

# Cyberbullying on Social Media Platforms and Its Impact on Sri Lankan Youth: With Special Reference to Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue among young people, causing detrimental emotional and psychological harm. This study explored the types, causes, demographic factors, impacts, and coping mechanisms of cyberbullying among young Sri Lankans on social media platforms. A mixed-methods approach was employed, using surveys and in-depth interviews to gather quantitative and qualitative data. A total of 120 participants aged 19-25, drawn from the Faculty of Communication and Business Studies (FCBS) at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, were purposively selected for the survey, and five participants who reported experiencing cyberbullying were selected for in-depth interviews through volunteer sampling. The study found that the most common forms of cyberbullying were name-calling, sexting, spreading rumours, posting embarrassing content, hacking of accounts, cyberstalking, and exclusion, with Facebook identified as the platform most associated with such incidents (92.1%). Anonymity, easy access to technology and social media addiction, social pressure, and gaps in sexual and media literacy education emerged as the leading causes. Gender was a significant factor, with 83.75% of female and 80% of male respondents reporting prior awareness of cyberbullying, and 22-year-olds recording the highest victimisation rate (67.74%). Emotionally, 54% of victims reported sadness and 63.5% reported heightened stress or anxiety, while 77.8% reported headaches as the most common physical symptom; academic focus and friendships were also affected. Coping mechanisms centred on confiding in friends and family, limiting online presence, and constructive activities, while formal legal action remained uncommon, with only 31.7% of victims reporting incidents to the police. The findings highlight the urgent need for targeted awareness campaigns, stronger platform-level regulation, and clearer legal protections for young social media users in Sri Lanka. Further research is recommended to broaden the geographic scope and examine the cultural nuances of cyberbullying across the country.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Social media, Sri Lankan youth, Impacts, Mixed-methods approach

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has made social media platforms an indispensable part of modern life, enabling individuals and businesses to network, share content, and exchange knowledge (Ahmed et al., 2019). Sri Lanka has followed this global trend: internet penetration reached 52.6% of the population by early 2022, with 8.20 million social media users, or 38.1% of the population (DataReportal, 2022). Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp remain the dominant platforms in the country (gs.statcounter.com, 2023). Alongside these benefits, however, Sri Lanka is experiencing the harmful consequences of cyberbullying, a phenomenon that mirrors traditional bullying but is amplified by the anonymity, reach, and permanence of the online environment (Liyanage et al., 2021; Beringer, 2011).

Cyberbullying is commonly defined as an aggressive, intentional act carried out repeatedly by an individual or group using electronic means of contact against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008). Left unaddressed, it is associated with anxiety, poor academic performance, sleep disturbance, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation among both victims and

offenders (Vadysinghe et al., 2022). Young people, who make up the majority of active social media users, are disproportionately exposed to these risks (Liyanage et al., 2021).

## Problem Statement

Most of the research data regarding cyberbullying currently available comprises of North American, UK, and Australian studies. In fact, there are no or very few published studies that samples Asia in general. Unlike bullying which is physical or verbal it is non-direct (gossip, social exclusion). The anonymity factor which allows the bullies more freedom on the internet has similar effect on the cyberbullying victim of having perpetrators access them directly on a variety of different mediums and is more invasive and harder for its victim to escape (Lodge and Frydenberg, 2012). Issues that are highlighted in many current cyberbullying studies relate to the frequency of cyberbullying taking place in schools, the increasing rates of personal information disclosure via social networking websites, the influence of peers and the safety of the school environment both for bully and victim. Risk factors that have been focused on cyberbullying raised debates such as who are more likely to be victims/cyberbullies i.e. Females or males (Alim, 2016).

There seems to be a gap in knowledge of the ways that social media is being used and the prevalence of cyberbullying at the societal level in the context of Sri Lanka, according to research articles and research papers. The influence of cyberbullying and the misuse of social media do not get enough attention in Sri Lanka. The limited discussion of this issue at the national level has led to social media influencing cyber bullying among society in general. The investigation being conducted in the Sri Lankan society is by attempts to inform all generations but with concentration to the young generation of how social media networks in Sri Lanka tend to be abused. The research also aims to inform and expand knowledge on cyberbullying among Sri Lankan youth, the kinds of cyber bullying that they are victims to on social media, why cyber bullying tends to happen and their defining attributes, its effects, and what kind of preventative and legislative measures that should be applied.

## Research Objectives

1. To find out the different types of cyber bullying in social media platforms that young community face in Sri Lanka.
2. To find out the major causes and demographic factors to take place cyberbullying among young community in Sri Lanka.
3. To find out the impact of cyberbullying on young community in Sri Lanka.
4. To find out how a young person who has been subjected to the cyberbullying process deals with it and handles it.

## Significance of the Study

With the increased use of internet and social media among all demographic groups in Sri Lanka (Dikwatta and Fernando, 2019), young people are increasingly exposed to cyberstalking, exclusion, harassment, trolling, trickery, outing, fraping and masquerading (Dilshani et al., 2022). In the absence of a national cybersecurity policy framework (Gunathillake and Perera, 2020), this study provides parents, educators and policymakers with empirical, locally grounded evidence to inform prevention strategies, support systems and legal reform to protect the mental health and safety of Sri Lankan youth online.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defining Cyberbullying

Smith et al. (2008) were among the first to formally define cyberbullying as an aggressive, intentional act carried out repeatedly using electronic forms of contact against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves.

Langos (2012) noted the persistent difficulty of defining the concept precisely, while Hinduja and Patchin (2011) observed that the near-universal ownership of internet-enabled smartphones among young people has expanded opportunities for harassment through text messaging, photo and video sharing, and social gaming platforms. Ariyadasa (2019) similarly framed cyberbullying as the use of electronic communication to hurt, frighten, or coerce another person over time. Nair et al. (2023) trace the term to 1998, when it first described anonymous, hurtful postings about individuals; Sezer and Tuncer (2021), citing Froese-Germain (2008), attribute the coinage of the word itself to Canadian educator Bill Belsey, founder of [www.bullying.org](http://www.bullying.org).

## Types of Cyberbullying

Hinduja and Patchin (2005) distinguished two broad categories of cyberbullying: bullying carried out through internet-connected computers (defamatory web pages, offensive postings, harassing emails or instant messages) and bullying carried out via mobile devices (malicious text messages, images, and videos). Smith et al. (2008) identified seven common media used for school-based cyberbullying, while Willard (2007) proposed eight largely platform-independent categories: flaming, online harassment, cyberstalking, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, and exclusion. Adikaram and Rathnayake (2021), studying Sri Lankan workplaces, found that cyberbullying also manifests as cyber sexual harassment, sextortion, and attacks on gender identity, underscoring its function as a gendered and cultural construct.

## Cyberbullying versus Traditional Bullying

Kowalski et al. (2012; 2016) and Bauman (2010) note that, unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time or place, is frequently anonymous, and denies victims the safety of retreating home. Sourander et al. (2010) add that cyberbullying can reach a far wider audience than face-to-face bullying, and that perpetrators may be less aware of the harm they cause because they do not witness the victim's reaction directly.

## Factors Contributing to Cyberbullying

Shaikh et al. (2020) grouped the drivers of cyberbullying into personal, socio-cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors, ranging from low self-esteem and poor empathy to problematic social media use, parenting style, and family conflict. Zhong et al. (2021) similarly organized contributing factors at the personal, family, educational, and social/environmental levels. Within the Sri Lankan literature, Ariyadasa (2019) points to persistent gaps in the country's legal framework, noting that the Computer Crimes Act No. 24 of 2007 lacks a clear definition of "public order" and that key provisions remain under-analysed by legal scholars and the judiciary.

## Impact and Coping

Cyberbullying victimization is consistently linked to fear, anger, depression, and diminished self-esteem (Ariyadasa, 2019), and to elevated risk of anxiety, eating disorders, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Tözün and Babaoglu, 2018). Goshe (2016) found that more intensive cyberbullying experiences correlate with higher self-reported anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms such as sleep disturbance. On coping, Kowalski et al. (2012) and Wong-Lo (2011) recommend evidence-preservation, reporting to platforms and schools, parental involvement, and professional mental-health support where needed, while Völlink et al. (2013) found that victims rely more heavily on emotion-focused coping strategies than uninvolved peers.

## Recent Sri Lankan and International Perspectives

More recent scholarship reinforces and extends these findings. Inthusha and Kajanathan (2023), surveying students across Sri Lankan state universities, found that social anxiety and trait anger were the strongest individual-level predictors of cyberbullying involvement, while social media use alone showed no significant direct effect once these psychological factors were accounted for, pointing to the value of examining psychological alongside social and demographic factors, as this study does. Internationally, a narrative systematic review by Bussu et al. (2025) of more than sixty studies on university students found that

cyberbullying and cyberstalking frequently co-occur and share overlapping risk and protective factors, calling for a more integrated approach to studying both phenomena among higher-education populations.

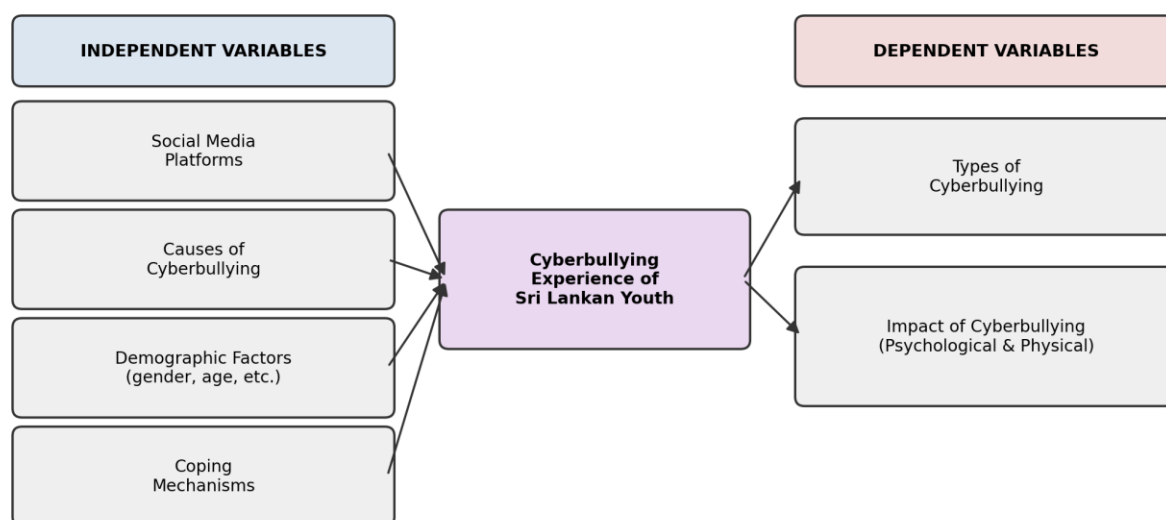
Closer to home, Sathurusinghe (2024) documented that heavy daily engagement with digital and social media is reshaping family and peer relationships among Sri Lankan children and youth, a shift that plausibly compounds the vulnerability documented in the present study. Taken together with earlier Sri Lankan evidence (Ariyadasa, 2019; Adikaram and Rathnayake, 2021; Gunathillake and Perera, 2020), this growing body of recent work confirms that cyberbullying research in Sri Lanka remains fragmented across small, localized samples, none of which has focused specifically on communication and business studies undergraduates.

## Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reveals a clear shortage of Sri Lanka-specific, empirically grounded studies on the prevalence, demographic patterning, psychological impact, and coping strategies associated with youth cyberbullying, as well as limited evaluation of the effectiveness of existing prevention and legal frameworks in the local context. Existing Sri Lankan studies tend to isolate a narrow set of psychological, legal, or platform-specific variables using purely quantitative designs (e.g. Inthusha and Kajanathan, 2023; Gunathillake and Perera, 2020; Vadysinghe et al., 2022), leaving the four dimensions this study is concerned with, namely the types of cyberbullying young people encounter, its major causes and demographic patterning, its psychological and physical impact, and the coping strategies victims employ, largely unexamined together within a single mixed-methods Sri Lankan study. This study addresses that gap directly by investigating all four dimensions concurrently within a defined undergraduate population, combining survey and interview evidence in the way its four research objectives require.

## Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework built around four independent variables, social media platforms, the causes of cyberbullying, demographic factors (gender, age, and related characteristics), and coping mechanisms which together shape young people's experience of cyberbullying. This experience, in turn, is understood through two dependent variables: the types of cyberbullying encountered and its psychological and physical impact. The relationships among these variables are illustrated in Figure 1: demographic factors and platform-related exposure influence the forms of cyberbullying young people encounter, the underlying causes intensify its severity, and the coping mechanisms available to victims' shape how far its psychological and physical impact extends.



**Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework for the Study**

## METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach in research refers to the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods within a single study. This approach aims to combine the strengths of both methodologies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic or problem. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate and develop intricate theories and generate findings that are both generalizable and obtain various aspects of human experience and individual experiences expands the scope and depth of research (Creswell and Clark, 2011).

### Sampling

For this study, purposive sampling was used to select 30 respondents aged 19-25 from each of four academic batches (2018/19 to 2021/22) in two departments of the Faculty of Communication and Business Studies (FCBS), Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, the Department of Languages and Communication Studies (DLCS) and the Department of Business and Management Studies (DBMS) yielding a total sample of 120 respondents (Table 1). Five respondents, who reported experiencing cyberbullying, were selected for in-depth interviews investigating their experiences, emotional responses, and coping methods in greater depth, using volunteer sampling after the survey.

**Table 1. Representation of Survey Respondents**

| Batch   | DLCS (M/F) | DBMS (M/F) | Sample Size |
|---------|------------|------------|-------------|
| 2018/19 | 5 / 10     | 5 / 10     | 30          |
| 2019/20 | 5 / 10     | 5 / 10     | 30          |
| 2020/21 | 5 / 10     | 5 / 10     | 30          |
| 2021/22 | 5 / 10     | 5 / 10     | 30          |
| Total   |            |            | 120         |

### Data Collection

The online survey covered primary data on demographic factors (gender, age, department, academic year), time spent on social media, exposure to and awareness of cyberbullying, platforms on which it occurs, and open-response items on participants' views. In-depth interviews used a semi-structured format to explore causes, impact, and coping strategies in participants' own words (Eppich et al., 2019). In addition to using research articles as secondary data, the researcher obtained additional material from books, newspapers, magazines, government publications, websites, and online sources. With the help of the secondary data, the researcher had a better knowledge of how to conduct this research after using secondary data.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively using Microsoft Excel, cross-tabulating gender and age against cyberbullying type, awareness, and victimization. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2022), generating eight themes: social media usage, forms of cyberbullying, causes of cyberbullying, impact on mental health, impact on relationships, impact on academic performance, coping strategies, and preventive strategies.

## Limitations of the Study

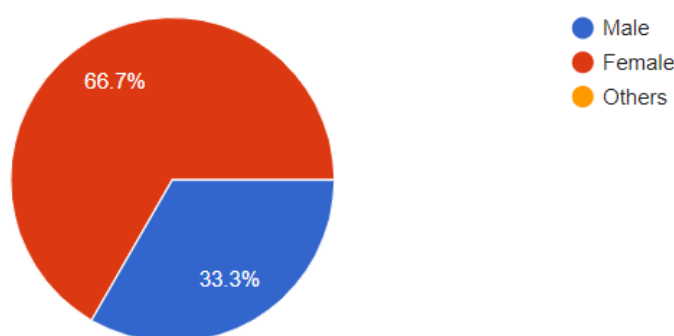
This study is subject to two principal limitations that should be borne in mind when interpreting its findings. First, the quantitative phase utilized a purposive sample restricted to 120 students aged 19–25 from two departments, the Department of Languages and Communication Studies (DLCS) and the Department of Business and Management Studies (DBMS), within the Faculty of Communication and Business Studies (FCBS) at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University. To capture richer qualitative insights, a voluntary sampling technique was subsequently employed to select 5 participants from among the 120 survey respondents for follow-up in-depth interviews. As with other non-probability, single-institution sampling designs, this approach trades broad representativeness for depth and accessibility, meaning its findings cannot be assumed to generalize to a wider population (Etikan et al., 2016).

Furthermore, voluntary sampling for qualitative interviews introduces potential self-selection bias (Hiratsuka, 2025), as students who volunteered to share their personal experiences may hold stronger opinions or distinct cyberbullying experiences compared to non-volunteers. Because participants were drawn from a single institution and a narrow age band, the findings describe the experiences of this specific student population and should not be generalized to Sri Lankan youth as a whole; a comparable caution was raised by Inthusha and Kajanathan (2023) regarding their own sample of Sri Lankan university students. Second, the quantitative analysis relied on descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation of percentages rather than inferential statistical testing, which limits the extent to which the associations observed between demographic variables, social media use, and cyberbullying victimization can be treated as statistically significant rather than as descriptive patterns.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Participant Demographics

Of the 120 respondents, 66.7% were female and 33.3% were male, reflecting the gender composition of the two departments sampled. Respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 25, with the largest concentration (71.7%) aged 21–23 and the single largest group (25.8%) aged 22. Departmental representation was evenly split at 50% each between the Department of Languages and Communication Studies and the Department of Business and Management Studies, with equal (25%) representation across all four academic batches, ensuring a balanced and representative sample.



**Figure 2. Gender Distribution of Participants**

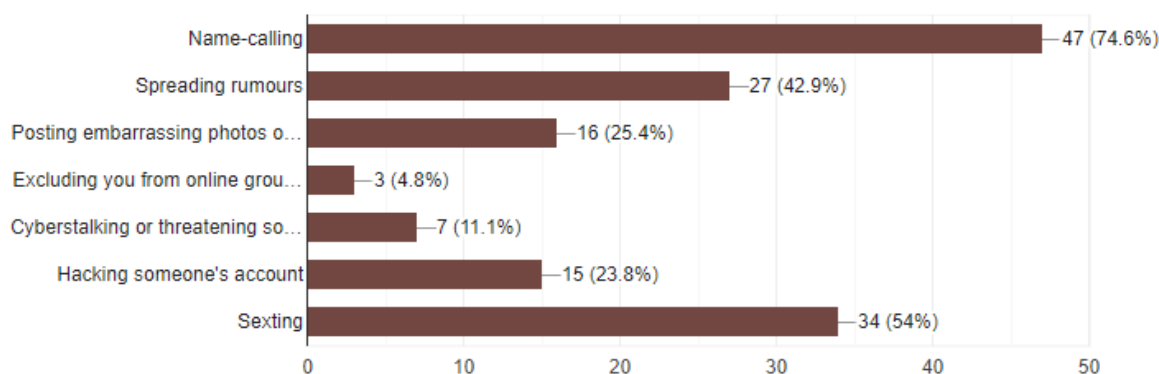
A large majority of respondents (80.8%) reported prior awareness of the term "cyberbullying," while 19.2% did not. Slightly over half of respondents (52.5%) reported having personally experienced cyberbullying, compared with 47.5% who had not (Table 2).

**Table 2. Awareness and Victimization**

| Measure                                      | Yes   | No    |
|----------------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Aware of cyberbullying (n=120)               | 80.8% | 19.2% |
| Personally experienced cyberbullying (n=120) | 52.5% | 47.5% |

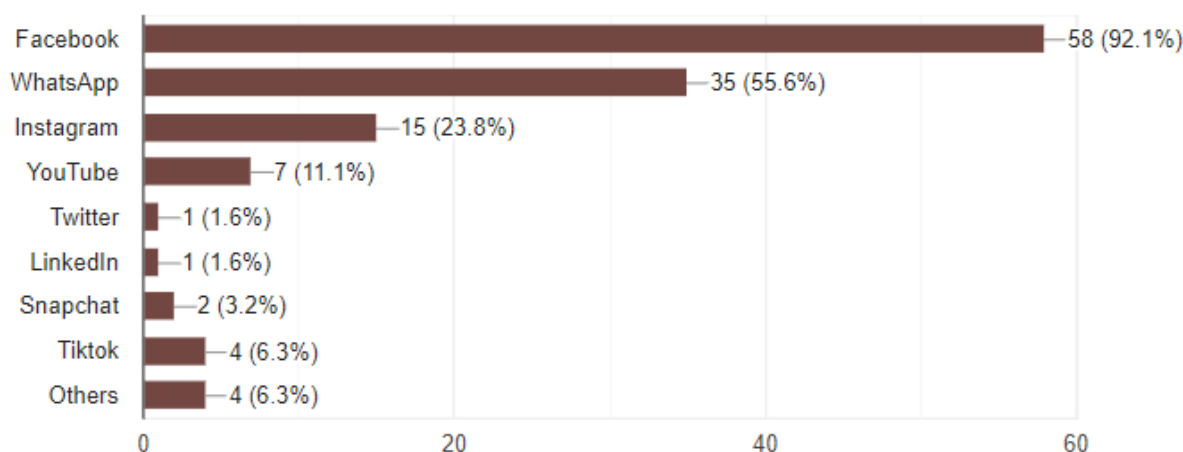
### Objective 1: Types of Cyberbullying Experienced

Among the 63 respondents who reported cyberbullying experiences (multiple-response item), name-calling was the most common form (74.6%), followed by sexting (54%), spreading rumours (42.9%), posting embarrassing photos or videos (25.4%), hacking of accounts (23.8%), cyberstalking or online threats (11.1%), and exclusion (4.8%). This pattern is broadly consistent with the international literature, in which verbal aggression and reputation-damaging content dominate reported cyberbullying tactics (Smith et al., 2008; Willard, 2007).



**Figure 3. Types of Cyberbullying Reported by Respondents**

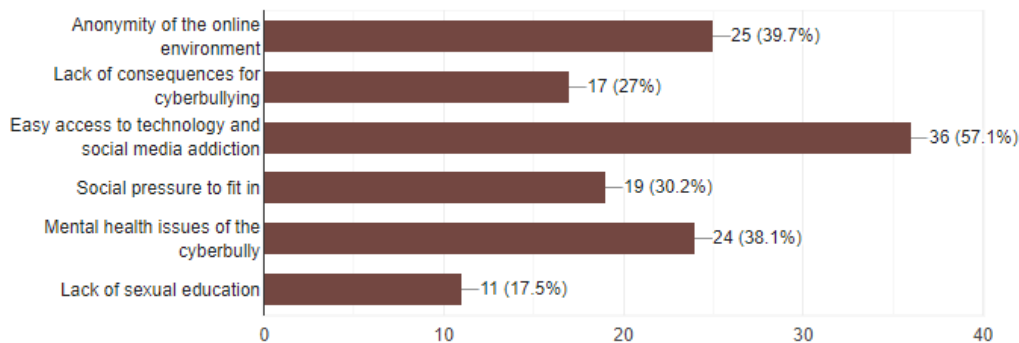
Consistent with the conceptual framework, the social media platform itself proved to be a strong contextual factor: Facebook was overwhelmingly the platform most associated with cyberbullying (92.1% of respondents who had experienced it), followed by WhatsApp (55.6%) and Instagram (23.8%), broadly consistent with these platforms' dominance of the Sri Lankan social media market (gs.statcounter.com, 2023).



**Figure 4. Social Media Platforms on Which Cyberbullying Was Experienced**

## Objective 2: Causes and Demographic Factors

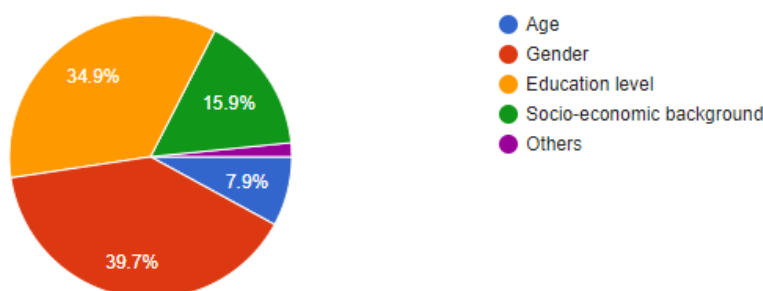
Easy access to technology combined with social media addiction was cited as the leading cause of cyberbullying (57.1%), followed by anonymity of the online environment (39.7%), mental health issues on the part of the perpetrator (38.1%), social pressure to conform (30.2%), lack of consequences (27%), and inadequate sexual education (17.5%). Interview participants similarly emphasised a lack of media literacy and education (3 of 5) and social-media-specific factors such as addiction and negative peer influence (3 of 5) as root causes.



**Figure 5. Causes of Cyberbullying Identified by Respondents**

Gender differences emerged in both awareness and victimisation: 83.75% of female respondents and 80% of male respondents reported prior awareness of cyberbullying, while 62.5% of female respondents and 40% of male respondents reported having personally experienced it. Name-calling was the most common form for both genders (45% of female cases and 32.5% of male cases). A large majority of respondents (74.6%) believed gender influences cyberbullying experiences, and 66.7% believed girls are more likely to be targeted through exclusion or rumours, while boys were seen as more likely to face physical threats or intimidation online.

Age was also strongly associated with victimization: 67.74% of 22-year-old respondents reported having experienced cyberbullying, the highest rate of any age group, while awareness of the term rose steadily with age, from 73.08% among 21-year-olds to 87.5% among 25-year-olds. Respondents attributed vulnerability to a broader mix of demographic factors, with gender identified most often, followed by education level, age, and socio-economic background (Figure 6).

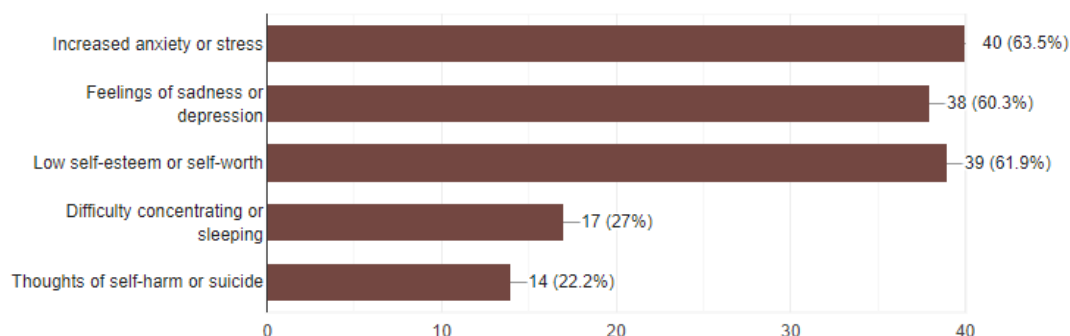


**Figure 6. Demographic Factors Respondents Associated with Cyberbullying Vulnerability**

## Objective 3: Impact of Cyberbullying

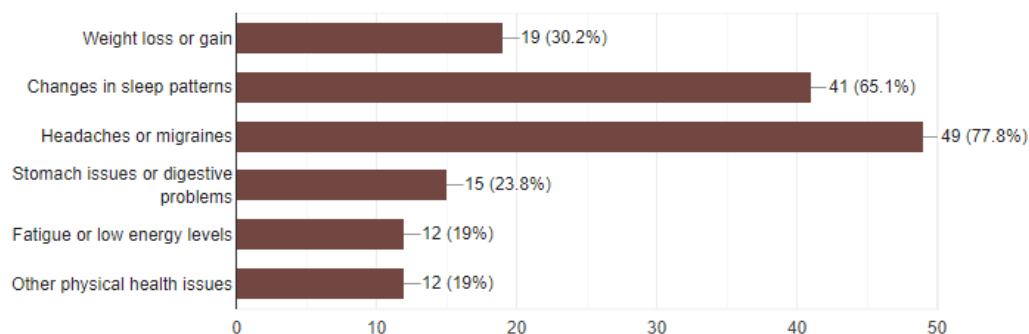
Emotionally, increased anxiety or stress was the most common response (63.5%), followed by feelings of sadness or depression (60.3%) and low self-esteem (61.9%); smaller proportions reported difficulty concentrating or sleeping (27%) and thoughts of self-harm or suicide (22.2%), underscoring the seriousness

of the psychological toll for a meaningful minority of victims. Interview participants (4 of 5) also described experiencing depression, alongside anger, loneliness, and disgust.

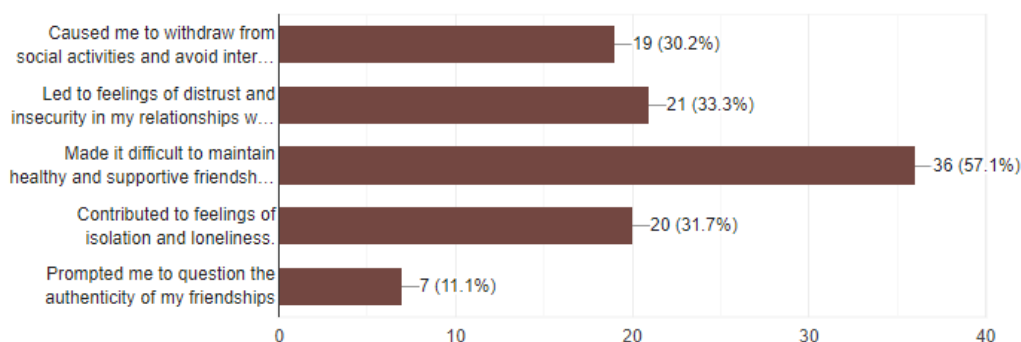


**Figure 7. Psychological Impact of Cyberbullying Reported by Victims**

Physically, headaches or migraines were the most common symptom (77.8%), followed by changes in sleep patterns (65.1%) and weight loss or gain (30.2%). Academically, 68.3% of respondents reported difficulty concentrating on their studies, and socially, 57.1% found it harder to maintain healthy, supportive friendships as a result of cyberbullying, consistent with findings from Muzamil and Shah (2016) and Egeberg et al. (2016) on the ripple effects of cyberbullying into academic and social life.



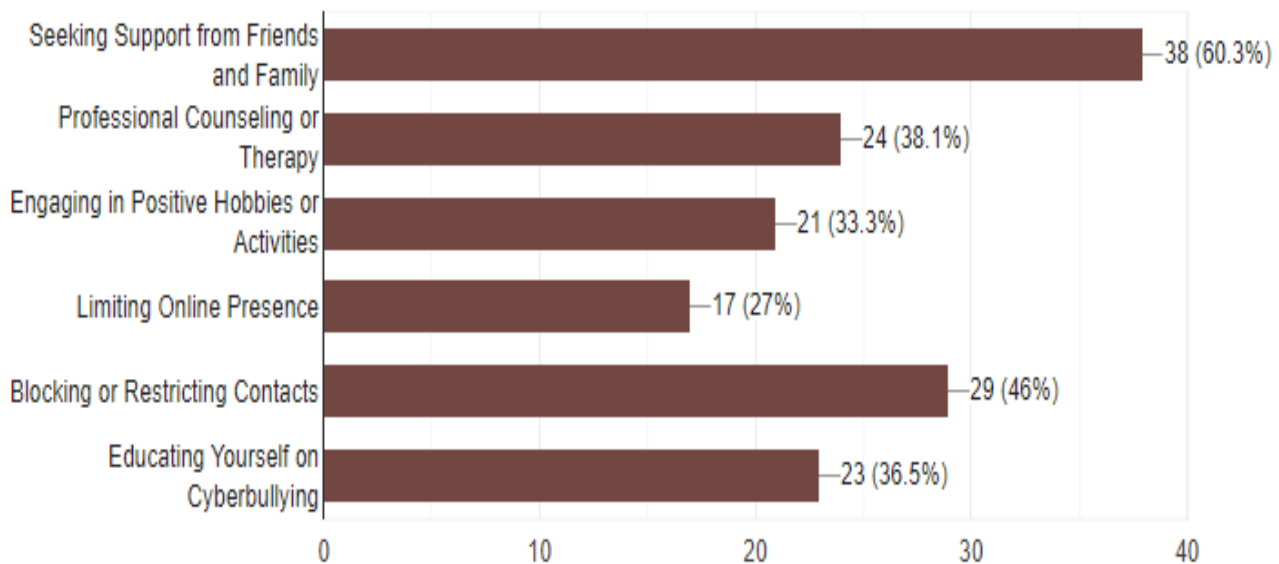
**Figure 8. Physical Health Symptoms Reported by Victims**



**Figure 9. Impact of Cyberbullying on Victims' Friendships and Relationships**

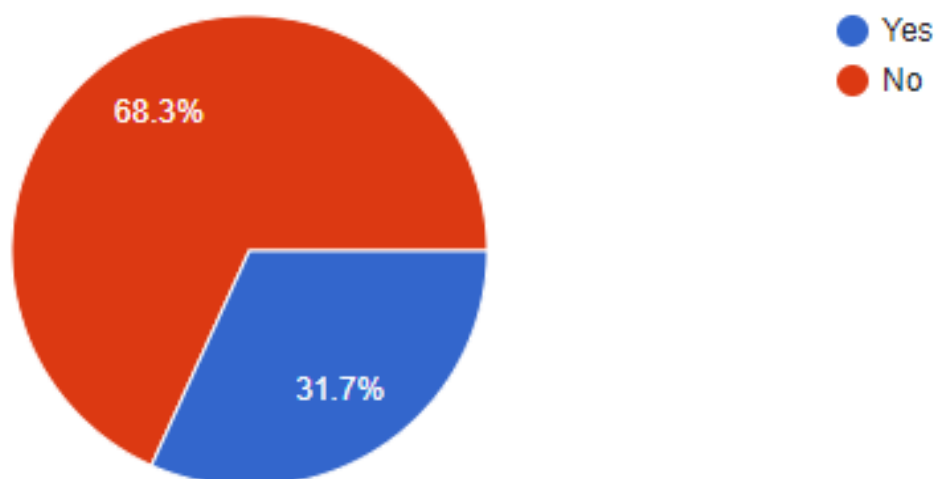
#### Objective 4: Coping Strategies

Seeking support from friends and family was the most common coping strategy (60.3%), followed by blocking or restricting contacts (46%), professional counselling or therapy (38.1%), educating oneself on cyberbullying (36.5%), engaging in positive hobbies or activities (33.3%), and limiting online presence (27%).



**Figure 10. Coping Strategies Used by Victims of Cyberbullying**

Formal legal action remained comparatively rare: 68.3% of victims did not report incidents to law enforcement, and among those who did, 71.4% approached the Sri Lanka Police and 14.3% approached CERT Sri Lanka. Respondents preferred preventive measures centred on improved platform regulation and educational programmes on responsible online behaviour (52.4% each), echoing recommendations by Kowalski et al. (2012) and Feinberg and Robey (2009) for coordinated school-, platform-, and family-level responses.



**Figure 11. Proportion of Victims Who Reported Cyberbullying to Law Enforcement**

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify the types, causes, impact, and coping strategies associated with cyberbullying among young people in Sri Lanka. The findings show that name-calling, sexting, and the spread of rumours are the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying, occurring predominantly on Facebook. Easy access to technology, social media addiction, anonymity, and gaps in media and sexual education emerged as the principal drivers, with gender and age particularly among 22-year-olds shaping both awareness and vulnerability. The psychological and physical toll is considerable, manifesting as sadness, anxiety, headaches,

and disrupted academic and social functioning, while formal legal recourse remains underused relative to informal support from friends and family.

These findings point to a clear need for targeted awareness and media-literacy campaigns, stronger content moderation and reporting mechanisms on dominant platforms such as Facebook, and clearer legal protections and enforcement pathways for young victims of cyberbullying in Sri Lanka. Future research should extend beyond a single campus to build a nationally representative picture of cyberbullying prevalence, examine the cultural and family dynamics that shape victims' experiences, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing policy and legal frameworks in protecting Sri Lankan youth online.

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