

ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING: PERSPECTIVES ON UNIVERSITY ACTIONS FROM MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract. Cyberbullying poses significant challenges for university students, particularly in Malaysia, affecting both their emotional and academic well-being. This study explores the emotional and academic impacts of cyberbullying on Malaysian university students through a qualitative approach. The findings revealed that cyberbullying significantly increase anxiety, decreases motivation, and resulted in a decline in academic performance among victims. The research also investigated the actions that Malaysian universities could implement to effectively address cyberbullying, based on the perspectives of undergraduates. Recommendations include the introduction of comprehensive educational programs on digital safety, the establishment of clear and accessible reporting mechanisms, and the provision of targeted counselling services. Additionally, while strict disciplinary measures can be effective in addressing the behaviour, they must be paired with educational and support strategies to promote understanding and prevent future incidents, ensuring that both victims and perpetrators can benefit from a more rehabilitative and inclusive approach. This study provides valuable insights into developing more effective policies and practices that can foster a safer and more supportive academic environment for students.

Keywords: *academic impacts, cyberbullying, emotional impacts, undergraduate perspectives, university actions*

Introduction

The Internet and social media have offered numerous advantages to adolescents, including rapid communication, increased entertainment options, and easy access to information. According to a detailed analysis by Kepios, as of July 2024, there were 5.17 billion social media users worldwide, representing 63.7% of the global population. Over the past year, social media has seen continued growth, with 282 million new users added since the same period in 2023. This marks an annual growth rate of 5.8%, with an average of 8.9 new users joining every second. The data also shows that nearly 95% of internet users globally access social media monthly (DataReportal Web Portal, 2024). However, the advancement of internet and social media also introduced some negative effects, one of which is the growing global issue of cyberbullying, now recognized as a serious form of misconduct (Chan et al., 2020). Cyberbullying shares fundamental characteristics with traditional bullying, involving deliberate abusive actions intended to cause harm and stress to victims over an extended period. However, cyberbullying can be more damaging because these harmful actions can occur at any time and in any place due to advances in ICT platforms. Cyberbullying can take several forms, including: (1) exclusion, which involves isolating someone from a social or online group where they

have mutual connections; (2) harassment, characterized by a repeated pattern of sending inappropriate or threatening messages to the victim; (3) trolling, where individuals post harmful comments with the intent to embarrass others, often without having any personal relationship with the victims; and (4) dissing, which entails spreading negative information about someone through private messages or public posts to damage their reputation and relationships (Ariffin et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying has become a serious issue in Malaysia. For instance, in May 2019, a 16-year-old girl from Sarawak also committed suicide by jumping after an Instagram poll asking her followers to decide whether she should continue living or end her life went viral (Hassan, 2019). In May 2020, a 20-year-old girl from Penang took her own life by hanging herself from a ceiling fan after a TikTok video featuring her and a colleague attracted negative attention and went viral on Facebook (Basyir and Perimbanayagam, 2020). In August 2020, a 17-year-old girl from Penang leaped to her death from a condominium after her boyfriend threatened to share her private photos on social media (Basyir, 2020). These tragic events underscore a troubling rise in cyberbullying cases in Malaysia, leading to suicides and escalating mental health issues among victims. These incidents highlight the severe impact of cyberbullying on Malaysian youth, affecting their physical, social, and cognitive development, as well as their overall psychological well-being. The frequency of Internet use is a key predictor of both engaging in and becoming a victim of cyberbullying. It is often observed that increased internet usage correlates with a higher likelihood of initiating or experiencing cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2015). Individuals who spend three to five hours online each day are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying compared to those who use the internet less frequently (Balakrishnan, 2015). Previous research has also demonstrated a link between social media usage and the likelihood of becoming a victim of cyberbullying (Adebayo and Ninggal, 2022). Individuals face a higher risk of cyberbullying when they have uncontrolled and excessive access to social media, engage in problematic behaviour, communicate with unknown individuals and share private or school-related information or post personal photos (Craig et al., 2020). Essentially, the more time spent online, the greater the risk of participating in or falling victim to cyberbullying.

Many cases of cyberbullying end in tragic outcomes, which could potentially be prevented if victims are aware of their rights and understand how to respond to online harassment. Universities should establish guidelines to help students manage and prevent cyberbullying, ensuring they have access to resources that can help them make informed decisions and avoid harmful situations (Ghazali et al., 2022). Although cyberbullying often takes place at home or in college dormitories, it is essential for educators and lecturers to provide supervision to ensure that students are protected and do not fall victim to such behaviour (González-Cabrera et al., 2019). Effective monitoring and support can help mitigate the risk and impact of cyberbullying, creating a safer environment for students. However, to address these issues more effectively, a deeper understanding of the students' experiences is required. While existing research on cyberbullying has largely utilized quantitative methods, there is a significant need for qualitative insights to develop a more comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying (Chan et al., 2020). Hence, this study aims to investigate the emotional and academic impacts of cyberbullying from the perspectives of Malaysian university students who have experienced it firsthand by using qualitative research design. By exploring how cyberbullying affects their mental health and academic performance, the research seeks

to uncover the broader consequences for victims. Understanding these impacts from the students' viewpoints is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems tailored to their needs. This study intends to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the emotional and academic impacts of cyberbullying on Malaysian university students? (2) What actions can Malaysian universities implement to effectively address cyberbullying, as perceived by undergraduates who have personally experienced it? Incorporating the experiences of victims allows the findings to guide the development of more effective strategies and support systems for preventing and addressing cyberbullying across Malaysian campuses nationwide.

Literature review

University students are in a transitional life stage known as emerging adulthood, characterized by the development of new behavioural, cognitive, and social responses to evolving environmental demands (Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2020). This period of university life aligns with their developmental phase, requiring them to navigate the challenges of increased independence, forming new social networks, and managing greater responsibilities. In addition to the academic pressures that shape their future careers, students face social and emotional challenges, especially those stemming from cyberbullying (Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2020). Cyberbullying can occur in two main forms: directly and indirectly. Direct cyberbullying involves direct communication between the perpetrator and the victim. In contrast, indirect cyberbullying occurs when the perpetrator does not communicate directly with the victim but instead targets them by posting negative content publicly or sharing it with a wider audience through digital communication tools, such as mobile devices or the internet (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2018). Involvement in cyberbullying has detrimental effects on the physical, psychological, and social well-being of both victims and perpetrators. It has been linked to anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, with studies indicating that it may have a stronger connection to depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation than traditional forms of bullying (John et al., 2018). As a result, cyberbullying poses significant challenges for parents, educators, and policymakers, and represents a serious issue for young people whose lives are increasingly intertwined with technology.

Given the heightened risks to young people's health and well-being posed by cyberbullying, which exceed those of traditional bullying, researches emphasize the need for targeted, evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies (Hutson et al., 2018). Research also suggests that efforts to tackle cyberbullying have largely been grounded in conventional anti-bullying approaches and have often failed to actively involve young people in the process (Smith, 2019). There are still limited efforts from tertiary institutions in the implementation of cyberbullying initiatives and in ensuring their effectiveness. Many of these initiatives are based on studies involving children and adolescents rather than reflecting the perspectives of university students (Faucher et al., 2020). This is problematic, as university students are key stakeholders who should be given autonomy and input in these efforts. Their insights would help create more informed, relatable, and age-appropriate interventions (Jackson et al., 2018). Age-appropriate interventions are crucial because research consistently shows they are most effective when aligned with the specific life stage of the targeted group (Jackson et al., 2018). To address these concerns, new prevention and response strategies should be developed at the tertiary level, grounded in young adults' experiences of cyberbullying and taking into account the unique aspects of this life stage, such as living

independently, forming new social networks, and reduced adult oversight (Sheanoda et al., 2024). Furthermore, research on cyberbullying prevention and response also highlights the importance of studying barriers, as these challenges hinder effective intervention. Barriers are defined as obstacles that prevent achieving desired outcomes. For example, in the study conducted by Young-Jones et al. (2015) discussed that 12% of participants acknowledged having experienced peer bullying while 40% reported encountering bullying behaviour from peers but did not recognize it as bullying. This failure to recognize bullying behaviour may be partly attributed to students' lack of awareness about existing policies or to having access to anti-bullying policies that are insufficient or unclear in their definitions and information (Faucher et al., 2015).

Consequently, university students often hesitate to seek help when they encounter cyberbullying. Reasons such as embarrassment, reluctance to admit they are being bullied, a lack of clear understanding of what constitutes bullying, and a lack of confidence in the university's ability to offer support all contribute to the underreporting of cyberbullying incidents. Students not only need access to information that empowers them to report these incidents, but they must also trust that the university will thoroughly investigate their reports and deliver a positive outcome without subjecting the reporting student to retaliation. This reluctance can be further compounded by the lack of well-defined and accessible support resources, which may leave students feeling unsupported when dealing with cyberbullying. Additionally, the stigma associated with seeking help for such issues might deter students from reporting incidents. Thus, gaining deeper insights into students' perspectives and their suggestions for improvements would enable universities to more effectively address these barriers.

Materials and Methods

Research design, participants and instrument

This study will employ a qualitative research approach to explore the emotional and academic impacts of cyberbullying on university students and assess their perspectives on university actions. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with Malaysian undergraduates who have personally experienced cyberbullying. This method allows for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, providing rich insights into the emotional and academic effects of cyberbullying. The data collected will be analysed thematically to identify common patterns, perceived gaps in current university support systems, and collect suggestions for improving institutional responses to cyberbullying. The participants consisted of ten undergraduate students, distributed across different years of enrolment: three were in their second year, three in their third year, and four in their final year of study. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 24, with a gender distribution of four males and six females. All participants owned a personal laptop or computer, as well as a mobile phone. They were active social media users, with each participant maintaining accounts on major platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, in addition to using several other, less frequently accessed, platforms. Most participants reported spending significant time online daily about six to eight hours, engaging in various academic, social, and recreational activities. Each of these students had experienced cyberbullying in some form, including harassment, dissing, and hateful comments and they willingly contributed to the study, providing invaluable insights which impacted their emotional and academic lives. This study used a semi-structured interview process as the primary research instrument. The questions

were aimed at gathering the students' perspectives on the most effective university-level interventions, support mechanisms, and preventive measures to assist victims of cyberbullying. While the questions were structured to focus on the key areas, participants were also free to elaborate on their responses. Additionally, follow-up questions were posed where necessary to allow for more in-depth exploration of their personal experiences. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to express their thoughts in-depth while maintaining focus on the research goals.

Data collection and analysis

For data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, allowing participants to openly share their experiences and insights. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. Data analysis involved thematic analysis, where the transcripts were systematically reviewed to identify recurring themes related to the emotional and academic effects of cyberbullying. Key themes were then categorized to capture the participants' experiences and their recommendations for improving university support systems. This approach ensured that the analysis remained focused on addressing the research questions while being responsive to the participants' perspectives. To authentically represent the participants' perspectives, direct quotes were used to emphasize key themes, ensuring that their insights were central to the findings and effectively addressed the research questions in a thorough manner.

Results and Discussion

Emotional impact of cyberbullying: Stress and anxiety, self-esteem and embarrassment

Research indicated that cyberbullying could occur through various electronic platforms, including email, instant messaging, chat rooms, text messaging, and social networking sites. This form of harassment was prevalent in colleges and universities and affected students' development (Peled, 2019). The survey findings highlighted the significant emotional distress caused by cyberbullying. Many participants reported experiencing anxiety and stress as a result of cyberbullying. For example, one respondent described feeling "anxious and constantly on edge", while another expressed that cyberbullying led to persistent "sadness and depression", severely impacting their mood and mental health. This ongoing distress shows the emotional consequences of cyberbullying, revealing a profound impact on psychological and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the responses indicated that cyberbullying substantially erodes self-esteem and confidence. Several individuals reported feelings of isolation and self-doubt, with one participant noted that the harassment resulted in "self-doubt and insecurity" and another indicated a diminished sense of confidence. The emotional strain from these negative experiences often led to difficulties in enjoying social interactions and participating in daily activities (Tetteh et al., 2023). Students increasingly favoured the Internet for their daily activities, using it with high frequency. This causes cyberbullying to remain a troubling issue not only among adolescents but also within the undergraduate student population. These findings emphasize the urgent need for

effective support systems and interventions to address the emotional fallout from cyberbullying and to provide necessary assistance to those affected (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Emotional impacts of cyberbullying.

Repondent	Direct quotes
1	"Cyberbullying made me feel anxious and constantly on edge. I worried about what people were saying about me online, which affected my self-esteem"
2	"I experienced sadness and depression due to cyberbullying. It impacts my overall mood"
3	"The harassment online caused me significant stress and frustration"
4	"I just felt really angry and hurt by the cyberbullying"
5	"Cyberbullying led to a lot of self-doubt and insecurity"
6	"It made me feel extremely vulnerable and fearful"
7	"I struggled with feelings of depression and loneliness. I felt emotionally drained"
8	"I felt a lot of shame and embarrassment, which affected my confidence and daily interactions."
9	"I experienced stress and anxiety. The cyberbullying made it difficult to relax"
10	"The comments affected my mental well-being and made me less motivated."

Moreover, one respondent described experiencing intense feelings of shame and embarrassment due to cyberbullying, which severely eroded their self-confidence and daily interactions. This sense of humiliation led to a noticeable decline in confidence level, resulted in a growing hesitance to participate in social situations and an ongoing sense of doubt. The exposure to demeaning comments and negative online interactions fostered a persistent feeling of being scrutinized and diminished, further affecting their emotional turmoil. As a result, the individual struggled to maintain a positive image and found it increasingly difficult to engage in routine activities. When cyberbullying involves sharing a victim's private and personal information, it can make it hard for them to trust others (Tetteh et al., 2023). This is because the people who had access to this information are often those the victim trusted. When this trust is broken and the information is used to harm them, it can lead to strong feelings of mistrust and suspicion towards others. This finding is further supported by the research of Martínez-Monteaagudo et al. (2020). It can be inferred that a continual state of fear, mistrust, and scepticism is likely to result in depression over time.

Academic impacts of cyberbullying: Distraction and declining grades

The survey responses revealed that cyberbullying can significantly disrupted students' focus and engagement with their academic responsibilities. Respondents frequently mentioned that the constant anxiety and distress caused by cyberbullying made it challenging to concentrate on their studies. For example, one respondent noted that they were "constantly distracted by the harassment" which led to a noticeable decline in their academic performance. This distraction often resulted in missed assignments and reduced productivity, highlighting how cyberbullying undermines students' ability to fully engage with their coursework. This result matched earlier studies that found students who were cyberbullied often had lower academic performance, like worse grades or less involvement in school (Lee et al., 2023). Another prominent theme in the survey findings is the stress-induced impact on academic performance. Many respondents reported that the emotional toll of cyberbullying caused significant anxiety, which directly affected their ability to perform well academically. For instance, one participant described how the stress from cyberbullying caused him to be overwhelmed that he struggled to keep up with his assignments and this not only impacted their immediate academic tasks but also contributed to a broader sense of disengagement from their educational responsibilities. The strong link between social bullying and academic performance, regardless of various factors considered suggests

that the way victims cope with relational strain impacts their academic success (Torres et al., 2020). Recognizing that relational strain is common among undergraduates and negatively affects academic performance can help in developing practical university intervention programs aimed at addressing social and relational bullying (*Table 2*).

Table 2. *Academic impacts of cyberbullying.*

Repondent	Direct quotes
1	"I was constantly distracted by the harassment and my grades started slipping"
2	"I felt overwhelmed that I struggled to keep up with my assignments."
3	"The stress led me to miss several classes and my understanding of the course material dropped"
4	"...affected my ability to complete my coursework on time."
5	"It had a direct negative impact on my academic results ""
6	"I couldn't focus during exams "
7	"The emotional toll made me hard to stay motivated"
8	"I started neglecting my academic responsibilities.."
9	"...affected my ability to study and perform well in my exams"
10	"I was preoccupied with the negative online interactions.."

The survey also highlighted a clear correlation between cyberbullying and a decline in both motivation and academic achievement. Respondents shared that the ongoing cases of cyberbullying could diminished their motivation to study and attend classes, ultimately leading to poorer academic outcomes. One respondent stated that the bullying caused them to "neglect their academic responsibilities" resulting in a significant decline in their performance. This decrease in motivation and academic focus underscored the serious effect of cyberbullying on students' educational experiences and achievements. Some students skipped school due to fear of being bullied and the students involved in cyberbullying, whether as victims or perpetrators, often struggle academically (Singh and Dillon, 2020). Overall, these findings highlight the significant negative impacts of cyberbullying on students' academic performance and emotional well-being.

Enhancing cyberbullying prevention and support in Malaysian universities: Recommendations from students

The survey findings highlighted a strong consensus among students on the need for educational workshops focused on digital safety and cyberbullying awareness. Respondents emphasized that understanding the impact of cyberbullying and learning how to protect oneself online are crucial steps in prevention. Educational initiatives can provide students with essential knowledge and strategies to recognize and avoid cyberbullying, thus creating a more informed and proactive campus community. The universities should make these workshops mandatory as to equip students with the tools they need to navigate digital spaces safely and responsibly. The workshops might require comprehensive approach, including teacher training, school meetings with parents, online resources, and classroom activities with students. But, the goal is to educate and raise awareness about cyberbullying (Aparisi et al., 2021). For example, parents can learn how to set rules for internet use and monitor their children's online activities, educators can be trained to recognize and handle cyberbullying, and students can receive advice on avoiding risky online behaviour. As a result, the program successfully reduced both cyberbullying and cybervictimization in the group that participated compared to those who did not. Apart from that, the call for a clear and accessible reporting system reflects a critical concern among students who have experienced cyberbullying. Many respondents pointed out that knowing how to report incidents and feeling confident that their concerns will be addressed are vital for

effectively combating cyberbullying. An efficient reporting mechanism ensures that victims can seek help without facing bureaucratic challenges, and it signals that the university is committed to taking action against cyberbullying. This system not only supports victims but also helps in tracking and addressing the broader issue of cyberbullying on campus. Given the crucial role of digital education in preventing cyberbullying and reducing online aggression, universities could develop and implement educational mobile apps. These apps would be accessible anytime and on various devices, providing young people with important information about internet risks and how to prevent them (Aparisi et al., 2021). Additionally, these apps could offer a way for university students to request help if they experience cyberbullying. By doing so, they could also foster virtual communities where young people can receive psychological support and be encouraged to report negative experiences (Aparisi et al., 2021) (*Table 3*).

Table 3. *cyberbullying prevention and support.*

Repondent	Direct quotes
1	"...should provide mandatory workshops on digital safety and the impact of cyberbullying"
2	"There should be a clear reporting system for cyberbullying cases"
3	"Offer counselling services and mental health"
4	"...should create a supportive campus culture where students feel safe to speak up"
5	"Implement stricter policies and penalties for those found guilty of cyberbullying"
6	"...update students and staff about cyberbullying trends"
7	"...partner with tech companies to provide tools and resources for detecting and addressing cyberbullying"
8	"Create peer support programs where students can help each other"
9	"Create cyberbullying prevention and awareness into the university's orientation programs"
10	"...promote a strong sense of community through events and activities"

Furthermore, university students often resort to technical coping strategies, such as blocking the bully or adjusting privacy settings, which can lead to further isolation from their online communities. They may also place their trust in social media companies to address and resolve the situation (Byrne, 2021). However, these measures can sometimes increase the feelings of loneliness and helplessness, as the victim may feel disconnected from their peers. Additionally, relying solely on technical solutions might not address the underlying emotional and psychological impacts of cyberbullying (Byrne, 2021). Hence, the respondents shared the necessity of providing specialized counselling and mental health services for victims of cyberbullying. The emotional toll of cyberbullying can be problematic, affecting students' mental health and academic performance. Offering targeted support from universities can help students cope with the psychological impacts of cyberbullying, facilitating their recovery and academic success. Counselling services can provide a safe space for students to discuss their experiences and develop better coping strategies possibly in terms of spiritual aspects, which is crucial for their overall well-being. Next, the need for stricter policies and penalties for cyberbullying perpetrators was a recurring theme in the survey responses. Students suggested that clear rules and consequences for cyberbullying can deter potential offenders and demonstrate the university's commitment to maintaining a safe and respectful environment. This is also reflected in the survey by Faucher et al. (2020), where many respondents suggested using different disciplinary measures, even though the ideas were not strongly highlighted in the focus group discussions. Some people felt that the university should include strict actions like public shaming, suspension, and expulsion as part of its response to cyberbullying (Faucher et al., 2020). Knowing that severe penalties are in place may make individuals think twice before participating in cyberbullying. Enforcing these policies not only addresses incidents of cyberbullying

but also fosters a culture of accountability and respect. Universities must take a firm stance against cyberbullying to effectively reduce the occurrence of such behaviour and promote a healthier campus climate.

Conclusion

The research highlights the serious effects of cyberbullying on students' emotional health and academic performance. The findings show that cyberbullying severely impacts students' ability to concentrate, increases their stress levels, and leads to a decline in their academic success. Victims commonly face increased anxiety, decreased motivation, and worsening academic results. These findings emphasize the critical need for universities to implement thorough strategies to tackle and prevent cyberbullying. Universities can introduce educational initiatives, create clear reporting procedures, and offer dedicated support services which consequently foster a safer and more supportive environment for Malaysian students. The implications of this research suggest that universities should prioritize a multi-faceted approach to combat cyberbullying. Educational initiatives, such as digital safety workshops and awareness campaigns, can equip students with the knowledge to protect themselves and respond effectively to online threats. Furthermore, implementing accessible reporting mechanisms and providing robust counselling services are crucial for supporting victims and addressing their needs. Additionally, while disciplinary measures can deter cyberbullying, they should be balanced with supportive interventions to ensure that both victims and perpetrators receive appropriate care and guidance. Overall, a combined approach that integrates prevention, support, and fair disciplinary actions can enhance the effectiveness of university policies and foster a healthier campus environment.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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