

Public Perceptions of the Causes of Rising Bullying Cases and Solutions in Malaysian Schools: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in Malaysian schools has become a pressing concern, with increasing cases reported in recent years. This study aimed to examine public perceptions of the reasons for the rise in bullying and the measures schools and the government should take to address the issue. Using a qualitative design, data were collected from 50 participants through open-ended responses and analysed thematically. Findings revealed three main factors that the public associated with the increase in bullying which are; 1) Media exposure and online games, 2) Gentle parenting and lack of discipline and 3) Peer Influence and Social Pressure. Participants believed that these elements combined to weaken children's self-control and social responsibility. For the second research question, participants proposed four strategies which are implementing stricter school rules, enforcing stronger juvenile laws, offering parenting classes, and reshaping the education syllabus to emphasize manners, empathy, and moral values instead of focusing solely on exam performance. The discussion highlighted the public's concern that current strategies are inadequate, pointing to gaps in discipline, legal enforcement, and moral-based education. The implications of these findings stress the need for a holistic approach that involves schools, families, and government agencies in shaping a safer school environment. By addressing both behavioural causes and systemic shortcomings, Malaysia can work toward more effective anti-bullying measures.

Keywords: Bullying Factors, Malaysian schools, Public perception, Solutions for bullying

INTRODUCTION

The increasing frequency of bullying incidents in Malaysian schools has become a pressing concern that demands urgent attention. Recent tragic cases have not only shocked the nation but have also exposed significant gaps in the country's anti-bullying measures and responses. The death of 13-year-old Zara Qairina Mahathir in July 2025, who allegedly fell from her school hostel's third floor after experiencing bullying and neglect represents the latest in a series of devastating incidents that have sparked nationwide outrage. Evidence from Zara's diary also detailed her struggles with bullying, highlighting the severity of the problem (The Star, 2025).

This tragic case follows the infamous murder of Zulfarhan Osman Zulkarnain at the National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM) in 2017, where the 20-year-old navy cadet was tortured to death by fellow students who scalded him with a steam iron. After years of legal proceedings, six former students were initially sentenced to death for murder, though this was later overturned by the Federal Court in February 2025, with sentences reduced to 18 years for manslaughter (Malay Mail, 2025). The Zulfarhan case exposed the extreme culture of ragging and bullying in educational institutions, while more recent incidents at UPNM continue to surface, including a 2024 case where a student suffered fractured ribs after being stepped on by a senior (Channel News Asia, 2024).

The scale of the problem has grown significantly in recent years. According to Malaysia's Ministry of Education, reported bullying cases increased steadily from 3,887 in 2022 to 5,891 in 2023, reaching 5,703 by October 2024, involving nearly 11,600 students (The Sun, 2025). The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) described the rising bullying cases in schools as a systemic crisis of child safety, urging urgent and comprehensive national anti-bullying action. In July 2025 alone, SUHAKAM reported multiple severe bullying cases within a single week, including a Form 1 female student who allegedly jumped from a school building reportedly due to bullying by her peers and a male student who sustained serious eye injuries from assault by peers. The commission emphasized the government's responsibility to ensure schools are safe and nurturing environments and called for more concrete and immediate action beyond current measures (Dusuki, 2025).

Malaysia's response to bullying has recently taken notable legislative steps, but a comprehensive anti-bullying law with statutory definitions is yet to be fully established. The Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2025 and the Criminal Procedure Code (Amendment) Act 2025, announced in early 2025, introduce specific criminal offenses targeting bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and offenses leading to self-harm, with penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment or fines. However, the government is currently reviewing the potential introduction of dedicated anti-bullying legislation, including setting up tribunals to handle school bullying cases more effectively. These legal reforms reflect mounting public pressure following cases such as the tragic death of Zara Qairina Mahathir, accompanied by nationwide calls for urgent, decisive action to combat bullying in schools (Bernama, 2025; Bloomberg, 2025).

Despite recent legislative reforms and heightened public awareness, Malaysia's approach to tackling school bullying remains in a transitional phase, with gaps in comprehensive legal frameworks and effective enforcement. The persistent rise in bullying incidents, coupled with public demand for stronger preventive and responsive measures, underscores the necessity for deeper understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives. Hence, this study aims to explore public perceptions regarding the causes of rising bullying cases in Malaysian schools and to understand how people think schools and the government should respond to reduce bullying. To guide this research, two research questions are posed:

- (RQ1) What reasons do members of the public give for the increase in bullying cases in Malaysian schools?
- (RQ2) How do members of the public believe schools and government should respond to address bullying among students?

By focusing on qualitative perspectives, the research seeks to uncover the disconnect between public expectations and institutional responses. In doing so, it aims to provide a clearer foundation for designing anti-bullying strategies that not only react to incidents but also address the deeper causes that allow bullying to persist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forms and Factors of Bullying in Malaysian Schools

Bullying has emerged as a significant concern in Malaysian schools, manifesting in various forms that affect students' well-being and academic performance. It is important to establish a clear understanding of what constitutes bullying. Bullying encompasses a range of behaviours including physical aggression, verbal abuse, cyberbullying, ostracism, and extortion (Sabramani et al., 2021). In the Malaysian context, physical bullying remains prevalent, often involving punches, kicks, and in some severe cases, the use of weapons, especially in boarding schools. Verbal bullying, including hurtful racial remarks, also poses a detrimental threat to social cohesion and the psychological safety of students. These forms of bullying contribute significantly to mental health issues, social anxiety, and disrupted peer relationships among students. Bullying also manifests in other forms such as social isolation, cyberbullying, and extortion, adding layers to the complexity of the problem in schools (Chong et al., 2025).

Understanding the factors contributing to bullying is crucial in addressing its rise. Teachers and researchers have consistently shown interest in examining the different factors that influence students' academic achievement (Mohammed & Hassan, 2022), and a similar concern is evident in research on bullying behaviours. Research has identified multiple influences ranging from personal gratification and the home environment to peer pressure and prior victimization. For instance, family dynamics and parental support significantly impact bullying behaviour; students from unstable family backgrounds or those lacking adequate parental guidance are more likely to engage in or become victims of bullying (Zaib et al., 2022). Peer influence remains a strong factor, where group dynamics can either encourage aggressive behaviour or foster resilience. The social environment created by peers can either escalate or mitigate bullying incidents, highlighting the importance of peer group intervention in anti-bullying strategies (Sabramani et al., 2021).

Societal and Policy Responses to Bullying

Public perceptions and community responses represent another vital area. Community attitudes toward bullying shape the effectiveness of interventions and support mechanisms within schools. Many Malaysians recognize bullying as a growing problem associated with societal changes, such as increased internet access leading to widespread cyberbullying (Gopinathan et al., 2025). Public opinion calls for a holistic response that involves not only schools but also families and local communities in fostering safe environments for students. Community awareness campaigns and involvement in anti-bullying programs have been shown to enhance responsiveness and reduce the stigma often attached to bullying victims (Nengsih et al., 2024).

Finally, government policies and legal frameworks provide the structural backbone for addressing bullying nationwide. The Malaysian government is reviewing the need to enact a dedicated Anti-Bullying Act that would include clear definitions, specific punishments, and a tribunal system for bullying cases involving children. Although recent amendments to the Penal Code (Sections 507B to 507G) have criminalized various forms of bullying and harassment, the current provisions lack a comprehensive framework specifically targeting school bullying. Authorities recognize the necessity for further legal development to provide structured protections and rehabilitative processes for children involved in bullying incidents (Bernama, 2025). This legal gap has led to calls from various stakeholders for stronger policies and more effective implementation mechanisms, including school-based protocols and national campaigns.

Bullying in Malaysian schools continues to harm students' well-being and learning, whether through physical, verbal, or online forms. Although awareness is growing and new laws offer protection, gaps in support and enforcement remain. Moving forward, real progress will depend on closer cooperation between schools, families, communities, and the government to build safer and more supportive learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, as the aim was to explore the perspectives of members of the public regarding bullying in Malaysian schools. Qualitative approaches are particularly valuable for investigating social issues because they allow participants to express their experiences, views, and values in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By focusing on narratives rather than numerical data, the research provides a more nuanced understanding of the reasons behind the increase in bullying and the responses expected from schools and government.

Participants were members of the Malaysian public recruited through purposive sampling. This approach was selected because it ensures that individuals with relevant knowledge and concern about bullying could contribute meaningful perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants included parents, teachers, and community members aged between 20 and 45, representing both urban and rural areas. A total of 50 participants were invited, which allowed for a manageable yet diverse range of viewpoints.

This research used a qualitative survey instrument consisting of open-ended questions. Data collection was conducted over a period of two weeks, during which participants submitted their responses electronically. All responses were compiled and organized systematically for thematic analysis. Each participant's response was carefully read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data and to gain an overall understanding of the

perspectives shared. Initial codes were generated by highlighting key words, phrases, or ideas related to the research questions. These codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into broader themes that represented recurring concepts across participants' responses. Direct quotations from participants were preserved to maintain authenticity and provide clear evidence of the themes. The final themes were then interpreted in light of existing literature to discuss their significance and implications for addressing bullying in Malaysian schools.

RESULTS

This study addressed two research questions and the thematic analysis generated seven themes. The first three themes address RQ1, while the remaining four themes address RQ2.

(RQ1) What reasons do members of the public give for the increase in bullying cases in Malaysian schools?

Table 1: Participant Responses for RQ1

Theme	Responses from Participants
Media Exposure and Online Games	"Children copy fighting from games. Even games chat have many predators and creepy people" "Many rude pranks and roasting culture online" "Games make them more angry, they became more aggressive when they lose" "They learn bad words from social media platforms" "Games show violence all the time. Too many killing and shooting games" "Boys like to act like the hero from games."
Gentle Parenting and Lack of Discipline	"Parents don't scold their kids anymore, no consequences" "Children get everything they want." "Parents do not punish their children and only advise" "No one teaches them respect." "Parents are busy and they tend to spoil and pamper the children" "They don't get discipline at home, too lenient" "Mother and father are too soft, no clear rules"
Peer Influence and Social Pressure	"They bully to look cool." "Friends push them to join." "If they don't bully, they feel left out." "Classmates laugh, so they do it. They thought it was funny" "They want to be popular in school." "They are scared to be the target so they target others" "They want to control others"

(RQ2) How do members of the public believe schools and government should respond to address bullying among students?

Table 2: Participants Responses for RQ2

Theme	Responses from Participants
Stricter Rules in Schools	“Teachers need to punish bullies and right now, they have no power at all” “Schools need stronger rules. No canning makes students rude and arrogant” “No soft action for bullies.” “Teacher should not ignore bully cases. Small cases can lead to severe ones”
Stricter Laws for Juvenile Bullying	“Police must take stricter action” “Even kids and teenagers should face the law.” “There should be no involvement of politics” “Government must be fair. Bully cases that involve death require harsher punishment” “Law should protect victims at all cost”
Parenting Classes and Awareness Programs	“Young parents nowadays need training in teaching kids” “maybe a workshop can help fathers and mothers” “Parents don’t know how to guide their children.” “Parents need to learn control and teach discipline.” “Many parents are afraid to cause trauma to their kids and become too lenient”
Education Syllabus on Manners and Moral Values	“Schools should teach students the value of respect and accountability.” “Schools should not be only exams, but focus on teaching good manners.” “Children must learn empathy in class.” “Subjects should teach values, focus on kindness, not just grades.”

DISCUSSION

Media Exposure and Online Games

Across the responses from the participants, members of the public repeatedly linked rising bullying to the always-on media environment such as social media, online gaming chat, and the visibility of “prank” or “roasting” content. These platforms, with their algorithm-driven content distribution and emphasis on short, shareable videos, create environments where harmful content such as cyberbullying, “prank,” or “roasting” videos can spread rapidly. The anonymity afforded by these platforms make it easier for bullies to target others, often exploiting visual content to humiliate or intimidate victims. This digital culture is especially influential among Generation Z, who are in a vulnerable phase of seeking peer approval while navigating increasingly aggressive online interactions (Huang et al., 2020).

Similarly, online gaming chats contribute significantly to bullying, as the anonymity and competitive context may lower inhibitions and increase aggressive behaviour. Games with violent or confrontational elements tend to foster more bullying incidents, as they often normalize aggression and reinforce adversarial relationships among players. Research has shown that violent games not only increase hostile behaviour but also influence the type of language used, with players more likely to employ offensive, derogatory, or aggressive expressions during interactions (Olejarnik & Romano, 2023). Such language ranging from insults and threats to sexist or racist remarks can create a toxic communicative environment where hostility becomes routine. Players appear more prone to both experiencing and perpetrating bullying in these settings, with the hostile discourse reinforcing competitive environments.

Moreover, “roasting” content, often framed as humorous yet grounded in personal insults, create a culture of bullying by normalizing public humiliation for entertainment. Younger users, in particular, may imitate these practices without fully understanding the psychological consequences, thereby reinforcing cycles of aggression. This environment ultimately creates a feedback loop where bullying and toxic language become normalized within online communities centered around these media (Kee et al., 2022).

Gentle Parenting and Lack of Discipline

A recurring concern among respondents was the perceived absence of consequences in gentle parenting. Statements such as “parents don’t scold their kids anymore, no consequences” and “parents do not punish their children and only advise” illustrate a belief that children are not being adequately corrected when they misbehave. This reflects the wider criticism that without consistent reinforcement, children may fail to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Prior research supports this view, noting that an absence of clear discipline can hinder the development of self-control and respect for rules (WenLi et al., 2025).

Another issue raised was overindulgence, expressed in responses like “children get everything they want” and “parents are busy and they tend to spoil and pamper the children.” Here, participants linked leniency with material and emotional indulgence, suggesting that parents may compensate for their absence by giving in to children’s demands. This concern resonates with studies showing that overindulgence can lead to entitlement and difficulty coping with frustration (Karasavva et al., 2025). For these respondents, gentle parenting was equated with a lack of restraint, where children’s desires are prioritized over parental authority.

Finally, respondents emphasized the erosion of respect and discipline within the home. Comments such as “no one teaches them respect” and “mother and father are too soft, no clear rules” highlight the fear that gentle parenting undermines traditional values of authority and order. In cultural contexts where obedience and hierarchy are highly valued, parenting practices that avoid strict punishment may be judged as ineffective. However, research in child psychology shows that being firm but caring, known as authoritative parenting, is usually more effective than harsh or overly strict methods (Baumrind, 1966). For example, a 2020 cross-national study found that authoritative parenting positively correlates with higher life satisfaction and better academic outcomes, while authoritarian parenting had the opposite effect (Yang & Zhao, 2020). From the view of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), children learn by watching how adults behave, so constant punishment may make them more aggressive rather than respectful. Therefore, the respondents’ views reflect a clash between traditional ideas about discipline and modern research that supports more balanced, respectful approaches to raising children.

Peer Influence and Social Pressure

Peer influence emerged as a powerful factor in encouraging bullying behaviour. Several respondents noted that students bully “to look cool” or because “friends push them to join,” highlighting the role of peer approval in sustaining these actions. Bullying, in this sense, becomes a social performance where aggression is rewarded with recognition or acceptance from peers. This finding echoes Aishah et al (2025) work on group involvement in bullying, showing that peer reinforcement plays a critical role in its continuation. In Malaysian schools, where collectivist values often emphasize group belonging and social image, the pressure to conform to peers’ expectations may amplify these behaviours (Sabramani et al., 2021).

Another issue raised was the fear of being left out. Some students explained, “if they don’t bully, they feel left out” and “they are scared to be the target so they target others,” suggesting that participation in bullying is sometimes driven not by personal desire, but by the need to protect themselves. This kind of defensive behaviour shows how strong the pressure to fit in with peers can be, even when it leads to harm. In Malaysian classrooms, where peer approval is highly valued, social acceptance can strongly influence student behaviour (Sabramani et al., 2021). By paying attention to students’ self-esteem and overall happiness, teachers can identify those who are most at risk and provide support that strengthens their confidence and social skills (Tamil & Ismail, 2020). With better emotional support, students may feel less pressure to join in bullying to fit in, helping to reduce the cycle of aggressive behaviour among peers.

Finally, the desire for popularity and control also featured prominently, with comments like “they want to be popular in school” and “they want to control others.” These responses indicate that bullying can serve as a strategy to gain social dominance. Within Malaysian schools, competition for status whether academic, social, or extracurricular can intersect with these dynamics, positioning bullying as a shortcut to influence among peers (Chong et al., 2025). Classmates who laugh and encourage the behaviour further reinforce the bully’s status, normalizing aggression as entertainment. Together, these findings underscore how peer dynamics not only facilitate bullying but also embed it into the social fabric of Malaysian school life, making interventions more complex than focusing solely on individual perpetrators.

Solution 1: Stricter Rules in Schools

Participants strongly emphasized the need for stricter rules in schools, reflecting frustration with what they see as weak enforcement. Statements such as “Teachers need to punish bullies and right now, they have no power at all” and “Schools need stronger rules” illustrate the belief that current measures are insufficient. This aligns with studies showing that when schools lack consistent disciplinary frameworks, bullying behaviours tend to persist (Rodriguez & Welsh, 2022). For many participants, the absence of caning or traditional punishments is seen as a reason why students become “rude and arrogant,” pointing to a desire for authority figures to regain control in classrooms.

At the same time, the call for “No soft action for bullies” highlights public demand for a firmer stance. Teachers were described as sometimes ignoring cases, which can leave victims feeling unsupported and bullies unchecked. Prior research supports this concern, noting that underreporting or lenient handling of bullying incidents can worsen the school climate and erode trust in educators (Dawes et al., 2024). While corporal punishment is a sensitive and contested issue, these responses underline the expectation that schools should adopt clearer, fairer and stronger consequences whether through non-violent but firm disciplinary systems or by empowering teachers to take immediate action.

Solution 2: Stricter Laws for Juvenile Bullying

Participants voiced a call for stricter laws to address juvenile bullying, especially in serious cases. Expressions such as “Police must take stricter action” and “Even kids should face the law” show public frustration with what they perceive as weak legal consequences. This reflects a broader debate in Malaysia and elsewhere on whether young offenders should be held more accountable under the law when bullying leads to severe harm. Research suggests that when legal systems appear lenient, bullying behaviours risk being normalized, while stronger policies can act as deterrents (Xue et al., 2022).

Some participants also linked bullying responses to issues of fairness and justice. For example, one stated, “There should be no involvement of politics” and another added, “Government must be fair. Bully cases that involve death require harsher punishment.” Such views suggest public concern that legal processes may sometimes be influenced by power or privilege, echoing findings that perceived inequality in the handling of bullying cases can reduce trust in institutions. At the same time, statements like “Law should protect victims at all cost” highlight the expectation that legislation should prioritize victims’ safety and dignity, which aligns with international calls for a victim-centred approach to juvenile justice (European Commission, 2020).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that members of the public see stronger laws not only as a punishment for bullies but also as a way of restoring justice and ensuring that victims feel supported. While stricter juvenile laws remain controversial, the participants' responses underline a societal demand for clearer, firmer, and fairer frameworks to reduce the severity and recurrence of bullying.

Solution 3: Parenting Classes and Awareness Programs

The responses reveal a strong perception that many parents today lack the necessary skills and confidence to manage their children's behaviour effectively. Statements such as "young parents nowadays need training" and "parents don't know how to guide their children" suggest that there is a gap in knowledge regarding discipline strategies and child guidance. This highlights the need for structured support, particularly for younger parents who may be navigating parenting without sufficient role models or prior experience. Research has shown that parenting programs can improve parental competence, reduce stress, and encourage positive discipline practices (Tuntipuchitanon et al., 2024).

Participants also emphasized the potential benefits of workshops and awareness programs, with comments like "maybe a workshop can help fathers and mothers" and "parents need to learn control and teach discipline." Such initiatives could provide parents with practical tools to balance empathy with firm boundaries, addressing concerns that leniency may lead to a lack of respect or discipline at home. These findings align with calls in educational and psychological literature for community-based parenting interventions that are culturally sensitive and accessible to all parents (Schilling et al., 2021).

At the same time, some participants noted that "many parents are afraid to cause trauma to their kids and become too lenient," highlighting a tension between modern awareness of children's emotional needs and the fear of being overly strict. This indicates a need for awareness programs that clearly communicate the difference between harmful punitive practices and constructive discipline. By reinforcing that setting boundaries does not necessarily equate to causing trauma, such programs could help parents adopt balanced approaches that nurture children's well-being while ensuring accountability.

Solution 4: Education Syllabus on Manners and Moral Values

Participants highlighted the importance of integrating moral education and values into the school syllabus, moving beyond an exam-oriented system. Statements such as "Schools should teach students the value of respect and accountability" and "Schools should not be only exams, but focus on teaching good manners" suggest dissatisfaction with the heavy academic focus in Malaysian schools. This perspective is supported by past research, which shows that education systems overly focused on examinations often neglect social-emotional learning, leaving students less equipped to manage relationships and conflicts (Abdul Hadi et al., 2023).

Many participants emphasized that empathy, kindness, and respect should be explicitly taught, as seen in comments like "Children must learn empathy in class" and "Subjects should teach values, focus on kindness, not just grades." Such ideas echo findings that social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes significantly reduce bullying by fostering self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making (Lin & Shih, 2024). Schools should embed moral-based education as a preventive strategy against school violence. Teachers are also encouraged to use digital tools and resources to help design an engaging learning experience that are more interactive and adaptable, meeting the different styles and needs of their coping students (Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024). Overall, these responses show a strong belief that education should not only develop intellectual skills but also nurture character and compassion. Participants viewed moral and value-based education as a sustainable solution, ensuring that students grow into respectful individuals who are less likely to engage in bullying behaviours.

CONCLUSION

This study explored public perspectives on the rising cases of bullying in Malaysian schools and the actions that should be taken by schools and the government. The findings revealed three main reasons for the increase

in bullying; media exposure and online games, gentle parenting practices, and peer influence. At the same time, participants strongly advocated for stricter school rules, stronger juvenile laws, improved parenting education, and an education syllabus that emphasizes manners and moral values rather than exam performance. The implications of this study are twofold. For policy and practice, the results suggest that addressing bullying requires a multi-level approach, combining school discipline, family engagement, legal accountability, and curriculum reform. Schools and ministries may consider embedding social-emotional learning into the syllabus, while also providing parents with training on effective discipline strategies. For the government and policymakers, participants' call for stronger laws highlights the urgent need to review existing legal protections to ensure that victims are safeguarded and that accountability mechanisms are fair and transparent. Future research could further examine these public perceptions using established psychological and sociological frameworks to deepen understanding of how environmental, familial, and social factors interact in shaping bullying behaviour. Integrating perspectives from child psychology and social systems theory may also help contextualize these findings within broader academic debates. Overall, the study underscores the need for collaborative action between schools, families, and government agencies. By addressing both the root causes and the systemic gaps in prevention, Malaysia can work toward creating safer and more supportive educational environments for students.

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