

Cyberbullying and Mental Health: Experiences of International Secondary School Students in Selangor, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital communication has led to an increasing prevalence of cyberbullying, significantly affecting individuals' psychological, emotional, and social well-being. This study examines the lived experiences of individuals of six students from three different international secondary schools in Petaling Jaya Selangor who have been subjected to cyberbullying, emphasizing its impact on mental health conditions. Through a qualitative research approach, personal accounts are analyzed to identify recurring patterns and emotional responses of participants from cyberbullying. The findings reveal that cyberbullying contributes to heightened stress, anxiety, and social withdrawal, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive intervention measures. This research provides valuable insights for educators and mental health practitioners in developing effective prevention and support mechanisms to address cyberbullying in the digital landscape.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Psychological Impact, Social Media, Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying has become a significant concern in today's tech-driven world, especially among teenagers who frequently use social media platforms. Research indicates that many people on social media do not fully understand the importance of cyber security and the risks associated with sharing information online. This lack of awareness makes them vulnerable to cyberbullying (WHO, 2024). A UNICEF report released on November 25 highlighted a troubling reality in Malaysia where the country ranks second in Asia for youth cyberbullying, behind only China, based on data from 2020. This alarming trend is further emphasized by the World Health Organization's 2024 findings, which show a significant uptick in cyberbullying incidents.

Cyberbullying poses significant challenges for young people, extending the reach of bullying beyond school into their homes, relationships, and daily lives. The situation is further complicated by Malaysia's diverse cultural landscape, where factors like race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status can exacerbate the challenges of bullying (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 2024). Specifically, the prevalence of online bullying among boys has increased from 11% to 14%, while for girls, it has risen from 7% to 9% (World Health Organization, 2024). Moreover, the organization also mentioned the number of children reporting experiences of cyberbullying has also surged where the rates have climbed from 12% to 15% for boys and from 13% to 16% for girls. As children spend more time online, these statistics highlight an urgent need for collaboration among teachers, parents, community leaders, and government officials to improve online safety and skills. The issue of cyberbullying is not only frustrating but also profoundly concerning, signalling a critical need for action.

Cyberbullying, a profoundly troubling behaviour can harm both mental and physical health and needs to be fully understood. World Health Organization's mental health report highlights that nearly one in eight people globally have experienced a mental disorder at some point (World Health Organization, 2019). These issues often present as anxiety disorders but also include physical complaints, increased depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Bernardo et al. (2020) found that students who experience cyberbullying are more likely to consider dropping out compared to those who are not bullied. Ali & Shahbuddin (2022) argue that the impact of cyberbullying on students' mental health may be more severe than previously understood, stressing the need for further research. Such experiences can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (BMJ, June 23, 2020).

Recent research highlights the severity of cyberbullying among young people in Malaysia. A study by the Malaysian Mental Health Association revealed that at least 20% of youth suicides in recent years were connected to cyberbullying. These alarming statistics underscore the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address and mitigate the effects of this dangerous trend (Rashid, 2024). Not only that, a significant study by Yatiman (2020) involving 322 high school students in Samarahan, Sarawak, revealed that 61.8% of the students had experienced cyberbullying. This statistic underscores the magnitude of the issue, with more than half of the students reporting being targets of online harassment, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health.

Policies regarding student phone usage vary across different educational institutions. Some international schools permit students to bring their phones to school but enforce strict regulations prohibiting their use during class. Others take a more controlled approach by requiring students to store their devices in designated lockers throughout the school day. In contrast, public schools often implement stricter policies, outright banning phones on school premises (Aziz, 2024). In these schools, students are not even allowed to switch their phones off discreetly. If caught with a phone, it is immediately confiscated, and parents must retrieve the device from the school administration. These policies reflect the ongoing debate about balancing technological accessibility with maintaining a focused learning environment.

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of cyberbullying among International Secondary School students, shedding light on its prevalence, patterns, and the factors that contribute to its occurrence. In particular, the research seeks to analyze the psychological and emotional impact of cyberbullying on students' mental well-being, including potential effects such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and academic difficulties. By gaining a deeper understanding of these challenges, the study aspires to provide valuable insights that can inform the development of targeted interventions and preventive measures. Ultimately, the findings of this research will serve as a foundation for creating a safer, more inclusive, and supportive school environment, where students feel protected from online harassment and empowered to seek help when needed.

Research Questions

What are the experiences and impacts of cyberbullying on mental health among International Secondary School students in Petaling Jaya Malaysia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying is particularly damaging to teens' mental health, as it assaults their emotional health and self-image at an infancy stage. Several studies have demonstrated that teenagers who are the targets of cyberbullying are more prone to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts because the ongoing bullying on the internet interferes with their lives and creates permanent psychological damage (Even-Tzur & Hadar, 2019). In contrast to bullying that might be focused on physical environments such as school, cyberbullying follows victims into their homes and personal spaces, and they feel trapped and powerless (WeLiveSecurity, 2020). The relentlessness of cyberbullying means that kids don't have an easy way to turn away from their bullies, generating unrelenting stress and exacerbating mental health problems. The effects of cyberbullying not only affect the individual victim's present emotions but also result in ongoing mental health issues that can linger long into adulthood (Bansal, 2024). Fear of cyberbullying is one of the most prevalent mental health consequences of cyberbullying,

where the victim's sense of security is repeatedly compromised by cyberbullying. Teens who experience cyberbullying often experience social anxiety, which is characterized by nervousness, fear, and a profound phobia of social situations in which they will be judged or bullied (Li & Leung, 2019). This anxiety is particularly damaging because it inhibits adolescents' willingness to join social groups and results in

loneliness, further stressing their mental health (Wang et al., 2019). Cyberbullying is unpredictable and social: victims are constantly at risk of exploitation and there is no place to feel safe or at ease, even at home (Haidt & Rose-Stockwell, 2019). This anxiety can also affect schoolwork because victims find it difficult to concentrate and might opt out of school altogether to bypass the emotional baggage of cyberbullying (King, 2023).

Depression is another critical psychiatric outcome of cyberbullying that tends to stem from the ongoing erosion of a victim’s confidence and self-esteem. It has been shown that adolescents who have been bullied online tend to experience sadness, hopelessness, and disinterest in activities they once liked (Niu et al., 2020). When individuals especially adolescents are subjected to online harassment, they may begin to internalize negative messages, leading to a persistent sense of sadness, worthlessness, and a diminished sense of self-esteem. Over time, this emotional distress can manifest as a loss of interest in hobbies or activities they once found enjoyable, feelings of hopelessness about the future, and even withdrawal from social interactions. If left unaddressed, this prolonged emotional turmoil may contribute to more severe mental health challenges, including anxiety disorders and suicidal ideation. Therefore, recognizing and addressing the psychological toll of cyberbullying is crucial in mitigating its long-term impact on individuals’ well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Design

The study was conducted by using a qualitative study. Qualitative research involves diving deep into human experiences, behaviours, and social settings to understand participants' viewpoints. This approach helps gather detailed stories reflecting students' lives' intricate realities. By focusing on cultural and contextual influences, qualitative research is particularly useful for examining sensitive issues like mental health and victimization, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of these topics (Ali & Shahbuddin, 2022).

The sample was based on purposive sampling. Six students from three different international secondary schools in Petaling Jaya Selangor participated. The researcher approached them for interviews, with assistance from the school counsellors, by concentrating on individuals aged 14 to 18 who reported being victims of cyberbullying (Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of Each Participant's Demographics

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade	Race	Religion
1	Nor Aishah	14	Female	Year 9	Malay	Islam
2	Rachel Hui	16	Female	Year 11	Chinese	Christian
3	Eunice Yap	15	Female	Year 10	Chinese	Christian
4	Sachin	15	Male	Year 10	Indian	Christian
5	Yuvan	16	Male	Year 11	Indian	Hinduism
6	Xin Yi	14	Female	Year 9	Chinese	Buddhism

Data Gathering Procedures

Conducting semi-structured interviews followed a systematic approach that ensured depth and flexibility in data collection. The first step in this process was the recruitment phase. During this time, the researcher identified and contacted various international secondary schools in Selangor, sending details about the research topic and its requirements. To encourage participation, the researcher provided clear information regarding the study's purpose for involvement. After the participants' (students) and counselors’ approval, the researcher scheduled the interviews for the first three schools that agreed to the request.

Each interview was carefully arranged to fit the participants' availability, ensuring a comfortable environment promoting open dialogue (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018). The schools requested a call without showing the face

for scheduling as the participants asked, and the school preferred to keep participants' identities confidential, which is in line with their policies on students' privacy.

During the interviews, the researcher used an interview guide that included predetermined questions but remained flexible enough to explore new topics that emerged from participants' responses (Flick, 2021). After the interviews were conducted, transcription and initial analysis followed. Accurately transcribing the interviews was essential for capturing the hints of participants' expressions. Once transcription was completed, the researcher began an initial analysis by coding the data for recurring themes and patterns that would inform subsequent analysis stages (Saldaña, 2021).

Instrument of Study

This study applied semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection, concentrating on experiences and impacts related to cyberbullying among students. The interview questions were crafted to align with the research objectives, allowing for a thorough exploration of the phenomenon from previous research. The questions were designed based on the literature review and have been validated by two experts in the field of Psychology.

FINDINGS

Lack of concentration on study

As awareness of cyberbullying continues to grow, research participants have shared firsthand experiences of being targeted online and the various consequences they have faced as victims. A significant issue that emerges from their responses is the negative impact on their ability to focus on academic tasks. Many victims report struggling with concentration, which affects their overall academic performance, leading to difficulties in completing assignments, retaining information, and maintaining motivation in their studies. This disruption in learning not only hinders their educational progress but may also contribute to heightened stress and decreased self-confidence in academic settings.

Anxiety is often described as a feeling of fear about future events, which can negatively affect a person's motivation to learn (Cao et al., 2024). During her interview, Aishah shared her intense emotional struggles resulting from cyberbullying. She mentioned feeling “super anxious” about going to school, which led her to skip classes. The anxiety became so overwhelming that she avoided the very environment where the bullying had first occurred, even though this decision meant falling behind in her studies.

“...my grades slipped because I could not focus on anything, and I even skipped a few days because I just did not want to deal with it.” (Aishah)

Yuvan shared a different viewpoint, highlighting how cyberbullying badly affected his academic performance and personal motivation. Once an excellent student, he now struggles to focus on his studies because of the emotional chaos brought on by the bullying.

“... it badly impacted my academic performance. I used to be the top in my class, and right after this incident, I lost my concentration in class... I seldom go to school... my grades dropped, and every exam and even in-class quizzes were very low.” (Yuvan)

Social Isolation

The participants also shared their deep personal experiences of withdrawing from social interactions because of cyberbullying. Social isolation happens when adolescents are excluded from their peer groups because of cyberbullying, and they often endure psychological trauma that leads to feelings of isolation (Ademiluyi et al., 2022).

The experiences shared by participants illustrate how cyberbullying can create a profound sense of disconnection from others. For example, Eunice revealed that she often skipped school due to her fear of running into peers who had harassed her online. Her choice to avoid school stemmed from feelings of shame and anxiety, which were finely tuned by the expectation of facing judgment in person. This behaviour highlights how cyberbullying can significantly disrupt a victim's educational engagement, forcing them to deal with their struggles in silence.

"... sometimes I even skipped school as I do not want to see anyone." (Eunice)

Sachin on the other hand shared that his experience with cyberbullying led him to withdraw into separation, even in the supposed safety of his home. His tendency to avoid family and friends highlights the deep emotional scars left by online harassment. By isolating himself in his room, he was required to shield himself from searching questions and perceived judgment, reflecting a desire for protection among the confusion he was feeling.

"... start avoiding people even at home ... do not talk much to anyone like my friends or even my parents or siblings ... just wanna be in my room as I do not want anyone to ask anything." (Sachin)

He demonstrates how widespread cyberbullying can be, showing that it does not just stay in the online world but also interrupts the victim's personal life, affecting their family and social relationships (Kim et al., 2018). This sense of isolation often deepens feelings of hopelessness, making it challenging for victims to reach out for support.

Furthermore, Xin Yi's comments emphasized the social effects of cyberbullying, which often result in feelings of isolation and distrust. She shared her fear of being mocked by her classmates again, which played a significant role in her decision to stay away from school.

"... did not want to see anyone in my class or have them start making fun of me again... was distracted ... so my grades dropped a lot... could not focus on anything in school." (Xin Yi)

Her hesitation to confront her surroundings highlights the harmful social consequences of cyberbullying. Xin Yi's fear of experiencing further humiliation made it difficult for her to build or sustain friendships, resulting in feelings of isolation and a lack of support. This emotional withdrawal had a profound effect on her ability to concentrate in class, creating a cycle of declining academic performance and social disconnection (Kamtsios & Karagiannopoulou, 2020).

Emotional Distress

Aishah shared her experience of how continuous exposure to hurtful remarks from her peers left her feeling more anxious and trapped in a cycle of negativity. She found it challenging to move past the emotional weight of those comments, which only intensified her feelings of low self-worth. From her viewpoint, the ongoing nature of these online attacks led her to question her value and diminished her confidence in social situations.

"felt more anxious and down... feel low and cannot shake off the negativity from their comments." (Aishah)

Eunice, another respondent, described a similar experience where constant harassment online led to feelings of depression and lowered confidence. She explained how the offensive remarks made her question her self-worth and gradually affected her emotional state to the point of self-doubt and anxiety.

"... messed up with my confidence ... started believing the things he said... made me kind of anxious and depressed for a while." (Eunice)

From Eunice's viewpoint, the psychological weight of cyberbullying extends far beyond the instant of receiving hurtful comments. It breaks into how victims view themselves, resulting in ongoing battles with anxiety and depression. Her insights highlight the distinct difficulties posed by online bullying, as it frequently

goes unnoticed by others, making it challenging for teachers, parents, or friends to step in and offer support on time.

Anticipating To Escape

During the interview, Sachin shared that he dealt with the impact of cyberbullying by pulling away from his usual activities, including those he used to love. He mentioned skipping his weekly basketball training sessions to escape the feelings of shame and anxiety that his experiences had caused.

“... just wanted to hide away ... avoid going to my weekly basketball training to avoid everything.” (Sachin)

Sachin's experience reflects a common reaction among those who face cyberbullying, which is withdrawing from social and physical environments where they might encounter judgment, inquiry, or reminders of their trauma (Xia et al., 2023). Individuals like Sachin seek to establish a temporary feeling of safety by isolating themselves. However, this choice often negatively impacts their mental health, leading to heightened feelings of loneliness and a reduced sense of self-worth.

Yuvan, another student, opened up about the relentless online harassment he endured, which left him feeling utterly overwhelmed and powerless. He conveyed that the emotional pain became so intense that he began to contemplate running away as a means of escaping the psychological burden. For Yuvan, this urge to escape went beyond just physical departure; it represented a profound desire to free himself from the mental anguish that had consumed his life.

“Thought about running away from all ... the pain felt overwhelming and overtaking my lifestyle.” (Yuvan)

He pointed out that the impact of cyberbullying runs deep, often leading victims to feel that their only choice is to withdraw from their environment altogether (Cretu & Morandau, 2022). This urge to escape reflects a profound sense of hopelessness that many participants find difficult to articulate to others.

DISCUSSION

Adolescents today are increasingly at risk of suffering negative psychological effects from harmful online interactions, particularly cyberbullying, which has become a pressing issue. Interviews indicate that victims often endure significant emotional and psychological distress, with harmful online comments worsening their mental health struggles (Bansal et al., 2024). In Malaysia, a study by Tin et al. (2024) pointed out that the widespread use of social media is linked to rising emotional distress among young people, highlighting a concerning trend in their emotional well-being associated with digital interactions.

The participants reported that the emotional weight of cyberbullying often led them to contemplate escape to cope. The absence of their aggressors in physical form does not diminish emotional strain. Rather, victims usually feel trapped, convinced that withdrawing from their regular activities is the only way to ease their suffering (Green, 2023). This feeling of being trapped can initiate a cycle of isolation and anxiety, making it increasingly difficult for them to participate in their everyday lives (Gallardo-Peralta et al., 2022).

The participant's experience highlights the significant effects that cyberbullying can have on self-esteem and academic identity, where academic success is a source of pride and personal satisfaction (King, 2023). The bullying they faced undermined their focus and confidence, leading to a negative impact on his academic performance. The participants' growing reluctance to attend school further complicated matters, illustrating how cyberbullying can disrupt their educational journey.

The participants' comments also emphasized the connection between cyberbullying and a withdrawal from academics. For students like her, school transforms into a source of stress instead of a space for learning and social interaction. This tendency to avoid school often creates academic difficulties, deepening feelings of

shortage and isolation (Kearney & Albano, 2020). This avoidance often leads to problems in keeping up with coursework, lower academic performance, and an increased sense of isolation.

Cyberbullying not only inflicts emotional distress but also severely impacts social relationships that are crucial for adolescent well-being (Zhu et al., 2021). This highlights how cyberbullying perpetuates a harmful cycle of self-doubt and emotional turmoil, particularly among vulnerable adolescents who may lack adequate support or coping mechanisms. Insights from participants indicate that such experiences can have long-term effects on mental health, making it challenging for students to focus on their academic performance and social interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study explored cyberbullying's complex and multifaceted nature, as well as its effects on victims. The data revealed that cyberbullying is a reality with several psychological, emotional, and societal consequences. Victims experience a lack of concentration on the study, social isolation, emotional distress, and anticipation to escape which leads to increased anxiety, despair, and low self-esteem. These feelings have affected their academic, social, and overall well-being.

While the research provides some interesting findings, more research is needed to consider the longer-term psychological effect of cyberbullying and the effectiveness of a range of intervention strategies. Future studies must also analyze the role of bystanders and how their participation can perpetuate or resolve the problem. Moreover, with the pace at which online media are evolving, ongoing research must be conducted to keep track of new forms of cyberbullying and devise respective coping mechanisms to pre-empt and counter it.

Finally, the fight against cyberbullying supposedly comes with a collaboration between policymakers, schools, society, and the public. Society can take meaningful steps toward creating a safer online environment by fostering a culture rooted in respect, empathy, and responsible digital citizenship. Schools must implement proactive policies and educational programs, while policymakers play a vital role in establishing and enforcing regulations that deter harmful online behaviors. Public awareness campaigns and community engagement further strengthen this effort, ensuring that victims receive the support they need and that preventative measures are continuously reinforced. Through these collaborative initiatives, we can work toward minimizing the devastating effects of cyberbullying, ultimately building a more inclusive and supportive digital space for all.

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