

# Empowering Responsible Digital Citizens: A Survey of Cyberbullying and Digital Citizenship Among Adolescents in an International School

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## ABSTRACT

As schools become increasingly reliant on digital platforms for learning and communication, the responsible and humane use of technology has become central to learner wellbeing. This mixed-methods study examined cyberbullying involvement, the forms it takes, adolescents' awareness of responsible digital citizenship, and teacher-leaders' school-based responses within an international school context. Quantitative data were gathered through the Adolescent Online Behaviour and Digital Practices Survey administered to 30 students from Years 7 to 11, with descriptive statistics computed in IBM SPSS (v.24). Qualitative data were drawn from semi-structured interviews with two purposively selected teacher-leaders and analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The findings indicate that cyberbullying is present across victim, perpetrator, and bystander roles, with hostile messaging, rumour-spreading, online exclusion, sharing of private content, and impersonation among the reported forms. Students demonstrated strong awareness of responsible online conduct, yet confidence in reporting incidents to teachers was notably weaker, with the majority of respondents undecided. Teacher-leaders consistently framed cyberbullying as a wellbeing and safeguarding concern, described detection as dependent on student reporting and digital evidence, and identified inconsistent policy implementation as a central challenge. The study contributes contextualised insight into digital citizenship and cyberbullying in international schooling and offers practical implications for humanising technology-rich learning environments through clearer reporting pathways, coordinated whole-school responses, and sustained digital citizenship education.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying; digital citizenship; adolescents; international school; teacher-leader perspectives; whole-school approach

## INTRODUCTION

Digital technology now occupies a central place in the learning and social lives of adolescents. Rising rates of home internet access and the rapid expansion of social media have made online communication an everyday feature of schooling, exposing students to both enriching and harmful experiences (Seçkin-Kapucu et al., 2021). Within technology-enhanced and increasingly humanised learning environments, students collaborate through digital platforms, sustain peer relationships through messaging, and engage with content well beyond the classroom. As schools deepen their reliance on technology for instruction and communication, they assume a corresponding responsibility to cultivate the safe, respectful, and ethical use of digital tools.

Responsible digital citizenship has become an organising concept for this responsibility. Digital citizenship encompasses not only technical competence but also online conduct that reflects respect, empathy, accountability, and an awareness of the consequences of one's actions. Schools shape digital citizenship by embedding it in the curriculum, establishing behavioural norms, and modelling consistent adult expectations. When these values are not reinforced consistently, harmful online behaviours can become normalised among learners.

Cyberbullying is among the most pressing threats to adolescent wellbeing in connected learning environments. It may involve the spread of false information, exclusion, harassment, or impersonation, and it can originate inside or outside school while its effects reliably re-enter school life through emotional distress, strained peer relationships, and reduced academic engagement. Because the boundary between school and online space is porous, schools cannot treat cyberbullying as a purely external matter. Teachers occupy a pivotal position in prevention and response, yet their actions are shaped by their confidence, the availability of training, the clarity of school policy, and parental expectations (Flôres et al., 2022).

The international school setting offers a distinctive context for this inquiry. International schools typically enrol culturally diverse student populations, producing varied communication styles, help-seeking tendencies, and disciplinary expectations that can complicate how cyberbullying is understood and addressed (Dichek et al., 2021). Much existing research foregrounds student experience while underexamining teacher perspectives and the school-based responses that determine whether policy translates into practice. This study addresses that gap by integrating adolescents' self-reported experiences with teacher-leaders' accounts of detection, response, and prevention. In doing so it speaks directly to the conference theme of humanising technology and empowering minds, since safe and respectful digital environments are a precondition for the kind of confident, collaborative, technology-mediated learning that language and content classrooms increasingly depend upon.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine cyberbullying among adolescents in an international school and to analyse how teacher-leaders recognise, respond to, and seek to prevent it. By combining student survey data with teacher-leader interviews, the study aims to identify where students may need stronger guidance in responsible digital behaviour and where teachers may need clearer support in responding to incidents. Four research questions guided the study:

1. What is the prevalence of cyberbullying involvement among adolescents in an international school, including experiences as victims, perpetrators, and bystanders?
2. What forms of cyberbullying are most commonly experienced by adolescents in the school community?
3. What is the level of adolescents' awareness of responsible digital citizenship practices related to cyberbullying?
4. How do teachers perceive cyberbullying and respond to it through school-based strategies in the international school context?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Digital Citizenship and Responsible Online Behaviour**

Digital citizenship frameworks position responsible online behaviour as a learnable disposition rather than a fixed trait. Programmes that make digital citizenship explicit have been associated with improved understanding of online norms and reduced harmful behaviour among adolescents (Bickham et al., 2021; Capuno et al., 2022). Yuniawati et al. (2024) further argue that strengthening digital citizenship can reduce cyberbullying through its influence on learning outcomes and self-regulation. These accounts converge on a shared premise that empathy, accountability, and awareness of consequences are central to safe participation in digital learning spaces (Silke et al., 2021).

### **Cyberbullying Through a Whole-School and Social-Ecological Lens**

Cyberbullying is rarely an isolated act between two individuals. Social-ecological and whole-school perspectives situate it within overlapping influences spanning peers, classrooms, school policy, family, and the wider online environment (Ponsford et al., 2022). Whole-school approaches that engage the entire community have repeatedly been identified as more effective than isolated disciplinary measures (Kidwai & Smith,

2024; Bell et al., 2025). Research also documents substantial overlap and role continuity between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, with students frequently moving between victim, perpetrator, and bystander positions across physical and digital settings (Pennell et al., 2020; Sorrentino et al., 2023).

### **Prevalence, Forms, and Impact**

International evidence points to non-trivial prevalence among adolescents, with some surveys reporting that a majority have encountered cyberbullying in some form (Bali et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2021). Reported forms commonly include hostile messaging, rumour-spreading, deliberate exclusion, sharing of private content without consent, and impersonation through fake accounts (Malik et al., 2024; Kowalski & Wingate, 2023). The consequences extend to emotional distress, anxiety, reduced confidence, and disengagement from school, with longitudinal work linking victimisation to enduring mental health difficulties (Carvalho et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2025). Within Malaysia, recent work confirms meaningful prevalence among secondary students and situates responses within a developing legal framework (Saruddin et al., 2025; Razali & Nawang, 2022).

### **Teacher Perceptions and School-Based Responses**

Teachers' willingness and capacity to intervene are shaped by knowledge, self-efficacy, and institutional support. Fischer et al. (2021) report that teacher self-efficacy is a consistent predictor of intervention, while Iorga et al. (2023) document the beliefs and coping strategies that explain why teachers are not always willing to act. Several studies emphasise that detection often depends on student disclosure and digital evidence, and that the publicity and perceived severity of an incident influence how teachers respond (Macaulay et al., 2021; Masoumi et al., 2025). Bystander research highlights that supportive peer responses can interrupt harm, although fear of becoming a target and low confidence in adult follow-through frequently inhibit action (Ferreira et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2021).

### **Research Gap and Rationale**

Taken together, the literature establishes that effective responses to cyberbullying require alignment between student awareness, peer norms, teacher preparedness, and consistent policy implementation. Yet relatively few studies integrate student and teacher perspectives within a single international school context, where cultural diversity and varied parental expectations add further complexity. The present study addresses this gap by examining both adolescents' experiences and teacher-leaders' school-based responses, thereby generating contextualised insight to inform digital citizenship education and whole-school prevention.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative strands to capture both the measurable patterns and the contextual meanings of cyberbullying in the school (Sharma et al., 2023; Skamagki et al., 2024). The quantitative strand documented the prevalence, forms, and digital citizenship awareness reported by students, while the qualitative strand explored how teacher-leaders interpret and respond to cyberbullying. The combination was chosen because cyberbullying is multidimensional and requires both statistical description and situated explanation. The strands were brought together at the interpretation stage, where interview themes were used to help explain survey patterns.

### **Participants and Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used for both strands. Thirty adolescent students from Years 7 to 11 were recruited for the survey on the basis of their age range and their active use of digital communication platforms, ensuring relevance to the research focus (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). To reduce social desirability bias, participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous (Negri-Ribalta, 2022). For the qualitative strand, two teacher-leaders were purposively selected for their combined teaching and leadership roles and their direct involvement in pastoral care, discipline, and digital policy. Although small, this sample was appropriate for the aim of depth

rather than statistical generalisation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The participants are referred to throughout as TL1 and TL2 to protect confidentiality.

## Instruments and Data Collection

The quantitative instrument, the Adolescent Online Behaviour and Digital Practices Survey, was developed from established models of cyberbullying and digital citizenship. It comprised demographic items, frequency-based items on cyberbullying involvement scored on a four-point scale (0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = a few times, 3 = many times), and Likert-scale items measuring digital citizenship awareness (Joshi & Joshi, 2021). The instrument was pilot tested with a small number of students to confirm clarity, and minor wording adjustments were made before full administration (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). The survey was completed anonymously during school hours and took approximately fifteen to twenty minutes.

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule covering teacher knowledge, prevention strategies, reporting and intervention procedures, and policy implementation (Adeoye et al., 2021). Interviews were conducted privately at the school, audio-recorded with consent, and lasted approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.

## Data Analysis

Survey responses were analysed in IBM SPSS (v.24) using descriptive statistics, with frequencies and percentages computed for each item to summarise patterns of involvement, the forms of cyberbullying experienced, and levels of digital citizenship awareness (Weil, 2025). Interview data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure: familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

## Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness in the qualitative strand was supported through audio-recording for transcription accuracy, the use of illustrative extracts, and cross-case comparison of the two teacher-leaders (Naeem et al., 2023). Ethical approval procedures were observed, including obtaining school administration consent, ensuring voluntary and anonymous student participation, and securing informed consent from interview participants. No personally identifying information is reported, and pseudonymous labels are used for all participants.

# FINDINGS

## Participant Profile

The 30 respondents were evenly distributed across Years 7 to 11 (six per year level, 20.0% each), with ages ranging from 11 to 16. The sample was balanced by gender, comprising 15 female respondents (50.0%), 14 male respondents (46.7%), and one respondent (3.3%) who preferred not to disclose. Digital exposure was high: half of the respondents (50.0%) reported spending three to four hours online daily outside schoolwork, and a further 16.7% reported more than six hours. WhatsApp (56.7%), Instagram (50.0%), and TikTok (43.3%) were the most frequently used platforms, and 46.7% described themselves as active in group chats many times each day. This profile confirms that the sample inhabits intensive, peer-oriented digital environments relevant to the study.

**Table 1 Participant Profile and Digital Engagement (n = 30)**

| Characteristic    | Category               | n  | %     |
|-------------------|------------------------|----|-------|
| Year level        | Years 7 to 11 (6 each) | 30 | 100.0 |
| Gender            | Female                 | 15 | 50.0  |
|                   | Male                   | 14 | 46.7  |
|                   | Prefer not to say      | 1  | 3.3   |
| Daily time online | 3 to 4 hours           | 15 | 50.0  |

|                    |                   |    |      |
|--------------------|-------------------|----|------|
|                    | 1 to 2 hours      | 8  | 26.7 |
|                    | More than 6 hours | 5  | 16.7 |
|                    | Less than 1 hour  | 2  | 6.7  |
| Most used platform | WhatsApp          | 17 | 56.7 |
|                    | Instagram         | 15 | 50.0 |
|                    | TikTok            | 13 | 43.3 |

Note. Platform use was a multiple-response item, so percentages do not sum to 100.

### Research Question 1: Prevalence of Cyberbullying Involvement

Cyberbullying involvement was evident across all three roles. For victimisation, 73.3% of respondents reported receiving intentionally hurtful messages at least once, 50.0% reported being the target of rumours spread through digital platforms, 56.7% reported deliberate exclusion from online groups, and 60.0% reported having embarrassing or private content shared about them. Bystander exposure was comparatively common, with most respondents reporting that they had witnessed someone being bullied online; responses to intervening were mixed, as a substantial proportion reported not acting while a similar proportion reported supportive or reporting behaviour. Self-reported perpetration was lower than victimisation and bystanding, which is consistent with the under-reporting commonly observed for socially undesirable behaviours (Shahaf-Oren et al., 2021). Taken together, the pattern indicates that cyberbullying affects a meaningful subgroup of students and is best treated as a wellbeing and safeguarding concern rather than a series of isolated incidents.

**Table 2 Self-Reported Victimisation Experiences (n = 30)**

| Victimisation experience                   | Some experience (codes 1 to 3) n |      | %    |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------|------|
| Received intentionally hurtful messages    | 22                               |      | 73.3 |
| Embarrassing or private content shared     | 18                               |      | 60.0 |
| Deliberately excluded from an online group | 17                               | 56.7 |      |
| Rumours spread through digital platforms   | 15                               | 50.0 |      |

Note. Code 0 indicates no reported experience; codes 1 to 3 indicate increasing frequency.

### Research Question 2: Forms of Cyberbullying

When asked about engagement in specific forms of cyberbullying, most students selected the lowest code, yet a consistent minority reported involvement across each form. Sharing screenshots without permission and posting embarrassing images or videos emerged among the more frequently reported behaviours, alongside sending threatening or aggressive messages (40.0% reporting some involvement), spreading rumours online (36.6%), and excluding others from group chats (33.4%). Creating fake accounts to impersonate others was the least common form, reported by 16.7% of respondents. The prominence of privacy-related behaviours, such as sharing screenshots and private content, indicates that adolescents may not always classify these acts as cyberbullying, particularly when they are framed as jokes or as group norms (Reneses Botija et al., 2025).

**Table 3 Reported Involvement in Forms of Cyberbullying (n = 30)**

| Form of cyberbullying                         | Some involvement (codes 1 to 3) % |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Sending threatening or aggressive messages    | 40.0                              |
| Spreading rumours online                      | 36.6                              |
| Excluding someone from a group chat           | 33.4                              |
| Posting embarrassing images or videos         | 30.0                              |
| Sharing screenshots without permission        | Frequently reported               |
| Creating fake accounts to impersonate someone | 16.7                              |

### Research Question 3: Awareness of Responsible Digital Citizenship

Students demonstrated strong digital citizenship awareness. A large majority understood what cyberbullying

means (93.3% agreed or strongly agreed), recognised that sharing private content without permission is wrong (90.0%), acknowledged that online behaviour can affect others emotionally (83.3%), and agreed that people should take responsibility for what they post online (80.0%). Awareness, however, did not extend evenly to reporting confidence. Only 36.7% of respondents felt confident reporting cyberbullying to a teacher, while 53.3% were undecided. Trust that teachers would take reports seriously was moderate, with 60.0% in agreement, 26.7% neutral, and 13.3% in disagreement. This gap between conceptual awareness and reporting self-efficacy is the most consequential quantitative finding, since strong norms do not automatically translate into help-seeking behaviour.

**Table 4 Digital Citizenship Awareness and Reporting Confidence (n = 30)**

| Item                                                  | Agree or strongly agree % | Neutral % |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| I know what cyberbullying means                       | 93.3                      | n/a       |
| Sharing private content without permission is wrong   | 90.0                      | n/a       |
| Online behaviour can affect others emotionally        | 83.3                      | n/a       |
| People should take responsibility for what they post  | 80.0                      | n/a       |
| I believe teachers take reports seriously             | 60.0                      | 26.7      |
| I feel confident reporting cyberbullying to a teacher | 36.7                      | 53.3      |

#### Research Question 4: Teacher-Leader Perspectives

Thematic analysis of the two teacher-leader interviews produced six themes that explain how cyberbullying is understood and managed at the school level.

**Theme 1: Cyberbullying as a wellbeing and safeguarding concern.** Both teacher-leaders framed cyberbullying as a duty-of-care issue rather than merely a disciplinary matter, foregrounding the protection of the affected child. This framing positions emotional impact and student safety at the centre of the school's response.

**Theme 2: A blurred boundary between online life and school responsibility.** Participants observed that many incidents originate outside school hours on platforms such as WhatsApp, yet still disrupt school relationships, obliging the school to respond to harm it did not directly witness. Frequent platform shifts were seen to make prevention more difficult.

**Theme 3: Detection depends on reporting and evidence.** Teacher-leaders described student disclosure as the primary entry point for any response and noted that screenshots and other digital evidence are essential for investigation, while private digital spaces limit visibility.

**Theme 4: A multi-layered response pathway.** Responses combined investigation and verification, proportionate consequences, counselling and pastoral support, and parental engagement to reinforce expectations beyond the school gate.

**Theme 5: Policy exists, but consistency is the key challenge.** Both participants identified gaps between policy intention and uniform staff implementation, and stressed that policy must keep pace with continuously evolving digital behaviour.

**Theme 6: Balancing accountability, learning, and protection.** Teacher-leaders sought to correct behaviour while educating and supporting students, escalating responses according to severity rather than defaulting to punishment.

**Table 5 Summary of Teacher-Leader Themes**

| Theme                                 | What the theme captures                                   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Wellbeing and safeguarding         | Cyberbullying framed as duty of care, not only discipline |
| 2. Blurred online and school boundary | Off-campus incidents still disrupt school relationships   |

|                                         |                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. Detection via reporting and evidence | Student disclosure and screenshots drive investigation        |
| 4. Multi-layered response pathway       | Investigation, consequences, counselling, and parents         |
| 5. Policy versus consistency            | Gaps between policy intent and uniform staff practice         |
| 6. Accountability with education        | Correcting behaviour while supporting and protecting students |

### Mixed-Methods Integration

The interview themes help to explain the survey patterns. The students' weak reporting confidence aligns with the teacher-leaders' account of detection as dependent on disclosure, suggesting that low confidence directly constrains the school's capacity to detect and respond. Similarly, the high awareness yet uneven labelling of privacy-related behaviours corresponds to the teacher-leaders' emphasis on education alongside accountability. The convergence of the two strands strengthens the interpretation that the principal leverage point is not awareness, which is already strong, but the reporting pathway and the consistency of adult response.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that cyberbullying is present in the school across victim, perpetrator, and bystander roles, echoing evidence of role continuity and the porous boundary between physical and digital spaces (Cabrera et al., 2024; Sorrentino et al., 2023). The comparatively high level of bystander exposure is significant, because bystanders are decisive in whether harm escalates or subsides (Ferreira et al., 2020). The mixed willingness to intervene observed here suggests that intervention is constrained by familiar barriers, including fear of becoming a target and uncertainty about adult follow-through (Wong et al., 2021). Lower self-reported perpetration should be interpreted cautiously, since social desirability and the reframing of harmful acts as jokes can mask involvement (Reneses Botija et al., 2025).

The most actionable finding concerns the gap between awareness and reporting confidence. Students clearly understood digital citizenship norms, yet fewer than two in five felt confident reporting to a teacher. This dissociation indicates that knowledge alone is insufficient and that schools must invest in trustworthy, transparent reporting mechanisms and visible follow-through to convert awareness into help-seeking (Khairy et al., 2021). The teacher-leaders' framing of cyberbullying as a safeguarding concern provides an enabling foundation for this work, but their identification of inconsistent implementation as the central challenge confirms that whole-school coherence is the decisive factor (Kidwai & Smith, 2024; Bell et al., 2025).

These results reinforce the conference's call to humanise technology. Empowering responsible digital citizens is not achieved by restricting access or by treating cyberbullying as an external nuisance, but by building learning environments in which students trust that disclosure will be met with consistent, caring, and proportionate adult responses. Such environments are foundational to all technology-enhanced learning, including language learning, where collaborative and communicative digital tasks presuppose psychological safety.

### Practical Implications

For students, the priority is to strengthen reporting self-efficacy and bystander agency through guided practice in safe disclosure and supportive intervention. For teachers, the findings argue for targeted professional development that builds confidence and consistency, supported by clear protocols for investigation, evidence handling, and escalation. For school leadership, the central task is to close the gap between policy and practice through shared procedures, regular review that keeps pace with platform change, and transparent communication of how reports are handled. For parents, home-school partnership is needed to reinforce expectations across the porous boundary between school and online life (Helfrich et al., 2020).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small, single-site sample of 30 students and two teacher-leaders limits generalisability, and the cross-sectional, self-report design constrains causal inference and may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could employ larger and multi-site samples across

international schools, incorporate student and parent interviews, and adopt longitudinal designs to examine how reporting confidence and bystander behaviour change as digital citizenship education matures. Comparative work across cultural contexts would further illuminate how diversity shapes help-seeking and school response.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined cyberbullying involvement, its forms, adolescents' digital citizenship awareness, and teacher-leaders' school-based responses in an international school. Cyberbullying was present across victim, perpetrator, and bystander roles and took multiple forms, while students demonstrated strong awareness of responsible online conduct that was not matched by confidence in reporting. Teacher-leaders consistently framed cyberbullying as a safeguarding concern and identified inconsistent implementation as the principal obstacle to effective response. The study's contribution lies in integrating student and teacher-leader perspectives within an international school setting and in locating the decisive leverage point in reporting pathways and whole-school consistency rather than in awareness. Humanising technology-rich learning, the study concludes, depends on cultivating trust, coherence, and care so that students are genuinely empowered to participate responsibly and safely in digital life.

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