



## **A Study on the Usage of Mobile Phones for Cyber Bullying Among Tweens & Teens of Chennai, India**

**Manjula Venkataraghavan, Manipal University, India**

### **Abstract**

A 2014 survey by Ipsos report that India accounts for the highest among 24 countries, in the number of child cyber bullying cases (32%) compared to the U.S (15%) or Great Britain (11%). About 70 percent of Indian tweens & teens, spend over five hours on the Internet in a normal week, out of which 27% kids use smartphones, says a McAfee Intel survey report. Popular among them are Social Networking Sites such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Vine, Pinterest, Tumblr, including Tinder (a dating app meant for adults)

Earlier the access to the internet and the social networking sites for these children used to be from home through desktops but with iPad, iPod, Tablets, and mobiles, the whole problem take a deeper significant turn.

This paper is based on a study which attempts to check on how much of cyber bullying exists in the Chennai scenario and how much of cyberbullying happen through mobile phones. The study also attempts to find out the most prevalent form of cyberbullying among these children and the reasons why these kids either become a victim or bully in the cyberspace.

Key words: Mobile phones, cyber bullying,

## Introduction

Constricting space & time, the revolutionary technology of mobile phone has long established itself as the tool for connectivity any time anywhere. For children, especially teens & tweens, it seems to have liberated them from the demands of existing social structures and parental surveillance. (Ito.M., 2005). Much has been talked, about the 'Identity' factor this technology plays amongst this population. (Boyd 2008; Turkle 1995; Weber and Mitchell 2008). The use of mobiles as a mode to escalate status in the peer group is an identifying trait of this group (Abeele. MB & Cock. RD, 2013). A mobile phone's features, appearance, personalized accessories, applications etc. all contribute to identity formation among adolescents (Netsafe, 2005). According to Ling (2001, 2004), by understanding the developmental need in adolescents to gain freedom, form individual identities and manage relationships, the role mobiles play in their lives can be apprehended.

Enumerable studies have however established major adverse effects & impact this technology has on this young population. Addiction to this technology is one such concern. Studies have shown affected individuals to experience unpleasant symptoms of withdrawal if mobile phone were switched off or happened to be out of range (Walsh et al.2007). Also called as the Problematic mobile phone use or mobile phone addiction or compulsive mobile phone use, this condition has been documented in plenty among young individuals. Excessive usage of mobile phones have been linked to sleep problems (Kubiszewski et al. 2013). Studies has shown that with mobile ownership comes increase in calling/sending of messages and time spent online before sleep leading to depression. (Lemola .S et al, 2015).

Studies on effect of continuous usage of internet among this population has long been associated with depression, social anxiety, insomnia, hyperactivity or conduct problems (Ozturk.FO et al 2013; Cheung and Wong 2011; Jenaro et al. 2007; Morgan C and Cotton SR 2003). Similarly excessive use of mobile too have been associated with sleep disturbances, anxiety and mental health symptoms (Thome´e et al. 2011, Lemola.S et al ,2015). Scientists are still uncertain about the vulnerability of young children' developing brains to the exposure of radio waves that are emitted from mobile phones and other wireless technologies. Some studies have associated the electromagnetic radiation emitted by mobile phones to delay melatonin production which could be related to later sleep onset (Wood et al. 2006) which in turn could lead to depression. Inattention is also one of the major problems

associated with excessive mobile use in adolescents (Zheng.F et al, 2014). The rising number of cyberbullying cases among tweens & teens is yet another menace that has increased parental and governmental concerns to a large extent. Additional concerns include ‘sexting’, infringement of privacy, reputational risks etc.(Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Marwick, Diaz.M, & Palfrey, 2010; Steeves & Webster, 2007; Strassberg et al, 2013).The problem is on a continual high world over due to increasing smartphone ownership in this population.

In India, the problem is manifold, due to lack of proper regulatory laws to curb the issue among this particular age group. A survey by Ipsos (Nov-2014) report that India account for the highest among 24 countries, in the number of child cyber bullying cases (32%) compared to the U.S (15%) or Great Britain (11%).About 70 percent of Indian tweens & teens, spend over five hours on the Internet in a normal week, out of which 27% kids use smartphones, says a McAfee Intel survey report. Popular among them are Social Networking Sites such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Vine, Pinterest, Tumblr, including Tinder (a dating app meant for adults). The rising number of suicides among young cyber bully victims here is a definite cause for concern. This issue coupled with the fact that there is a lack of literature on the cyber bullying menace in a conservative city like Chennai, led to this study. This study was undertaken to understand the problem among tweens & teens of Chennai, who use mobile phones for the same.

### **Adolescents & Mobile Phones Ownership World Over**

Mobile phones, especially smart phones usage is becoming rapidly common among children in several countries across the world. The rate of ownership, however, varies by nation and age group. The number of children who owned a smartphone in the U.S, increased from 35 % in 2011 to 56 % in 2013 (Smith, 2013). Switzerland saw an increase from 47% in 2010 to 79% in 2012 (Willemse et al. 2012). The number of adolescents using the mobile phone to surf the Internet increased from 16 % in 2010 to 66 % in 2012. In Germany, the number of 12-19 year old smartphone owners has risen from 25 % in 2011 to 72 % in 2013. In Japan, 47.8 % junior high and 95.6 % high school students have mobile phones [Cabinet Office, Japan.2012.]. In this study it was found that in Chennai, too out of a sample size of 90 students from 12 different schools and 3 city colleges, 79 students were found to own phones. 88.1 % out of this children were found to have smart phones. The advantage of reduced call

and texting costs could be a reason in the increasing number of smartphone usage in this age group. With wireless Internet, smartphones allow adolescents to communicate with peers without any charge, by using internet based messenger apps such as WhatsApp. (Lemola .S et al, 2015) This include charge free options to share pictures and short videos with a group of friends. Furthermore, smartphones also has the advantage of being lighter & handier than notebook computers, permitting its usage in bed to surf the Internet or to watch videos from YouTube. The availability of internet and a plethora of web based applications on mobile phones poses other grave problems, that of Child Sex Abusers which cannot be overlooked or forgotten. (K.F. McCartan and R. McAlister.2012.)

Additionally the potential of this population to undergo sexual exploitation is very high because of their online behaviors like sexting as well as unwittingly involving themselves in production and distribution of illegal sexually explicit content. (Bryce, 2010). Additionally loading such images on to social networking sites could lead to distribution in the cyberspace in unpredictable ways into the hands of pornographers and pedophiles. What these children fail to realize is that their actions online could result in bullying and humiliation among their social circles and could also affect them later on in life (Boyd, 2007)

### **Mobiles And Bullying**

Bullying is a form of power play which involves unprovoked teasing which in certain situations changes into abuse by one or more children with the intention to hurt, cause pain and distress to another child repeatedly (Dawkins J, Hill P. Bullying: Another form of abuse?) Cyberbullying is an extension of real world bullying involving the use of Information & Communication technologies such as the Internet & mobile phones (forums, blogs, social networking sites, video posting, instant messaging, texting, or email) to harm an individual or a group. Primarily due to their greater degree of online activities (Lupac & Sladek, 2008; Smahel & Lupac, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2006), the adolescents constitute majority of cyberbully victims (Sevcikova & Smahel, 2009). As the usage of mobile phones have gone up among tweens and teens, this technology has turned into a convenient choice for bullies. This technology provides with everything that a bully would look for. It gives the bully a perfect medium through which the perpetrator could traumatize his/her victim without any fear. Advantages for the bully include anonymity, slow responsiveness of telecommunication service and weak laws.

Cyber bullying through mobile phones, like traditional bullying is a strategy adopted by adolescents to amplify their dominant position. A study by Abeele. MB & Cock. RD, have found that girls are more likely to gossip using this medium through SMS as opposed to boys. The same study also found that the most prevalent form of bullying through mobile phones was gossiping through SMS. The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) reported through a fresh study in 2014 that one Indian teenager among every four is a victim of cyber bullying. Low academic performance, social anxiety, social isolation, self-harm, low self-confidence, and depressive symptoms are some of the associated consequences of cyber bullying (Tokunaga, R.S.2010, Šleglova, V., Cerna, 2011), Juvonen, J., Gross, E.F.2008). These consequences can lead the victim to substance abuse or suicide in extreme cases (Hinduja, S., Patchin, J.W.2010). Studies indicate that majority of minors who have been online have either been subject to some form of cyberbullying or have engaged in it as cyber bullies according to statistics. The McAfee 'Tweens, Teens & Technology Report 2014' says that 50 % of Indian tweens & teens have experienced 'cyber-bullying' themselves or have seen someone else go through it.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of this study -

1. To Find out how much of cyber bullying exists among Chennai tweens and teens
2. To understand how cyberbullying occur through mobile phones.
3. To examine the most prevalent form of cyberbullying among these children.

### **Method**

A detailed survey questionnaire was distributed among the high school children belonging to 12 different schools. Questionnaires were also distributed among undergraduate students of three different city colleges. In India, generally undergraduate students fall in the category of 17 to 19 year olds. 90 students participated in the survey by filling up the questionnaires. Snow ball sampling was used for data collection.

### **Findings of the Current Study**

Out of a sample size of 90 students, 79 students were found to have their own mobile phones. 88.1 % out of this were found to have smart phones and 82.1% owned their own sets. This goes to show that the children of Chennai are not far behind in using and owning a smart

phone of their own. A majority of respondents (79.5%) indicated that owning a mobile phone was important to them and that it helped them to stay connected (87.9%) with friends'. 25.8% respondents said that the device helped in expressing themselves. When asked about the brand of devices they owned, 57.6% respondents said that the brand of phone they use mattered to them. To top it, the survey revealed that a majority of the respondents owned devices belonging to top brands. 25.4% respondents owned iPhones, 19.7% owned Samsung phones and 15.5% owned Nokia phones. This reinforces the concept that mobile phones are indeed being used by these children as a tool for establishing identity amongst their peer groups.

On questioning the usage time among respondents during the day, it was found that 57.7% use their mobiles only after coming back from school. But 34.6% respondents indicated that they check their mobiles as soon as they get up from bed and 30.9% respondents said that they use their mobile phones for more than 4 hours. This could mean that mobile phone addictions among children of Chennai does exist but on a smaller scale. Some of the respondents (34.6%) were found to use their mobiles between 2 to 4 hours. Only about 12.3% out of the entire sample population informed of a use of less than an hour. The survey indicates a zero or nil usage of phone at school. This positive situation could be because of the strict regulations of mobile phone usage during school hours by the authorities of most Chennai schools. Many schools here strictly forbid even carrying the mobile phone to school. When questioned about the expense incurred every month on their phone, it was found that 39.7% students spend about Rupees 200 to 400 a month on their phones while about 15% spend more than Rupees 400. A small percentage (7.7%) spend more than Rupees 800 a month. About 37.2% spend less than Rupees 200 a month on their phones.

The major use of mobile phone among this population was found to be for chatting & texting (87.5%). Not far behind was the usage of phones for surfing the internet (67%) and for watching videos (63.8%). 60% respondents used their phones for connecting up on their social media networking groups. This goes to show that among adolescents a smartphone's secondary features such as SMS messenger, usability of various applications, camera etc. carry more importance than its primary purpose that of making/receiving calls. When enquired about the kind of applications (apps) they use on their mobiles, about 93.6% respondents indicated the use of WhatsApp while 35.9% used Snapchat. 29.5% respondents

indicated the use of Viber compared to 28.2% who used skype. 60% of the respondents said they used the Facebook app on their phones. 34% respondents used their mobiles mostly to connect on the social media. This could mean a smaller bill when compared with those using mobiles for only making calls. The data also indicates how this population has easily adapted these internet based networking apps which not only help them cut costs but also helps them in staying touch with peers.

On a serious note, this could mean a rampant existence of cyberbullying among this population. Surprisingly, only 9.8 % (8 respondents) out of 90 students agreed to have experienced cyber bullying. But a larger percentage (36.9%) of respondents indicated that their friends had experienced cyber bullying. While a large number of respondents (79.3%) claimed that they were familiar with the term ‘cyber bullying’ and understood what it means, the existing data on cyber bullying instances prove that cyber bullying definitely exists on a large scale in the city of Chennai and there is an urgent need to address this issue.

Interestingly, a large percentage (46.2%) of respondents agreed that they have been made fun of on their social media networking sites. When questioned on whether they had made fun of anyone on their social media networks, 38.5% agreed that they had occasionally made fun of someone on their social media groups, while a small percentage (2.6%) respondents said that they always made fun of someone on their social media groups. This could mean that these young children unwittingly, might have either become victims or the perpetrators of this menace.

Of the 9.8% respondents who accepted to have been cyber bullied, 18.2% indicate that they have experienced various types of cyberbullying. The most predominant form of cyberbullying experienced by these respondents were found to be ‘abusive language’ (81.8%) followed by ‘hurtful messages’ (36.4%) through social networking sites and text messages. Out of the 36.9% respondents who said that their friends had experienced cyber bullying, 54.6% said that ‘Hurtful messages’ through Social Networking Sites and texts were the most prominent form of cyber bullying experienced by their friends followed by ‘Abusive language’ (51.5%) and ‘Mean messages’ (36.4%) through mail or phone. This was followed by ‘Hurtful pictures circulated online’ (15.2%)

2.6% respondents were found to be using tinder, a dating app and about 2.4% of respondents agreed that they chat with strangers on line. About 75.4% use their mobiles to check videos on the YouTube. Keeping the vulnerability factor of this age group in mind, all this could mean that these respondents might be at the risk of getting cyberbullied, cyberstalked, exposure to porn etc.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Though only a small percentage (9.8%) of respondents agreed that they had actually experienced cyber bullying, a larger percentage (36.9%) of respondents revealed that they had friends who have experienced this menace. 9.8% among 90 respondents would mean 1.08 individuals per ten. This in itself is a worrisome figure. So when considered along with ‘friends who have experienced cyber bullying’ this figure turns scarier.

Also a large percentage of the respondents (46.2%) agreed that they have been made fun of on various social media networking groups. 38.5% agreed that they had occasionally made fun of someone on their social media groups, while a small percentage (2.6%) respondents said that they always made fun of someone on their social media groups. Vulnerable as they are at this age, it is possible that these children could unwittingly either become victims or perpetrators of the crime. So it is taken that cyber bullying menace does exist to a large extent among the tweens & teens of Chennai and cannot be ignored.

Majority of children here possess smartphones, of which a large percentage is already slipping into addiction to the device. A handy device, which can be used while on bed or any other place, most of this population use their mobile phones to communicate via various social networking groups through apps on their mobiles. It is on these platforms that most of their interactions take place pre and post school hours. So it is clear that mobile phones have become a medium through which most of the cyberbullying happens in this city. The most prevalent form of cyber bullying was found to be ‘abusive language & ‘Hurtful messages’ followed by ‘Mean messages’ & ‘Hurtful pictures’.

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