

The Influence of Triggering Posts and Hate Speech on the Attitudes, Justifications, and Motivations of Cyberbullying Perpetrators on Social Media

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100260>

Received: 18 November 2025; Accepted: 27 November 2025; Published: 06 December 2025

ABSTRACT

Social media has become the primary platform for sharing information and personal experiences, but some sensitive or provocative posts, known as triggering posts can provoke negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or anxiety. Such content has the potential to trigger cyberbullying because it influences perpetrators' moral perceptions and their justifications for aggressive online behavior. This study aims to assess perpetrators' attitudes toward cyberbullying and to identify the justifications and motivations that drive their actions. The study's objectives include evaluating levels of acceptance, moral perception, and the tendency of perpetrators to view bullying as justified, as well as understanding the reasons they use to rationalize their behavior. The study used a quantitative approach with a structured questionnaire involving 193 social media users. Data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially to assess attitude patterns and the relationship between exposure to triggering posts and the tendency to engage in cyberbullying. The findings show that perpetrators often justify aggressive behavior as a response to provocative content and consider their actions acceptable. These findings suggest the need for specific legislation addressing triggering posts and support for the government to introduce mandatory social media account registration for all Malaysian citizens.

Keywords: POCMA, justification, discipline, registration, mass communication, rage bait, motivations

INTRODUCTION

According to Zakharchenko (2018), a "triggering post" is a social media post that can provoke negative emotions such as sadness, anger, or anxiety because it touches on sensitive issues or reminds someone of unpleasant experiences, for example those related to bullying, violence, or personal conflict. Another example of a triggering post is content about marital infidelity shared on social media when someone recounts a partner's betrayal, it can spark anger, sorrow, or insecurity in people who have experienced similar situations.

There are also rage-bait posts that use inflammatory statements, such as insulting a particular group, distorting facts to provoke anger, or employing provocative language deliberately designed to elicit extreme emotional reactions (Sing, 2018; Shin, DeFelice, & Kim, 2025). Rice (2023) argues that these kinds of posts are considered triggering because they can reactivate past negative experiences or be indirectly related to a person's own trauma, causing emotional distress and making people feel threatened or uncomfortable even when they encounter the content online. Anypas et al. (2024) note that the aim of a triggering post is often to achieve higher audience engagement.

Wagner and Yu (2021) argue that triggering posts can lead to cyberbullying because content that touches on sensitive or provocative issues can provoke strong emotions in other users, prompting them to leave harsh comments, launch personal attacks, or publicly spread insults (Jattamart & Kwangsawad, 2021; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2010).

For example, a post about marital infidelity can invite condemnation, rash accusations, and the spreading of shame, while rage-bait draws in easily angered users who engage in arguments and hurl insults without knowing the real people behind the story. As discussions heat up, other users may join in and add pressure, leaving the target exposed to ongoing mockery, doxxing and digging up of past information, defamation, and online social isolation, this is what eventually develops into cyberbullying (Fox, 2024).

Accordingly, the researcher conducted this study with 193 respondents, each of whom was asked questions about cyberbullying. Some questions assessed the perpetrators' attitudes, justifications, and motivations regarding cyberbullying in the context of digital media use. From the collected data, the researcher was able to examine how some individuals view online bullying as acceptable, whether because they see it as merely entertainment, a response to provocation, or a way to gain attention and social power.

The study also helped identify common rationalizations perpetrators use to justify their actions, such as blaming the victim or believing the internet provides a consequence-free space. Overall, this assessment offers a clearer picture of the psychological and social factors that drive someone to engage in cyberbullying, thereby aiding the design of more effective preventive interventions. Through detailed analysis, the study aims to provide a deep understanding of how perpetrators evaluate their own behavior and society, as well as the factors that motivate or legitimize their actions. These findings not only help illuminate the thought patterns and attitudes that contribute to cyberbullying, but also provide an important foundation for developing more effective educational, regulatory, and intervention strategies to address the issue holistically.

Problem Statement

Although social media use is becoming more widespread and cyberbullying incidents continue to rise, understanding of perpetrators' attitudes, justifications, and motivations remains limited. Most previous studies have focused on victims' experiences, while the internal factors that drive individuals to act as perpetrators have received less attention.

This lack of information makes it difficult to design effective prevention strategies, because without understanding how perpetrators evaluate and rationalize their behavior, interventions developed may miss the mark. This situation creates an urgent need to investigate how perpetrators form perceptions, reasons, and motivations when engaging in cyberbullying so that efforts to address the issue can be more comprehensive and evidence-based.

Research Objective

Based on those issues and gaps in knowledge, this study sets two (2) objectives:

1. To assess perpetrators' attitudes toward cyberbullying behavior, including levels of acceptance, moral perceptions, and their tendency to view such actions as justified or acceptable.
2. To identify the justifications and motivations that drive perpetrators to engage in cyberbullying, such as emotional influences, peer pressure, entertainment factors, and the belief that their actions have no real consequences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has become a primary platform for sharing information, opinions, and personal experiences. However, Ibrahim (2022) argues that some posts can trigger negative emotions, especially when they touch on sensitive issues or personal controversies. This phenomenon is known as triggering posts, content that provokes

anger, sadness, insecurity, or anxiety in individuals exposed to it (Kumar, 2024). Triggering posts have the potential to encourage aggressive online behavior because they can influence perpetrators' moral perceptions and justifications for cyberbullying (Runions & Bak, 2015).

Examples of content that provoke emotional reactions in Malaysia include statements that insult or promote stereotypes. For example, a post by a national influencer labeled Mass Communication, theater, and music as the "dumbest" fields. He also described men who change their babies' diapers as "gay," and expressed the view that a woman's role is limited to doing housework and satisfying her husband's desires.

There have also been controversial incidents, such as individuals being exposed in scandals or infidelity cases that spread openly on social media, angering readers. Such posts not only cause emotional distress but can also trigger cyberbullying (Çakar-Mengü & Mengü, 2023). Users exposed to provocative content may be driven to leave abusive comments, make personal attacks, or widely share the provocateur's material. This kind of content fuels rage-baiting, where posts are deliberately designed to provoke extreme emotional reactions and online conflict.

Bauman (2019) argues that triggering posts not only harm victims directly but also shape the perceptions and justifications of perpetrators, leading them to view aggressive online behavior as acceptable (Gamez-Guadix & Gini, 2016). This situation shows that understanding the nature, types, and effects of triggering posts is essential for addressing cyberbullying. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess perpetrators' attitudes, justifications, and motivations for engaging in cyberbullying, particularly when exposed to content that elicits negative emotions. The study can provide in-depth insight into the psychological and social factors that drive people to engage in cyberbullying and help develop more effective prevention strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach with a questionnaire to assess perpetrators' attitudes, justifications, and motivations for cyberbullying behavior, particularly in the context of exposure to triggering posts. A total of 193 respondents were selected through simple random sampling from among active social media users. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature, allowing the researchers to evaluate patterns of attitudes and perpetrators' perceptions of cyberbullying.

The questionnaire contains three main sections: respondents' demographic information such as age, gender, education level, and social media use; respondents' attitudes toward cyberbullying; and the justifications and motivations that drive perpetrators to engage in cyberbullying.

The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents' level of agreement with statements related to exposure to cyberbullying, its emotional or perceptual impacts, attitudes toward online bullying, and the moral justifications and motivations that enable perpetrators to rationalize their actions. The following are statements related to triggering posts that provoke perpetrators to cyberbully:

1. I believe cyberbullying often occurs because people are easily influenced by online bullying culture.
2. I believe society views cyberbullying as a way to discipline certain individuals.
3. I perceive that others enjoy insulting people online more than I do.
4. Cyberbullying is more often carried out by users who are unaware of its effects on victims than by me.
5. I believe supporting or "liking" negative comments is done more by others than by me.

The study hypothesis posits a significant relationship between exposure to triggering posts and a perpetrator's tendency to engage in cyberbullying: the stronger the effect of a triggering post on a perpetrator's emotions or perceptions, the more likely they are to justify online bullying.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive analysis was used to assess patterns of perpetrators' attitudes, justifications, and motivations, while inferential analysis was used to test the relationship between exposure to triggering posts and the propensity to commit cyberbullying in order to evaluate the study hypothesis. This study also adhered to research ethics principles: all respondents gave voluntary consent, their identities were kept confidential, and their information was handled securely. Based on theory and preliminary questionnaire findings, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H1: There is a significant relationship between exposure to triggering posts and a perpetrator's tendency to engage in cyberbullying; the stronger the effect of a triggering post on a perpetrator's emotions or perceptions, the more likely they are to justify online bullying.

FINDINGS

This study of 193 respondents provides an in-depth picture of how perpetrators may evaluate and justify cyberbullying behavior, especially when exposed to triggering posts. The findings show that exposure to sensitive content, such as infidelity, public humiliation, or provocative statements, is often used as a rationale to shift responsibility onto others, thereby preserving a positive self-image even when they may have participated in online aggressive behavior.

Attitudes Towards Cyberbullying

The findings indicate that the majority of respondents perceive others as more likely to engage in cyberbullying than themselves, with 148 respondents agreeing that others are more likely to leave offensive comments. This distancing attitude demonstrates the predator's tendency to deny their involvement, even though they also acknowledge the existence of a culture of online contempt. More importantly, this perception is closely linked to the phenomenon of triggering posts, as sensitive content is often considered "worthy" of harsh criticism.

As many as 120 respondents believe that society considers harsh criticism as part of freedom of speech, proving that many social media users do not see scathing comments as a form of bullying. In the context of triggering posts, this normalisation encourages perpetrators to express emotional reactions aggressively, as they consider such behaviour acceptable as long as they are "responding" to anger-inducing content.

Additionally, 109 respondents agreed that victims are often labelled as "too sensitive," indicating that perpetrators underestimate the emotional impact of their actions. When faced with triggering posts, they are more likely to blame the victim for uploading allegedly provocative content, thus justifying aggressive behaviour as a reasonable response.

Other findings, such as 146 respondents who believe others are more likely to leave negative comments and 158 respondents who believe others often share personal information, indicate that toxic behaviour is considered commonplace in digital culture. In the context of triggering posts, this normalisation reinforces the belief that aggressive actions are "acceptable" if initiated by content that evokes negative emotions.

Justification and Motivation for Cyberbullying

In terms of justification, 169 respondents believe that cyberbullying occurs because individuals are easily influenced by the online bullying culture. This is closely related to the phenomenon of triggering posts, as perpetrators see aggressive reactions as a normal response when dealing with sensitive issues such as infidelity, politics, or hateful statements.

As many as 88 respondents believe that society uses cyberbullying to "discipline" someone, indicating that some users use triggering posts as a reason to "teach" or publicly shame other individuals. This justification allows perpetrators to see their actions as justified, not as aggressive behaviour.

The fact that 147 respondents agreed that others enjoy online humiliation indicates that, even if they don't admit it directly, they understand that the reaction to triggering posts often serves as a space to vent anger or mock the

victim. This aligns with the phenomenon of moral disengagement, where perpetrators rationalise their actions as entertainment or spontaneous responses.

Additionally, 150 respondents believe that true perpetrators are unaware of the impact of their actions on their victims. In the context of triggering posts, perpetrators often view their comments as mere reactions to provocative content rather than attacks that carry serious emotional consequences. Finally, the 131 respondents who distanced themselves from passive actions like "liking" or supporting negative comments also indicated that perpetrators often underestimate their engagement when faced with triggering posts. They don't see passive support as part of the bullying culture, whereas the action contributes to the reinforcement of aggressive behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The hypothesis is supported by the findings, which indicate that triggering posts on social media can elicit negative emotions and act as a catalyst for cyberbullying behaviour. Perpetrators tend to justify their actions based on provocative or sensitive content, rationalising aggressive behaviour as a natural reaction or entertainment. The study findings emphasise the importance of understanding the attitudes, motivations, and justifications of perpetrators to design more effective prevention strategies. Overall, this study provides an important foundation for addressing cyberbullying holistically, focussing not only on the victims but also on the factors that drive someone to become a perpetrator.

Effectively addressing triggering posts requires strong legal support, where provocative or hateful cyber actions are prohibited and perpetrators are subject to legal action. Singapore has introduced the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) as a measure to address the spread of false information and provocative content that could incite conflict or negative emotions on social media (Han, 2020). Through this law, the government has the authority to flag, correct, or remove content that is proven to be misleading or intentionally inflammatory (rage-bait). POFMA aims to reduce the spread of harmful information before it becomes widespread, thereby curbing the potential for online bullying and fostering a more responsible digital environment (Figure, 2024).

This step allows platforms and users to re-evaluate their content, simultaneously raising awareness about the negative impact of sharing false or provocative information. From the aspect of cyberbullying, the Malaysian government's move to mandate social media account registration is a strategy that has the potential to increase user accountability, as real identities can be identified in the event of the spread of triggering posts or cyberbullying. This approach can reduce the anonymity often exploited by perpetrators to justify their actions, while also fostering a more responsible digital culture. By combining law enforcement, account registration, and platform monitoring, Malaysia has the potential to adapt international best practices to address triggering posts more systematically and reduce the risk of cyberbullying.

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