great gratitude to Dr Hoa Nguyen at Political Theory Department, Central Propaganda Committee (Vietnam) for her useful comments and feedback in the initial stage of the study. The author would also like to thank Ms Nguyen Huong Tra for her contribution in literature review under the author's guidance.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Mai Huong Nguyen

Social media has become an inseparable part of youth life. Besides its many positive impacts such as connecting people, increasing productivity, etc., social media does affect youths negatively to a certain extent. The current study aims to investigate the reason for the excessive use of social media among Vietnamese youths. It then examines the effects of social media, especially the main sites such as Facebook, Instagram on human relationships among Vietnamese youths who spend large amounts of their time on the Internet and using their smartphones. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire from 150 high school and university students from Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the two big cities of Vietnam. The respondents volunteered to answer the open-invited survey questionnaire via online form. The findings showed that 1) majority of respondents declared that they use social media excessively to stay in touch with existing friends and to make new friends, among other reasons; 2) majority of respondents acknowledged that excessive use of social media affects their relationship with parents and siblings at home; 3) majority of respondents reported to have experienced being isolated from relatives and friends and 4) a high percentage of respondents reported to have become more introverted after a period of time. Results from the study highlighted that even though social media brings many positive contribution to society, its negative impacts should not be ignored or taken lightly. The study also discusses several limitations, including the lack of statistical power and an overreliance on descriptive data. Recommendation for future research includes studying in-depth how detached social relationships could affect ones in their later life. That requires a longitudinal research to a targeted group of participants.

Keywords: social media, social networking site SNS, family relation, friendship, introverted personality

1. Introduction

In this modern era, internet has become the most powerful source to connect people globally, beyond the physical boundaries. Boyd and Ellison (2007) characterised SNS as web-based services that allow individuals to create a public profile virtually, build a connection or sharing list whom they want to share information with, and interact with people on their list. Basically, SNS involves the relationships of individual with others within a bounded system or virtual society. By using SNS, individuals feel more socially connected and part of the network. The different technologies include instant messaging, emails, photos and video sharing sites (YouTube), and the various social media (as known as social networking sites - SNS, interchangeably) such as Facebook, Twitter, blog, etc. Based on a real-time statistics, the use of SNS is growing dramatically in Vietnam (We Are Social, 2017). Given the total population of nearly 95 million, more than half of the Vietnamese population is active internet user (50.05 million). Among those, 46 million have active SNS account. Digital growth in Vietnam has accelerated quickly and appeared to be one of the highest growth among Asia-Pacific countries and it shows no sign of slowing down in the near future.

One of the most essential part of youth development is to establish interpersonal connections with parents, peers and even strangers (Steinberg, 2010). As SNS is becoming an integral part of lives, it is important to look at it carefully in the context of interpersonal development. Different types of relationships include interaction with family, peers, romantic partners, etc. There is no doubt that wide coverage of SNS has altered the traditional relationship model.

Youth is the time where life becomes extremely busier with more activities and plans that they have lesser time to interact with others. In other words, their time becomes more limited and SNS provides the aid to maintain, sustain and improve that interaction. A longitudinal study examined 92 youths in two phases

when they were 13-14 years old and 20-22 years old for their social and behavioural adjustment on SNS and in real life. Findings from the study suggested that young people use SNS to recreate their face-to-face interaction patterns. In other words, they would act the same online as they do offline. The study also found that youth with higher positivity in dyadic peer interactions resulted in larger number of friends on SNS. In term of gender, females were found to have more positive and supportive comments or postings from friends than males (Mikami, Szewedo, Allen, Evans, & Hare, 2010). Results from a study with 261 high-school students revealed that adolescent boys and girls have similar patterns in term of their social interaction. It also suggested that they use these technologies for various purposes such as to maintain relationship with existing friends, interact with family members, or to create new connections (Elisheva, 2004). The online world somehow projects what their offline world looks like as the contents are psychologically connected (Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono, Li, & Lipana, 2009).

In a comprehensive study to examine frequency of use and relationship between the use of SNS and romantic relationship, more than 5000 people were drawn to take part in the 300 plus-item evaluation questionnaires. Majority of participants reported to use instant messaging to communicate with their partner very frequently to express their affection towards one another. The findings also suggested that instant messaging had the most significant correlation with individual's positive and negative communication with their romantic partners (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011).

Though SNS seems to afford a new and different avenue of social interaction which enables youth to form new relationships that otherwise would not be able to, there hinders negativity that SNS can bring. Alongside with studies looking at the bright side, various studies have also looked into the negative angle of SNS on relationship. The nature of SNS is virtual and 24/7, it sometimes act as a mediator for individual to achieve unpleasant interpersonal tasks otherwise hard to complete. These tasks can be break-up process using text messages, instant messages or changing relationship

status on SNS (Brown, 2011). In an effort to measure internet dependence among college students, an enrolment of nearly 20000 students at Midwestern University was sampled to complete an online survey regarding addiction. Four factors include problem usage, time spent, heavy usage and withdrawal were used for this study. The findings showed that the dependent nature of various social media acts the same way as substance dependence such as alcohol and drugs. However, no confirmatory finding was present as the study did not find a strong correlation between the heavy usage and feelings of withdrawal (Michell & Beard, 2010).

While a view seems to support the use of SNS as a good channel to improve interpersonal communication, another view focuses on its drawbacks and negative effects. The debate is ongoing as there is no confirmatory research yet.

Research gap

Limited research has studied SNS and human relationships in Vietnam context. The lack of research initiatives and statistics is a major concern in efforts to understand social issues in Vietnam more in-depth. The aim of this study is to investigate SNS usage among Vietnamese youths which include the hours spent each day on SNS, the reasons why they use SNS and which platforms are more popular in Vietnam. It also helps to examine the effects of SNS on youth's social development, especially on their relationships with family, peers, and others.

2. Method

Participants

The area/locale of current research was Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and Hanoi and the target population was high-school and university students from these two cities.

Measures

The survey questionnaire consisted of ten questions and divided into three main parts. The very first question was to understand the demographic of respondent in term of age range. The study was not designed to find any relationships or correlation in regards to gender or

occupation, therefore, the researcher felt that age range was sufficient enough. The second part was designed to examine the usage of SNS of respondent by asking which site they use, average time they spend on the site per day and to what purposes they use the site for. And lastly, the third part was designed to understand how SNS may have an effect on the respondent and his/her relationships with others around him/her. This part included six questions asking the respondent rate each statement in a Likert scale from 1 (being “not at all” relevant) to 5 (being “very much so” relevant).

Procedure

The survey questionnaires were distributed physically to students at the end of various student workshops held in HCMC and Hanoi. The intention of the study was conveyed clearly to respondents and a clause of Personal Data Protection Act was included in the survey to ensure anonymity of participants and no distribution of collected data to third party.

3. Results

The age range was limited to 12 to 20 years old. Based on the responses, nearly half of them spend more than three hours on SNS each day (47.3%). Those leading SNS in Vietnam include Facebook with all respondents reported to use it (100%), Instagram (68%) and the rest with lesser users. When being asked (verbally) about what other popular SNS platforms in Vietnam that they use, respondents listed Zalo, Viber, and Zing. These are Vietnamese version of instant messaging platforms, similar to WhatsApp. Table 1 shows the detailed break-down of descriptive statistics by age range, average time spent on SNS each day and SNS platforms used by Vietnamese youth.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics of respondents (N = 150)

	<i>n</i>	%
Age range		
12 to 14	13	8.7%
15 to 17	96	64.0%
18 to 20	41	27.3%
Average time spent on SNS per day		
<1 hour	6	4.0%
1-2 hours	34	22.7%
2-3 hours	39	26.0%
>3 hours	71	47.3%
SNS platforms used		
Facebook	150	100.0%
Twitter	24	16.0%
Instagram	102	68.0%
Google Plus	15	10.0%
Online gaming	8	5.3%
Others	17	11.3%

Respondents were also asked on the reasons why they use SNS and 92% of respondents reported to use it for keeping in touch with friends and others. Killing boredom and reconnecting with old relationships ranked third and fourth in regards to the purpose of using SNS (76% and 72% respectively). Lastly, 64% of respondents used SNS to make new friends and 36% of them reported to use it for showing off with others. Among the responses, six respondents indicated that they use SNS to update information, read news, find information and for academic or work related purposes. Table 2 below shows the detailed break-down of this question.

TABLE 2. Reasons to use SNS (N = 150)

	<i>n</i>	%
Reconnect with old friends	108	72.0%
Keep in touch with existing friends	138	92.0%
Make new friends	96	64.0%
Show off	54	36.0%
Kill boredom	114	76.0%
Others	6	4.0%

Regarding questions to understand how SNS may have an effect on respondents and relationships with others

around them, most responses geared towards the scale of “much so relevant” and “very much so relevant”. A large percentage of respondents claimed to have lesser time spent together with others (80%) or find it harder to communicate face to face (79.3%). Half of them actually falls out of touch if not logging in for a while (48.7%) or talks lesser to their parents at home (54.7%). In term of behavioural change such as becoming more introverted due to the excessive usage of SNS, one fifth of respondents reported to experience such change. In term of issues with trust in relationships with family, friends or romantic ones because of SNS, more than half of them experienced so before (62.7%). Table 3 shows a detailed breakdown of these questions.

TABLE3. Potential negative effects of SNS (N = 150)

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
SNS takes away time spent together with others		
No/ Not much so	25	16.7%
Neutral	5	3.3%
Much/ very much so	120	80.0%
Feel out of touch if not logging in for a while		
No/ Not much so	16	10.7%
Neutral	61	40.7%
Much/ very much so	73	48.7%
Talk lesser to parents at home		
No/ Not much so	19	12.7%
Neutral	49	32.7%
Much/ very much so	82	54.7%
Find it harder to communicate face to face		
No/ Not much so	21	14.0%
Neutral	10	6.7%
Much/ very much so	119	79.3%
Become more introverted		
No/ Not much so	51	34.0%
Neutral	68	45.3%
Much/ very much so	31	20.7%
Encounter trust issues in relationships		
No/ Not much so	22	14.7%
Neutral	34	22.7%
Much/ very much so	94	62.7%

4. Discussion

This study investigate the reasons for SNS use and examined the potential negative effects of social media, especially the main sites such as Facebook, Instagram on human relationships among Vietnamese youths who spend large amounts of their time on the Internet and using their smartphones. The results were based on descriptive statistics finding using percentage and frequency to each question asked.

SNS average time spent and reasons to use

The findings showed that nearly half of respondents spend more than three hours on SNS each day. This result is similar with other real-time statistical tools and research reports which also look into the media time spent of Vietnamese youths. The figure for average daily SNS use was 2 hours 18 minutes for social media usage via any device (Reaching Vietnam, 2016). In terms of reasons to use SNS, a majority of respondents declared that they use social media excessively to stay in touch with existing friends and to make new friends, among other reasons. The result unveils the prominence of SNS among youths and also helps to validate the importance of studying more in-depth SNS use. The finding is also somewhat in line with Facebook's primary purpose, according its homepage, is to share information with people you know, see what is going on with your friends, and look up people around you. A study looked into Five-Factor model of personality and examined how personality and motivations associated with SNS use, in particular, Facebook. The results indicated that a motivation to communicate and interact was influential in terms of their usage and it further suggested that different motivations based on the different personality traits may decide the use of such communication tools (Ross, et al., 2009). No doubt that SNS has the potential to create a shift in how we communicate. Similarly with this current finding, other studies also suggested that the major use of SNS is to maintain pre-existing social connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Among other reasons, SNS also allows individual to find and make friend with others who have similar interests (McKenna, Green, & Glenson, 2002).

Potential negative effects of SNS on relationships

The findings suggested the following interesting trends 1) majority of respondents acknowledged that excessive use of social media affects their relationship with parents and siblings at home; 2) majority of respondents reported to have experienced being isolated from relatives and friends and 3) a high percentage of respondents reported to have become more introverted after a period of time.

SNS may have provided stronger relationship than face-to-face method which is why more people rely on SNS usage than have offline interaction (McKenna, Green, & Glenson, 2002). Through SNS, people are more willing to disclose information about themselves and to foster deeper interaction without any restrictions like how face-to-face conversation would be. For example, in the online conversation, youths can ask deep personal questions such as someone's sexual orientation without offending the others (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). This kind of conversations may be harder to share with parents, relatives or even friends offline. Therefore youths prefer online communication than real-world contact. However, as the finding suggested majority of respondents claimed to have experienced the potential negative effects of SNS, the reason might be youths are unaware on how to balance their online and offline interaction.

Limitations

The study has several limitations, including the lack of statistical power and an overreliance on descriptive data. First of all, the study only included 150 participants who were gathered through student networks in Hanoi and HCMC high schools and universities. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to a larger sample size or Vietnam in general. In terms of measurement of variables, the study did not manage to capture other SNS which are popular in Vietnam and only focused on the known SNS worldwide which may not be relevant to this social setting (Google Plus or Twitter). In this regard, the study limited itself immediately in terms of reach.

Secondly, self-report method was used to gather information from participants. This may hinder social desirability bias in which participants responded in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others.

Lastly, the questionnaire was designed to ask for opinions on potential negative effects of SNS that respondents might face in their daily communication. By doing so, the study narrowed itself and eliminated the positive effects of SNS. The questionnaire largely uses a five point Likert scale and direct statements to determine the wanted results. Hence, only descriptive statistics were drawn from dataset. Given the designed methodology, the study may lack statistical power and validity to give a conclusive findings.

Future research

Future research could set to minimise the above mentioned limitations by casting a wider net of sample and including interviews or case studies. In regards to questionnaire design, adding more questions measuring the potential positive effects of SNS and elaborating on the different human relationships would help to enhance the scale and comprehensiveness of further study.

Another recommendation for future research includes studying in-depth how detached social relationships could affect ones in their later life. That requires a longitudinal research to a targeted group of participants.

5. Conclusion

SNS has increasing become an integral part of life and a substantial communication tool for youths. The study utilised a specific population from two large cities in Vietnam in order to examine the potential negative effects of SNS on youths. The findings suggested an interesting and at the same time alarming trend on how youths rely on the usage of SNS. At the same time, the findings can pave ways and lead to a better understanding on how Vietnamese youths prefer to communicate and interact and the intentions of their SNS use. Given the vast majority claimed to have experienced negative impacts from SNS, preventive recommendations should be in place to facilitate better experience.

On the other hand, as the advancement of technology is evolving by the second, further studies will need to catch up with that development determine the impact of continued SNS use on youth and on society as a whole.

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CYBERBULLYING AND ITS EFFECTS ON VIETNAMESE YOUTH

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Cyberbullying involves the use of online social platform or communication and it includes to send threatening or insulting messages, embarrass the other party publicly, and disclose private or often offensive photos, among others. This study aims to investigate the trend of cyberbullying in Vietnam and its effects on Vietnamese youths. The study reviewed published English language journal articles and book chapters from trusted sources and databases such as PsycINFO, Science Direct, PubMed, etc. Search terms for social media included “Facebook”, “Twitter”, “YouTube”, “ask.fm” and the main term “cyberbullying”. The age range was incorporated by adding keywords such as “youth”, “high school students”, or “teenager”. All searches were limit to articles published between 2007 and 2017. Additionally, a random sample of 1345 avid readers of a Facebook page completed a survey on cyberbullying. Among those, using stratified sampling method, 550 responses from people who were affected by cyberbullying were analysed as well as 10 case studies on victims of cyberbullying were conducted. The results from literature review, survey and case studies uncovered important findings, include 1) more youths are being exposed to cyberbullying than traditional bullying, 2) anonymous cyberbullying is on the rise due to the fast-paced technology, and 3) cyberbullying affects youth well-being, both mentally and psychologically. Limitation of the study includes the adequacy of quantitative analysis and generalizability of given statistics. Finally, the present results provide relevant agenda, including the roles of media content provider in liberating the understanding of cyberbullying consequences, the urge for an in-depth analysis on impacts of cyberbullying on key behavioural and psychological outcomes, and the need to increase social awareness on cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, social media, youth, teenager, traditional bullying, anonymous, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Internet and social media have become an integral part of life in not only positive manners but also negative impacts. More youths turn to the Internet to rant or take out their aggression and frustration. Cyberbullying involves the use of online social platform or communication and it includes to send threatening or insulting messages, embarrass the other party publicly, and disclose private or often offensive photos, among others (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Keith & Martin, 2005). Numerous studies have looked into the effects of cyberbullying to youth wellbeing. The results have shown a relationship between cyberbullying and alarming negative outcomes, including depression, suicidal ideation, and decreased performance in school (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007). Cyberbullying in Australia involves mostly malicious, targeted and repeated use of text and instant messages by older students since they owned a phone (Cross, Shaw, Epstein, Monks, Dooley, & Hearn, 2009). However, the fact is that cyberbullying can take many forms in many different venues.

In essence, cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying. Both types of bullying usually occur repeatedly and cause harm to the victim. The main difference is, in most cases, cyberbullying implies anonymous identities engage in the activity. As the virtual world is literally online for 24/7, materials from the cyberbullying cases will be wide reaching and spreading. Moreover, materials once sent or uploaded can be difficult to remove from the web. In other words, cyberbullying tends to make use of technologies to imply public humiliation on the victims. Taking into account the real threats from the booming of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, ask.fm, etc., it seems to be normal for cyberbullying to be more prominent. According to real time statistics, Facebook has approximately 1.94 billion

monthly active users while Twitter and ask.fm have 328 million and 160 million monthly active users respectively (Statista, 2017). Moreover, the number of worldwide user is expected to hit nearly 3 billion by 2020, given the world population is just merely three times of that.

Research has studied the prevalence of cyberbullying in youth and findings suggested that about one third of students was victims of cyberbullying, while one fifth of students admitted to cyberbully others (Williams & Guerra, 2007). According to MacDonald and Robert-Pittman (2010), 25% and 21% of students were bullied through social media and text messages respectively. Different studies regarding cyberbullying have been conducted in different regions and countries and results suggested a rise in the prevalence of the problem. More youths are being exposed to cyberbullying, either being victimised by it or actually engaging in attacking other people online.

In Vietnam, not until recent years that cyberbullying has become a serious topic. More cases of cyberbullying make it to the front page or most-read news. According to Nguoi lao dong (2015), a 15-year-old female student suicided after her nude video clip was spread in Facebook by her boyfriend. She felt so ashamed and guilty by the negative reaction of the online community because after only two days, the video reached more than 300.000 views, 18.000 likes, 4.000 shares and countless comments. The case made a huge turbulence in Vietnam at that time. Another case was when a young female student could not answer questions on a famous TV show and the online community made fun of her using harsh comments and calling her “stupid”, “idiot”, etc (VOA, 2016).

Research aim

Even though, numerous studies have looked into cyberbullying, its prevalence and effects on youth, not many conclusive statements have been made to date. Since most studies are one-off research, it is impossible to generalise the results to bring out causation effect or directly link cyberbullying with negative impacts on psychological and mental well-being. The purpose of this current study is threefold: 1) to investigate the trend of cyberbullying in Vietnam; 2) to provide a narrative review

on its effects on Vietnamese youths, and 3) to note research gaps and limitations, therefore laying agenda for future research with directions where additional and greater attention is needed.

2. Methods

Survey questionnaire

Participants

The data for this study came from a survey distributed to people who may be readers of a non-profit organisation which provides peer-counselling service and mental health knowledge to Vietnamese youth. Among 1,345 responses came back, only responses from those were affected by cyberbullying were used. Using stratified sampling technique, the final sample size totalled 550 in which 473 respondents are female, 45 males and 32 did not declare gender.

Material and Procedure

The survey questionnaire was constructed to measure relevant respondents' report on cyberbullying. It includes eight questions and two forms to fill in some other means of personal contact to conduct more detailed information. Apart from demographic questions such as age range, gender, they were asked about experiences with cyberbullying. Respondents were instructed to complete the surveys anonymously. Consent information was made known to them in protection of their personal data and responses to the survey.

Case study

Ten participants who were victims of cyberbullying, were interviewed via emails, Skype and instant messaging such as WhatsApp, Messenger. They shared their experiences and opinions about cyberbullying and how it influenced them. Manuscripts were recorded in Vietnamese, later translated into English and evaluated for analysis.

3. Results

Survey questionnaire

Table 1 shows the break-down of descriptive statistics by gender, age range and area of living of respondents.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics of respondents (N = 550)

	n	%
Gender		
Female	473	86.0
Male	45	8.2
Missing	32	5.8
Age		
10-12	2	0.4
13-16	147	26.7
17-20	242	44.0
21-25	129	23.4
> 26	30	5.5
Areas of living		
Abroad	42	7.6
In Vietnam (countryside/small town)	87	15.9
In Vietnam (major city/urban area)	421	76.5

In this sample, 45 males (8.2%) responded that they have affected by cyberbullying. In contrary, a much larger number, 473 female respondents (86.0%) acknowledged that they were either attackers or victims of cyberbullying. There were 32 respondents who did not disclose their genders (5.8%), hence the data were masked as “missing”. The ratio between male and female victims of cyberbullying is approximately 1:11. A large percentage of respondents was in the age range from 17 to 20 years old (44.2%). The age range of 13 to 16 and 21 to 25 attributed to one fourth of the population each (26.7% and 23.4% respectively). The data also captured two children in the age of 10 to 12 years old (0.4%) who responded and respondents over 26 years old (5.5%). However, their subsequent answers were not further analysed as the age ranges were not defined as “youth”. Furthermore, the area of living was also taken into account, 76.5% of respondents is living in major city or urban area of Vietnam. In contrast, there are only 15.9% of respondents living in the countryside and small towns in Vietnam. And lastly, 7.6% of respondents are living abroad (outside Vietnam).

Lastly, the survey asked respondents about the victims’ reactions after the event of cyberbullying in terms of whether they disclosed the event to others and whether they experienced any emotional and psychological changes. Nearly half of the respondents chose to disclose

the cyberbullying event to others (48.4%) while a slightly higher percentage of respondents did not (51.6%). It suggested that 83.6% of all respondents disclosed to have experienced emotional and psychological changes after the event of cyberbullying. On the other hand, only a small percentage of respondents did not spot any changes or did not have negative reactions after the cyberbullying event (16.4%). Table 2 below shows the detailed breakdown of statistics regarding the two survey items.

TABLE2. Reaction of respondents after cyberbullying event (N = 550)

	n	%
Disclosed the event to others		
Yes	266	48.4
No	284	51.6
Experienced any emotional and psychological changes		
Yes	460	83.6
No	90	16.4

The last survey question asked about the reason why they did not disclose their experiences to others and the question was marked optional. One fourth of them responded reasons as described in Table 3 below.

TABLE3. Reasons not to disclose the cyberbullying events to others (N = 116)

Reason	n	%
Tried to handle it alone, assumed that the event would pass easily	24	20.7
Was afraid of being judged (by friends), scolded (by parents)	23	19.8
Assumed that no one cared, understood the problem	23	19.8
Did not believe in others	17	14.7
Believed that nobody could help	10	8.6
Blamed self for being a burden to others	9	7.8
Was afraid of letting people know they were bullied	6	5.2
Did not want to appear weak	4	3.4

The results showed that the top three reasons to not disclose cyberbullying events to others include trying to handle it alone (20.7%), being afraid of being judged or scolded (19.8%), and assuming that no one cares (19.8%).

Case study

The following is 10 English translated manuscripts from cyberbullying victims.

[1] "It haunted me. It was such a fearful, scary memory" – Female, 19

[2] "There was a girl, who was a friend of my old boyfriend's ex. At that time we were all high school students, and I don't remember why we were all friends in Facebook. One time, I censored my boyfriend's ex in a post, but did not censor the girl. Things were not serious and the content of my post were not anything negative towards them. However, the girl posted a post in my wall with fierce words and quarrelled with me like a rival. Her attitude made me shock. After that, both girls unfriended me. What made me felt sad was that my boyfriend kept silent watching me being bullied. We broke up few years later, a part of the reason came from the unsafe feeling he left me during that event and other similar ones, when I needed him to speak up." – Female, 22

[3] "I was bullied and received rape, death threats through my friend's ask.fm account. First it was just a joke about my breast and then people kept telling me they wanted me and desired to rape me. I was 17 years old at that time. When that Ask.fm's question was shared widely on Facebook and a lot of comments entailed, I knew I was not allowed to express that I was so afraid, so I replied them in a tougher, firm manner. The next one month, I always carried knife and scissor to school to defend myself, just in case." – Female, 19

[4] "I felt panic and extremely confused. I had sweating, racing heart, breathe difficulties, shaky and blurred vision when I saw the bully's posts, comments and messages with the emoticons. Eventually I feared all the emoticons and social media because it reminds me of everything that related to the bully. After that, I was kind of "paranoid" whenever I received any messages from anyone even just saying hello, because I assumed the bully did that. I repeatedly deleted all my social network's accounts, and stopped using social network services for 2 months, and removed all my posts and comments, too; because I was afraid the bully would use that against me. Every negative words (for example: stupid, fool...) that I read somewhere were enough to trigger me and pulled me back to those painful memory." – Male, 20

[5] "Feeling low-value, low self-esteem, insecure, and depressed" – Female, 24

[6] "I am an administrator of a huge comedy fan page on Facebook. Although I only uploaded funny images and videos but sometimes I saw negative comments about me just because of I made some insignificant, nonsense mistakes such as typo error, or when I could not express it right and accurate, and they even made things up as an excuse to insult me. The slightest sentence was something like "She is so f* stupid", and the worse was they were willing to spam a lot of comments around, insulting me by all the most vulgar words they could ever thought of, and offended even my parents... I did not dare to upload anything after that, even on the fan page or my personal Facebook account, because if they found out they would do that again." – Female, 15

[7] "I had depression, and started cutting myself again. I became dependent on social network to receive care and attention." – Female, 21

[8] "I was terrified, panic, and just wanted to die." – Female, 18

[9] "There was a time I had been cyberbullied and both my mental and physical health were damaged. By that time, I found it strange because those friends who used to hang out with me and even were closed to me, turned their backs on me and isolated me. Every time I went home and opened my Facebook I had to observe a lot of insulting and offending statuses toward myself... I was also body-shamed. During that period, I had severe depression and mental breakdown, I could not go to school and cried a lot. I even attempted suicide." – Female, 16

[10] "I was constantly in a fear state. All the behaviors, actions, and words that the bully used on me were always on my mind. When I looked at an object or a scene that recalled my memory of being bullied, these images showed up again. I could not tell anyone. Regardless of what I did at that time, I always felt scared. I could not raise my voice, I did not dare to see other people in the eyes... I broke down, had negative thoughts, including suicide. And one day, I committed it." – Female - 25

4. Discussion

The rise of cyberbullying

Numerous studies on traditional bullying shows that the rate of bullying is higher in middle school because youth want to establish their status in society (Varjas, 2009). However, in terms of cyberbullying and indirect aggressiveness, it is more common with older youth than

younger ones (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008). A survey on cyberbullying among students found that more than 30% of respondents claimed to have first experience with cyber-bullying in college. Among this 30% of respondents, nearly half indicated that the cyberbullying events happened to them in both middle and high school (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Reese, 2012). Most findings also supported that the prevalence of cyberbullying has been increasing tremendously over the years among youth and it is alarming.

This study suggested that in Vietnam, people who are living in the countryside seem to have lesser engagement with cyberbullying. This can be explained by the lack of electronic gadgets such as computer, laptop and smartphones. Given the complexity of society and advancement of technology, more cyberbullying cases happen as it allows anonymous attacking. Based on the survey results, females tend to be the target more often than male. Their male counterpart tends to be more aggressive and prefers physical abuse than verbal and emotional abuse. Meanwhile, females are more susceptible to verbal abuse and relationship manipulation such as spreading rumours, isolating other female friends, and participating in verbal aggression (Athanasiaides & Deliyanni-Kouimtzi, 2010; Favela, 2010). Therefore, since cyberbullying uses non-physical medium, the anonymity makes them feel more powerful in attacking others and often entails more cruel behaviours.

A connection between cyberbullying and mental health issues

The finding suggested that a majority of respondents (79%) was afraid of being judged, claimed that nobody could help or understand the problem, did not believe to disclose the story, or had harsh self-criticism such as considering telling other people as a sign of weakness. According to Chadwick (2014), there is a link between the victims and their low self-esteem, as such they tend to have higher chance of social isolation, lack of psychological functioning, poorer self-image and poor school adaptation. Cyberbullying might have been a factor in lowering self-worth and self-esteem, reducing

social engagement, and potentially increasing self-criticism instead of embracing one's self. Furthermore, in Vietnam, very less attention is given to cyber-bullying, partially can be due to the fact that it happens online and most of people think it is not significant.

Based on the ten case studies, the victims suffered negative emotional and psychological changes. There are several types of cyberbullying spotted through survey questionnaire and manuscripts such as rape jokes, slut-shaming, body shaming, isolation and alienation (within an online community such as fandom, a private group, or fan page), etc. The interviewees responded that they felt panic, anxious, hurtful and depressed which resulted in harming themselves either by self-cutting, burning or scratching. Others developed a fear of meeting strangers and avoided any social situations. Alarmingly, youths who are bullied or bully others are at higher risk for suicidal thoughts, attempts and completed suicides (Baldry & Winkel, 2003; Mills, Guerin, Lynch, Daly, & Fitzpatrick, 2004). Research also proved that experiencing peer harassment through cyberbullying contributes to depression, decreased self-worth, hopelessness and loneliness which are preconditions to suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Flowers, 2006; Zetter, 2008), while other cases involved self-harm, being diagnosed with other mental illnesses such as anxiety disorder and PTSD. A study conducted by The Singapore Children's Society and Institute of Mental Health Singapore concluded that being involved in cyberbullying whether as a victim or as those who are both bullies and victims of bullying was associated with a higher level of reported self-harm, than reported by those not involved in cyber bullying (Sin, 2016). Similarly, a study on young Americans between 18 and 24 years old showed that exposure to cyberbullying incidents may increase the chance of having paranoia, phobic anxiety and psychoticism (Schenk, William, & Colleen, 2013). Additionally, cyberbullying victimization is found to be positively correlated with symptoms compatible with PTSD (Ranney, et al., 2016).

Limitations and Implications for future research

This study attempted to investigate the trend of cyberbullying in Vietnam and its effects on Vietnamese

youths. Although this exploratory study examined the important topic on cyberbullying and added valuable findings, it was carried out with some limitations, include the adequacy of quantitative analysis and generalizability of given statistics. Self-report measure was mainly used in this study and the lack of prior research on Vietnamese youths make the generalisation of this findings difficult.

Future research should take into great consideration of methodological features regarding how to conceptualise and measure cyberbullying, especially on the psychological impacts. Case studies are good to give a broader understanding to the topic, however, future research may employ sources other than self, such as from parents, friends and closed ones. And lastly, a large scale research among Vietnamese youths is indeed needed in order to draw out the roles of media content provider in liberating the understanding of cyberbullying consequences and the need to increase social awareness on cyberbullying.

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EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE PEER SUPPORT GROUP AND ITS INTERVENTIONS:

A CASE STUDY OF BEAUTIFUL MIND VIETNAM

Kha Tu Nguyen Do, Thanh Ha Nguyen, Khanh Linh Nguyen

In Vietnam, there is still limited access to mental health services. Challenges such as lack of legislation, education programs, human resources, and hospital infrastructures lead to high disease burden and high demands of care and accessibility. As the development of the Internet and social media has grown rapidly, forming online peer support groups can be an efficient way to target these challenges, alleviate symptoms and reduce disease burden and demands of care. A few studies have been conducted in other countries, and shown evidence that online peer support groups can help reduce mood disorder symptoms, anxiety symptoms and increase remission rate, and foster empowerment, self-control and self-confidence which are essential in handling psychological distress. However, with the difference in cultural and social setting, the application of such intervention in Vietnam still needs to be evaluated. This paper aims to assess the effectiveness of online peer support groups and its activities with people who are suffering from acute stress and mental disorders in Vietnam through surveying one of the largest online peer support groups, Beautiful Mind Vietnam (BMVN). Intervention provided includes online peer counseling, psychology first aid, and offline self-help workshops. Results showed that approximately 70% of received responses rated the intervention as helpful for people with mental health problem, in which these types of support helped them alleviate acute stress, symptoms of mood disorders and provide them a sense of community engagement. Such findings implicates that using online peer support group can be effective in improving the condition of people who are suffering from mental disorders.

Key words: online peer counseling, psychological first aid, Beautiful Mind Vietnam

1. Introduction

Despite the revolutionary change that social reforms brought to Vietnam, there are some life aspects that need further improvement, and mental health is one of them (Lee et al., 2015; Vuong et al., 2011). Mental health services remain limited accessibility with insufficient human and physical resources as well as a lack of proper public attention towards this field. According to WHO statistics, the rate of people treated in outpatient facilities rose from 56.9 users in 2005 to 370.57 users per 100,000 populations in 2011 (WHO, 2012). However, until 2014, there were only 0.91 psychiatrists per 100,000 populations while the ratio for clinical psychologist was 0.09 (WHO, 2015).

As the development of the Internet and social media has grown rapidly, forming online peer support groups can be a solution to these challenges, which can cost-effectively help alleviate symptoms (Deis, 2014). A study was conducted in 2016 about the acceptability of using internet intervention, and showed promising results as a care delivery model (Sobowale et al., 2016). In other countries, a few studies about the effectiveness of online peer support groups have shown evidence that this intervention can help reduce mood disorder symptoms, anxiety symptoms and increase remission rate, and foster empowerment, self-control and self-confidence which are essential in handling psychological distress (Barak et al., 2008; Griffiths et al., 2012; Ye et al., 2014). However, with the difference in cultural and social setting, the application of such interventions in Vietnam still needs to be evaluated.

2. Methodology

This is a descriptive study using an online survey to acquire both quantitative and qualitative data on the impact of online support for social media users with mental health problems.

Description of intervention as online support

In this study, we evaluated interventions proposed by Beautiful Mind Vietnam (BMVN) which includes two types: (1) online peer counselling/ psychological first aid through e-mails and a peer support group on Facebook called “Serene Land” and (2) follow-up offline workshops.

“Serene Land” was a private support group created in order for people with mental health problems to share their stories, feelings and emotions. The group was monitored by members of Beautiful Mind Vietnam and supervised by two mental health professionals, who is a psychiatrist at Bach Mai Hospital and a specialist with a PhD degree in psychology. The group was also followed by professional doctors in Vietnam as well as psychology graduates who provide advice and consultancy to a less frequent extent. Advice is given following strict codes of conduct from APA’s guidelines. Anyone Facebook user with mental health problems can join the group. Prior to the creation of “Serene Group”, BMVN also provided psychological first aid through e-mails.

To date, BMVN has organized two workshops to provide some knowledge and stress busting skills and let participants share opinions and experience about mental health. They were conducted by trainers who had undergone training about psychology first-aid and mental health support from Mind in the UK and the US. The workshop in Ho Chi Minh city provided practical experience in mindfulness while the one in Hanoi presented the most basic knowledge about mental disorders followed by some exercises in stress release and relaxation. Although workshops are held offline, they are considered follow-up of online activities, and thus, also assessed in this study.

Material

The survey was distributed throughout Facebook. Content of the survey is displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Questions in the survey to assess the effectiveness of online support

1. Gender of the participants
2. Age group
3. Have you ever received online peer-counseling or psychological first aid?
4. If yes, on the scale from 1-5, how would you rate the usefulness of the service?
5. Have you ever attended any offline workshops of BMVN?
6. If yes, on the scale from 1-5, how would you rate the usefulness of the workshop?
7. If BMVN organize workshop in the future, would you continue to attend?

8. Do you have any psychological problems?
9. If yes, do you think the activities such as online peer-counseling, psychological first aid or sharing story helpful in your recovery?
10. Beside the services from BMVN, have you used other professional services?
Optional:
11. If yes to question 10, do you think other professional services are better than BMVN’s?

Data analysis

We used Likert scale for survey respondents to rate the service as followed: 1= not at all helpful, 2= not helpful, 3= neutral, 4= helpful, 5 = very helpful. Quantitative data was analysed by Microsoft Excel 2016. Qualitative data was collected to provide more explanation for quantitative data, in which we asked the participants to provide reasons for their ratings of online counselling support (Question 4), ratings of BMVN offline workshops (Question 6), and explanation for better services other than BMVN’s (Question 11).

3. Results

Overall, we received 744 responses, of which the majority is female (87%, n=647). Of the four age groups, young people aged 14-19 years old accounted for the highest response rate at 48.1% (Table 2). For respondents with mental health problems, 71.9% (n=490) found online support services including peer counseling, psychological first aid or sharing story would be helpful for their mental health and recovery. For evaluation of two types of intervention, 51.2% of respondents rated the online peer counselling and/or psychological first aid as helpful and very helpful (140 out of 257) (Table 3) and 78.2% found follow-up offline workshops helpful and very helpful (18 out of 23) (Table 4).

TABLE 2. General information about respondents

	n	%
Gender	Male	71
	Female	647
	Other	26
10-13 years old		8
		1.1

Age	14-19 years old	358	48.1
	20-25 years old	293	39.3
	Above 25	85	12.6

Effectiveness of online peer counseling and/or psychological first aid

Among 279 respondents who have experience using online peer counselling and/or psychological first aid, there is 4% respondents rated the services as not at all helpful, 11.4% rated as not helpful, 34.4% rated as neutral, 34.4% rated as helpful and 15.9% rated as very helpful (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Rating of online counseling support service, according to gender and age range

		Not at all helpful		Not helpful		Neutral		Helpful		Very helpful		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender	Female	9	3.2	30	10.8	85	30.5	84	30.1	39	14.0	247	88.6
	Male	0	0	0	0	7	2.5	9	3.3	3	1.1	19	6.9
	Other	2	0.7	2	0.7	4	1.4	3	1.1	2	0.7	13	4.6
Age group	10-13	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.35	0	0.0	1	0.35	2	0.7
	14-19	3	1.1	14	5.0	54	19.4	47	16.8	23	8.2	141	50.5
	20-25	5	1.8	16	5.7	39	14.0	44	15.8	14	5.0	118	42.3
	Above 25	3	1.1	2	0.7	2	0.7	5	1.8	6	2.2	18	6.5
	Total	11	4.0	32	11.4	96	34.4	96	34.4	44	15.8	279	

These results indicated that females (88.5%) are seeking for online support service for their psychological concerns considerably more than other genders. Among 247 female respondents, approximately 50% (n=123) rated the intervention as helpful and very helpful, while the rate for men is 63% (12 out of 19). Approximately 37% of both males and females rated the service as neutral.

Within the age groups, 14-19 years old constitutes half of the respondent (50.5%), followed by 20-25 years old (42.3%), above 25 years old (6.5%) and 10-13 years old (0.7%). Most of respondents aged 14-19 years old (19.4%) rated the online supporting services as neutral, followed by 15.8% respondents rated as helpful. In contrast, among 20-25 years old group, majority respondent (15.8%) rated helpful, followed by neutral rating (14.0%).

Among 43 people rated the service as not helpful, only four people provided explanations, in which the common complaint is that the advice they received were unhelpful causing them to be more stressful. People who rated neutral provided both positive and negative comments, in which they agreed on the acute effectiveness of the intervention in reassuring and relieving people with mental disorders; yet, long term effectiveness requires more professional methods. People finding online peer counselling helpful said that these types of supports helped them reassure them in a stressful situation, reduce symptoms of mental disorders or provide the feeling of social integration.

Effectiveness of offline self-help workshop

Overall, people who had attended workshops of BMVN that took the survey (N=23) generally think that these workshops are effective (Table 4).

TABLE4. Rating of workshop (N = 23)

	n	%
Not at all helpful	0	0.0
Not helpful	1	4.4
Neutral	4	17.4
Helpful	11	47.8
Very helpful	7	30.4

Positive comments were made on the knowledge provided in the workshop and the interactivensess of workshops in compared with online support. In addition, the majority of people (94% -699 out of 744 respondents) indicated that they would likely to attend the workshop or use the services offer by BMVN in the future.

Comparison between BMVN service and other support services

When comparing services offer by BMVN and other services, 64.5% people (180 out of 279) indicated that they did not use other professional or free services for their psychological problems except BMVN's. Among 99 people who used both BMVN's and other services, 19.2% thinks that other services are better than BMVN's, 40.4% other services are not as good and 40.4% is unspecified.

People found other services more useful as they received direct counselling or medication, which were not provided by BMVN. According to a comment of a member (aged older than 25 years old), inefficient monitoring, particularly membership screening, is also a drawback of BMVN's Serene Land.

4. Discussion

Results from this survey indicated that in general, 71.9% of people with mental health problems think online support services help alleviate stress and recover. Respondents agreed on the overall advantages of these services as being quick and easy to access and help to relieve acute stress. In regards to the effectiveness of online peer counseling and/or psychological first aid, 50.2% of users think it is useful (rating helpful and very helpful). Literature also supports the effectiveness of Internet counselling group for several mental problems although the effect magnitude differs among different disorders (Deis, 2014). However, in our study, we did not distinguish the evaluation for specific disorders. Our study also found positive response from attendants to follow-up offline workshops. Participants of BMVN workshops thought the knowledge and skills provided in the workshop are helpful for their psychological problems and recovery. This result is similar to findings in study by Bowyer and colleagues (2013) about wellness workshop, which was reported to provide hope and empathy, as participants thought it was beneficial hearing people with mental disorders sharing their recovery journey.

Females often tend to seek mental health help more than males (Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005). This is also observed in our study with 88.6% of online service users being female. In Asian cultures such as Vietnam, disclosure of feelings and emotions can be a taboo for men, which leads to under-diagnosis and inadequate reaching for help in this population (Mizuno and Ishikuma 1999; Hwang 2006). This could potentially explain for the huge gap in help-seeking behaviors between males and females in this study.

In Vietnam, adolescents are found to experience significant psychological problems such as depression or

anxiety disorders among high school students (Le, Nguyen, Tran, & Fisher, 2012; Nguyen, Dedding, Pham, Wright, & Bunders, 2013). This result resonates with what we found, as the age group 14-19 years old seeks out for peer-counseling and/or psychological first aid more than other age groups. There is no supporting data to distinguish the effectiveness between age groups and genders. Even though 63% of males between 14-20 years old rated the services as helpful; however, since the sample was so small (11 people), no reliable conclusion can be drawn.

Qualitative data also reveals some limitations in online intervention for mental disorders. Participants found that effects of online intervention are short-lived or when participants shared their stories, they received judgmental or unsympathetic response. This could be due to the lack of nonverbal communication cues and body language of online interaction that could affect how support is expressed (Deis, 2014). A disadvantage of facilitating an online support group is the insufficient monitoring by healthcare professionals that may lead to misleading medical information or inappropriate communication in the group (White and Dorman 2001). This issue was also raised by a few comments in the response when comparing BMVN service with other professional services.

Limitations and recommendations

Findings can be subject to bias as surveys are distributed by "sharing" mechanism on Facebook. Participants taking surveys can be "snow-balling", in which they may know each other and, thus, make the results less generalizable. We also did not acquire for the information about the time when respondents received the intervention. If online support was received a long time ago, answers can be affected by recall bias.

Although the study could implicate some effectiveness of online support for people with mental disorders, future studies can use more rigorous methodology to establish a more confident conclusion for the impact of online support. Also, our survey did not assess the impact to specific symptoms or disorders. Future studies could look into such details in order to better evaluate the

effectiveness of each aspect of online support towards more specific disorders.

The sample size for participants attending offline workshop is relatively small in order to draw any conclusion regarding the effect of this intervention type. It can be suggested that a separate feedback surveys can be distributed to participants after the workshops so as to maximize response rates.

5. Conclusion

Within the context of limited resources of mental health services in Vietnam, peer online support can be an efficient way to improve acute symptoms of mental disorders. This study has shown some first evidence of effectiveness of peer online support group and online psychological first aid through evaluation by Beautiful Mind Vietnam's service users. While the result is relatively positive, it is recommended that future studies can conduct a more in-depth investigation into each aspect of online support in relations to the treatment of each disorder. On the other hand, a small number of service users reported more stress by the online advice, which reflects an imminent risk of online support with difficulty in controlling the content of given advice. This calls for a self-reflection of the support support and possibly suggests a stricter process of monitoring comments in the support group.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their attitude and thank to Dr Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa for her guidance and Dr Dao Thi Dieu Linh for her support.

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The authors would like to thank their families for the unconditional love which motivates them to continue doing the goods and contribute to the development of psychology in Vietnam.

HOW TO CITE THE PAPERS

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