Original Research Article

Representation of Digital Trauma and Narratives of Resistance against Cyberbullishing in the Novel Second Sister by Chan HO-KEI

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Abstract

This study examines how Chan Ho-Kei's novel, Second Sister, depicts trauma generated by digital technology and presents a narrative of resistance against online bullying. Online bullying has emerged as a global problem causing serious psychological harm to victims, including trauma that is recorded and shared electronically. A recent study by Hinduja and Patchin (2025) suggests that online bullying should be classified as an adverse childhood experience due to its traumatic impact on adolescent development, with a strong link between PTSD symptoms and online bullying experiences. The novel offers a unique perspective on how digital technology can function as both a source of trauma and an instrument of resistance. Applying narrative analysis and digital trauma theory, this study investigates how the novel's characters confront, respond to, and resist online bullying. The analysis includes story structure, character portrayal, and the role of technology as a plot element. The findings reveal that the novel depicts digital trauma through three main aspects: the persistence of electronic traces, the escalation of violence through social media, and the fragmentation of victim identity. The narrative of resistance is developed through online investigation tactics, the reclaiming of victim narratives, and the formation of solidarity online. The novel also critiques the social systems that allow online bullying to thrive, such as the culture of victimization and institutional incompetence. The study's conclusions underscore the need for a deeper understanding of the complexities of digital trauma in an era of hyperconnectivity, as well as the importance of empowering stories of resistance for online bullying victims.
Keywords: Novel Representation, Resistance, Bullying.

INTRODUCTION

The digital era has fundamentally changed the way humans interact socially. Advances in information and communication technology have made communication much easier, but have also given rise to various problems, such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is repeated aggressive behavior, carried out through electronic means, with the aim of harming someone who is unable to defend themselves. This phenomenon has received global attention due to its serious impact on mental health, especially among adolescents and young adults. Research shows that victims of cyberbullying are more susceptible to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts than others. A recent article published in(Liu *et al*., 2025)describes significant psychological changes during cyberbullying, including decreased feelings of happiness, increased risk of suicide, and moral disturbance.

The trauma that Cyberbullying has distinct characteristics from conventional trauma. Digital trauma refers to traumatic experiences influenced by technology. The permanence of digital content, the speed of information dissemination, and the wide reach of audiences make this trauma persistent and invasive. Victims not only experience distress during the incident but also continue to experience retraumatization each time the content is reshared or revisited. The viral nature of digital media makes trauma collective and difficult to erase, forming what is known as an indelible digital memory (Mandolessi, 2023)Research on memory in the digital age suggests that social media has changed the way we remember and forget, with the externalization of memories being constrained by platform features and user cultural norms.

In the world of modern literature, the issues of cyberbullying and technology-induced trauma are beginning to be addressed by writers. Chan Ho-Kei's

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novel, Second Sister, first published in 2016 and translated into Indonesian, explores a complex story of cyberbullying, digital investigation, and efforts to combat violence exploited by technology. The story is set in the story of Nga-Yee, who investigates the cause of her sister's death, Siu-Man, who is suspected of committing suicide due to the pressure of cyberbullying. With the help of a hacking expert named N, Nga-Yee uncovers a broader network of bullying, digital manipulation, and cybercrime. Beyond presenting a compelling detective story, the novel also provides a sharp critique of today's digital culture and the impact of technology on human life.

Research on how cyberbullying is represented in literature remains limited, despite the growing relevance of the phenomenon in today's society. Several studies have explored how popular media conveys the issue of cyberbullying, but in-depth analysis of novels specifically addressing this theme is scarce. Second Sister is an interesting case in point, combining elements of a technological thriller with a psychological exploration of trauma and resistance. Through an analysis of this novel, this study aims to understand how digital trauma is portrayed in literary narratives and how narratives of resistance to cyberbullying are constructed.

This research is important for several reasons. First, by understanding how digital trauma is manifested in literature, we can better understand how society understands and experiences this phenomenon. Literature acts as a social mirror, reflecting society's anxieties, fears, and hopes regarding the use of technology. Second, by analyzing narratives of resistance in literary works, we can discern the strategies used by victims or communities to resist cyberbullying and rebuild their strength. Third, this research helps enrich the study of modern East Asian literature, particularly in the context of technological advancements and the social issues facing urban communities.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this research is to analyze how digital trauma is represented in the novel Second Sister, identify narrative strategies of resistance to cyberbullying contained in the work, and explore the social and cultural impacts of this representation in today's digital society.

By analyzing systematically and in-depth, this research is expected to help deepen understanding of how literature responds to and shapes conversations about cyberbullying and digital trauma.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach with two main methods: narrative analysis and content analysis. Narrative analysis was chosen for its ability to examine how stories are constructed, character development, and the meanings embodied in literary texts. Using this method, researchers were able to identify patterns, themes, and the authors' methods for conveying digital trauma and narratives of resistance. Meanwhile, content analysis was used to categorize and understand specific elements within the texts related to cyberbullying, how victims respond, and the strategies of resistance employed.

The book studied was Chan Ho-Kei's novel, "Second Sister," translated into Indonesian. This book was chosen because of its clear focus on cyberbullying and digital investigation, as well as its in-depth explanation of technology, trauma, and justice. To obtain data, the novel's text was read thoroughly and repeatedly to identify sections relevant to the research topic. The data collected included descriptions of cyberbullying incidents, the characters' emotional and psychological reactions, how the characters investigate and resist, and social commentary or criticism that appears in the narrative.

This research uses a theoretical framework that combines several perspectives. First, the concept of digital trauma, introduced in the fields of media and psychology, focuses on how digital technology influences the experience and impact of trauma. Recent research suggests that digital trauma is characterized by its immediacy, high visibility, and rapid spread. In one study,(Hinduja & Patchin, 2025)using a nationally representative sample and found that feelings of exclusion or rejection can be as harmful as overt threats, thus challenging the belief that only extreme forms of cyberbullying can cause psychological distress. Second, the theory of counter-narrative narratives, originating from postcolonial and feminist studies, explores how minority groups develop alternative narratives to challenge dominant, oppressive narratives. Hochman and Spector-Mersel (2020) explain that counter-narratives can take various forms, encompassing both compliance and resistance to powerful narratives. In the context of cyberbullying, counter-narratives occur when victims attempt to regain control of their narratives and challenge the stigma they may experience. Third, the sociology of technology perspective examines how digital technology shapes social relations, power structures, and practices of violence.

The analysis was conducted in several stages. The first stage was a general reading of the text to understand the overall storyline and identify key themes. The second stage was to identify sections of the text that contained representations of digital trauma, cyberbullying, and resistance efforts. The third stage was to group the data according to analytical dimensions, such as the form of cyberbullying described, how trauma manifests in characters, resistance strategies used, and the role of technology in the narrative. The fourth stage was to interpret the results by connecting them to the

theoretical framework and the broader socio-cultural context. The fifth stage was to triangulate with academic literature on cyberbullying, digital trauma, and literary studies to ensure the validity of the interpretations.

To ensure the analysis remains objective and credible, this study employs several methods. First, the analysis process is structured, with each statement taken from the text accompanied by specific citations as concrete evidence. Second, the explanations provided are compared with previous research on cyberbullying and the impact of digital trauma, ensuring the analysis aligns with current scientific understanding. Third, the analysis considers Hong Kong's social and cultural context as the setting for the story, including the influence of technology, social media, and other social issues. Fourth, this study acknowledges that not all views are correct and allows for differing perspectives in the discussion.

Besides Furthermore, this study also considers ethical aspects in analyzing representations of trauma and violence. Although the work being analyzed is a work of fiction, the topics of cyberbullying and digital trauma are related to the real experiences of many people. Therefore, in analyzing them, this study attempts to consider the complexity of trauma and avoids oversimplifying or deliberately exaggerating violence. The aim of this study is to examine how representations in novels can contribute to a deeper understanding of social phenomena and provide useful information for better advocacy and intervention efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Representation of Digital Trauma in the Novel Second Sister

An analysis of the novel Second Sister shows that digital trauma is depicted through three main interconnected dimensions. The first dimension is the permanence of digital traces, which cause lasting trauma. In the story, the character Siu-Man is a victim of online bullying through the distribution of embarrassing photos and videos on social media. This content is difficult to completely erase and continues to spread even after Siu-Man's death. This creates what can be called a "digital social death," where the negative image of the bullying persists and even overshadows the victim's true life story. Nga-Yee, Siu-Man's older sister, continues to experience re-traumatization every time she encounters content about her sister on various platforms. The novel illustrates how digital archives act as unforgettable traumatic memories, unlike ordinary trauma that may fade over time. This finding aligns with research(Mandolessi, 2023)on collective memory in the digital age, emphasizing how digital archives transform the temporal and spatial boundaries of memory, thus creating a "permanent data transfer" that defines a new ecology of memory.

The second dimension is the escalation of violence through social media and collective complicity in bullying. The novel explains how social media becomes a platform for bullying, exacerbating the violence. Siu-Man is attacked not only by the main perpetrator, but also by hundreds or even thousands of social media users who comment, reshare content, or add their own insults. This reflects what is called the online disinhibition effect in social psychology, where anonymity and physical distance embolden people to act aggressively, something they might not do in person. The novel also shows how social media algorithms can amplify bullying by making viral content more accessible and disseminated. As a result, the trauma arises not only from the main perpetrator, but also from the digital crowd participating in the collective violence.

The third dimension of digital trauma in this novel is the fragmentation of identity and the loss of control over one's personal narrative. The story shows how online bullying undermines victims' ability to define themselves. Siu-Man, as a teenager, loses control over how others perceive her in the public eye. Her identity is instead reshaped by the bullies through victim-blaming narratives, the spread of gossip, and distorted versions of her personality and actions. This fragmentation of identity triggers a profound identity crisis, where victims can no longer distinguish between their true selves and the fabricated digital versions. The novel also depicts this trauma as panoptic, where victims feel constantly watched and judged by an invisible but omnipresent digital audience.

Furthermore, the novel depicts the real psychological impact of trauma. Siu-Man is depicted as experiencing severe social isolation, paralyzing anxiety, and ultimately choosing suicide as a reaction to the unbearable bullying. Nga-Yee, as an indirect survivor, experiences a hereditary trauma where she feels her sister's suffering even though she is not a direct victim. Feelings of guilt, anger, and a desire for revenge become the main emotions that shape her journey in the story. The novel shows that digital trauma affects not only the primary victim, but also the family and surrounding environment, thus creating a wider cycle of trauma. This shows that literary works, including short stories and novels, not only reflect the experiences of individual characters but also broader social conditions, where social criticism in fictional works is often used by authors to depict the problematic realities of society through narrative texts (Hasanah & Wiharja, 2018).

2. Narrative Strategy of Resistance Against Cyberbullying

The novel, Second Sister, builds a story of resistance through complex and layered strategies. The first strategy is online investigation as a means of empowerment and truth-seeking. Nga-Yee, with the help of hacker N, conducts an in-depth investigation to uncover the perpetrators of bullying and how it occurred.

This process is not only about finding facts, but also about reclaiming control and power. Nga-Yee uses the same technology used to harm her sister as a tool for justice. The online investigation in the novel involves hacking social media accounts, tracing digital footprints, analyzing metadata, and uncovering the perpetrators' social networks. This demonstrates the ambiguous nature of technology, both as a tool of violence and as a tool of liberation.

The second strategy is reclaiming the victim's story through truth-telling and humanization. Throughout the novel, Nga-Yee attempts to reconstruct her sister's true story, countering the narrative created by the bully. She gathers evidence that shows Siu-Man as a victim of systematic manipulation and bullying, rather than a deserving social punishment as portrayed on social media. This process involves uncovering the broader context, such as social pressures, power dynamics, and the perpetrator's motivations. The novel emphasizes the importance of counter-narratives to counter the stigma and backlash against victims that often occur in cases of online bullying. Reclaiming this narrative also serves as a healing tool for Nga-Yee, allowing her to properly honor her sister's memory.

The third strategy is building alliances and solidarity to combat bullying. The relationship between Nga-Yee and N demonstrates how cooperation and mutual support can be a force of resistance. N, initially mysterious and with unclear motivations, eventually becomes an ally who provides technical expertise and emotional support to Nga-Yee. The novel also illustrates how others who have been victims or witnesses of bullying can unite against the perpetrator. This solidarity creates a community of resistance that is stronger than any single individual. More broadly, the novel can be read as an invitation to form support networks and collectively intervene against online bullying.

The fourth strategy is to publicly expose the perpetrators and the systems that support bullying. The story culminates when Nga-Yee and N successfully reveal the identities of the main perpetrators and expose them to the public. This strategy mirrors the so-called "naming and shaming" in online activism, where perpetrators are confronted with the social consequences of their actions. But the novel also critiques the moral ambiguity of this approach. Exposure can be a form of justice, but it can also trigger new bullying and violence. Chan Ho-Kei skillfully explores this ethical dilemma without simple answers, prompting readers to reflect on the complexities of justice in the digital age.

A fifth, more subtle strategy is a critique of social and institutional structures that fail to protect victims. The novel depicts how schools, police, and social media platforms are often unresponsive or even contribute to bullying through indifference or inadequate policing. The novel's narrative of resistance targets not only individual perpetrators but also the systems that allow bullying to thrive. Nga-Yee faces various institutional obstacles in seeking justice, from distrust of the police to the inability of digital platforms to remove harmful content. This critique serves as a call for systemic change in how society addresses online bullying.

3. Socio-Cultural Implications and Critical Reflection

An analysis of the novel Second Sister reveals several important implications for understanding online bullying and digital trauma in the current socio-cultural context. First, the novel emphasizes the importance of critical digital literacy, which goes beyond mere technical skills. This literacy involves understanding power dynamics, communication ethics, and the psychological impact of online interactions. The characters who are most successful in combating bullying are those who truly understand how technology works and how it can be misused. This suggests that digital education must encompass ethical and social aspects, not just technical ones.

Second, the novel examines the responsibility of social media platforms to regulate content and protect users. Throughout the story, these platforms are portrayed as unregulated spaces where bullying can thrive. Harmful content can go viral instantly, while reporting and removal systems are often slow or ineffective. The novel subtly pushes for stricter regulation and platform accountability in preventing and addressing online bullying. This aligns with global discussions about technology regulations and corporate responsibility in the digital age.

Third, the novel highlights the complexities of justice in the digital age. The question of a just response to online bullying has no simple answer. The story explores various forms of justice, from punitive to restorative, from official to self-inflicted. The narrative's moral ambiguity reflects real-life tensions in society about how to achieve justice when the legal system often lags behind technological developments. Conversations between characters about the ethics of hacking and public exposure encourage readers to consider the limits of justice and law in the digital world.

Fourth, the novel provides insight into the gender aspects of online bullying. Siu-Man and Nga-Yee, as female characters, face gender-specific forms of bullying, such as sexual humiliation, objectification, and double standards in moral judgment. Recent research suggests that women and adolescent girls are more vulnerable to certain forms of online bullying, particularly those involving sexual harassment and revenge pornography. Although Chan Ho-Kei's novel does not explicitly analyze it from a feminist perspective, the depiction of these female characters' experiences invites a gender-sensitive reading of online bullying.

Fifth, the novel illustrates how online bullying is linked to broader social issues, such as academic pressure, social competition, and adolescent identity crises. Siu-Man experiences bullying in a highly competitive school environment and a society that places high expectations on academic success. This bullying does not emerge spontaneously, but rather is a result of larger social stressors and structural forces. This understanding is crucial for developing interventions that focus not only on individual bullying but also on the social conditions that allow it to thrive.

Sixth, this novel contributes to discussions about memory and oblivion in the digital age. The permanence of digital traces creates new challenges for the right to be forgotten. Victims of online bullying struggle to move on from their trauma when evidence of the abuse remains and is publicly accessible. The novel raises questions about how society can balance transparency and accountability on the one hand with privacy and the right to start over on the other. This is a dilemma that continues to be debated in global digital policy.

Seventh, the depiction in this novel can be used as an educational tool and to raise social awareness. Literature has a unique power to build empathy and understanding through identification with characters. Readers who follow Nga-Yee's journey can gain a deeper understanding of the impact of online bullying and the complexities of responding to it. This novel can be used in education to spark discussions about digital ethics, empathy, and social responsibility. The nuanced and complex representation here avoids oversimplification and encourages critical thinking.

Conclusion

This research shows that Chan Ho-Kei's novel "Second Sister" provides a complex and profound depiction of trauma caused by the digital world, as well as a story about how to combat cyberbullying. Digital trauma in this novel is depicted through three main aspects: the lasting digital footprint that keeps the trauma ongoing, violence that is magnified by the involvement of many people on social media, and fragmented identities that cause victims to lose control over their life stories. This depiction fits with theoretical explanations and empirical evidence about the special nature of trauma influenced by digital technology, where bad experiences do not just happen once but are ongoing and magnified through online storage and distribution.

Story the resistance in this novel is built through five main approaches: digital investigation as a means of self-empowerment, reclaiming the victim's narrative by uncovering the facts, building cooperation and solidarity, publicly exposing the perpetrator, and criticizing institutional systems that fail to protect victims. These approaches demonstrate that combating cyberbullying requires a multidimensional approach that combines individual action, group collaboration, and systemic change. The novel also addresses ethical dilemmas and moral ambiguities in resistance, avoiding simple solutions and encouraging critical thinking about justice in the digital age.

The socio-cultural implications of this analysis include the importance of critical digital literacy skills encompassing ethical and social aspects, the need for social media platforms to be responsible in monitoring content, the complexities of justice in the digital context, the role of gender in cyberbullying, the relationship of bullying to broader social issues, the challenges of remembering and forgetting in the digital age, and the potential of literature as a tool for education and public awareness. These findings emphasize that cyberbullying is not simply a personal or technological issue, but rather a complex social phenomenon that requires a comprehensive response from various parties.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focused on only one novel, so it may not reflect the various ways cyberbullying is portrayed in modern literature. Further research could compare literary works from different cultures to understand cross-cultural representations. Second, this study only analyzed the text and did not include a study of how readers understand and interpret these depictions. Third, although it used a comprehensive theoretical framework, additional perspectives such as deeper psychological analysis or techno-cultural analysis could enrich the understanding.

For further research, several directions could be considered. First, field studies on how cyberbullying victims react to and interpret depictions in literature or popular media could validate or critique these findings. Second, comparative analyses of cyberbullying representations across various genres and media, such as films, TV series, and interactive digital media, could provide broader insights into social discussions about cyberbullying. Third, research on the effectiveness of story- or narrative-based interventions in preventing and addressing cyberbullying could provide practical applications of these theoretical findings.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study is that literature plays a crucial role in shaping society's understanding of modern issues such as cyberbullying and digital trauma. The novel "Second Sister" is not only entertaining, but also educational and critical, providing a space to reflect on how technology impacts our lives and how to respond to its negative impacts. In an age where cyberbullying is increasingly frequent and damaging, stories of resistance that empower victims and critique the structures that enable digital violence are much needed. This study hopes to contribute to broader discussions on how to create a safer, more just, and more humane digital space.

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