

Exploring the Impacts of Cyberbullying Victimization among Youths in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the multifaceted impacts of cyberbullying victimization among Malaysian youths using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants aged 15 to 30, all of whom had experienced cyberbullying. Thematic analysis revealed that cyberbullying leads to profound emotional and behavioural consequences. Emotionally, participants reported fear, anxiety, panic, numbness, depression, and sadness. Behavioural changes included social withdrawal, reduced online engagement, altered communication patterns, and life decisions shaped by their experiences. These impacts extended beyond the individual, affecting relationships and trust with others. The findings demonstrate the pervasive toll cyberbullying takes on youth well-being, influencing multiple dimensions of their lives. The study emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive mental health resources and early intervention strategies that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the Malaysian context. By capturing the lived experiences of victims, this research provides critical insights into the complex nature of cyberbullying and highlights the importance of developing targeted support mechanisms to address its psychological and behavioural effects. Such efforts are vital for fostering safer digital environments, reducing stigma, and promoting resilience among Malaysian youth in an increasingly connected world.

Keywords: Impacts, cyberbullying, victimization, youth

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying refers to the intentional and repeated harm inflicted on individuals through the use of technology, such as mobile phones and computers. It involves using digital platforms to mock, hurt, or harm others and can occur in various contexts, including discussion forums, video or computer games, social media, or text messaging (Abramson, 2022). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying does not require the victim and perpetrator to be in the same location, region, or even country. In essence, cyberbullying transcends time, place, and space, occurring across diverse social settings (Paat & Markham, 2021).

As of October 2024, 5.52 billion people, accounting for 67.5% of the global population, were using the internet (Statista, 2024). Data from 2020 showed that 91% of children aged 12 to 15 owned a smartphone, and nearly all children aged 5 to 15 (97%) accessed the internet using a device (Ofcom, 2021). This highlights that individuals are being introduced to the internet at increasingly younger ages. With the rise in internet accessibility and digital communication, young users encounter both opportunities and risks online (Livingstone et al., 2017; Macaulay et al., 2020). In 2023, one in five internet users reported being vulnerable to cyberbullying, harassment, or abuse (Statista, 2023). According to Statista (2023), 39% of global internet users were reported to have anxious feelings and worry about being exposed to cyberbullying, cyber harassment, or cyber abuse. A survey conducted by the Market Research Institute, IPSOS and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) in 16 countries revealed that 67% of respondents had encountered hate speech online, signifying its widespread nature. Additionally, 69% admitted to having abused someone online (Seitz, 2024). Among students aged 13 to 17, over 55% reported experiencing cyberbullying at some point in their lives (Patchin & Hinduja,

2024). Young adults aged 18 to 25 exhibited the highest rates of cyberbullying, both over their lifetimes and in the past month. Significant lifetime cyberbullying was also reported by older age groups: 24% of those aged 26 to 35, 13% of those aged 46 to 55, and 6.5% of individuals aged 66 and older (Wang et al., 2019). Moreover, a 2023 survey found that 28.6% of girls and 24.2% of boys had experienced cyberbullying in the preceding 30 days (Patchin & Hinduja, 2024). These findings demonstrate that cyberbullying affects individuals across different countries, age groups, and genders.

Globally, Malaysia is ranked second in Asia for cyberbullying issues and sixth among 28 countries worldwide. One in four Malaysian parents reported that their child had been a victim of cyberbullying (IPSOS, 2018). Additionally, over half of Malaysian adolescents who use Social Networking Services (SNS) have experienced victimization both offline and online, according to Marret and Choo (2017). In 2019, three out of ten young Malaysians report having experienced cyberbullying, with youths making up the largest victim group in cyberbullying instances in Malaysia, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). These can help to explain the Cybersecurity Malaysia 2020 incident figures, which indicate that one of the top five cyberthreats to Malaysians is cyberbullying. In fact, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported receiving 3,199 complaints related to cyberbullying in 2023, though the actual number of unreported victims who suffer in silence is likely much higher (theSun, 2024). Alarming, from January to November 1, 2024, MCMC recorded 8,399 complaints about cyberbullying, averaging 27 cases per day (theSun, 2024). This reflects a significant rise in incidents within just one year. One of the most prevalent types of harassment that young people experience is cyberbullying, which may negatively impact their relationships, education, and mental health (MCMC, 2024). Like in other parts of the world, cyberbullying is becoming more and more common in Malaysia, particularly among students attending higher education institutions. According to the current study, 60% of college and university students reported experiencing cyberbullying, which is a very high prevalence rate (Lai et al., 2017). It is reported that nearly 28% of Malaysian adolescents have experienced some form of online bullying with rates higher among those engaged in multiple social media platforms (Lee et al., 2023). Furthermore, cultural nuances in Malaysia, such as the emphasis on community harmony and saving face often stigmatize victims and discourage them from reporting the bullying incidents (Ibrahim & Vi, 2021). As a result, many cases of cyberbullying remain hidden and unaddressed, perpetuating the issue in silence.

Victims of cyberbullying often experience a range of negative emotional and behavioral outcomes, including depression (Maurya et al., 2022), loneliness (Varghese & Pistole, 2017), low self-esteem (Agustiniingsih et al., 2024), antisocial behavior (Wolke et al., 2017), and, in severe cases, suicidal thoughts or attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that 13.9% of adolescents in the United States have experienced cyberbullying, and 13.6% have seriously attempted suicide, highlighting the growing prevalence of these issues among adolescents (Schonfeld et al., 2023). Adolescents who have been cyberbullying victims are 2.5 times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts compared to their non-victimized peers (Maurya et al., 2022). Additionally, 16.62% of men and 32.95% of women reported depressive symptoms resulting from cyberbullying (Maurya et al., 2022). A meta-analysis of 57 studies involving 105,440 participants from 17 countries confirmed a strong positive association between cyberbullying victimization and depression (Hu et al., 2021). A study conducted by the Malaysian Mental Health Association revealed that at least 20% of youth suicides in recent years were linked to cyberbullying (Kee et al., 2024). According to Fadhli et al. (2022), 17.1% of adolescents reported experiencing suicidal behaviour, with 11.9% having suicidal thoughts, 10.2% creating a suicide plan, and 8.4% attempting suicide. These findings highlight the significant role of cyberbullying victimization as a key risk factor for suicidal tendencies among young people. Additionally, psychological distress was found to have a strong relationship with cyberbullying victimization, acting both as a cause and an effect of the experience among young adults in Malaysia (Samsudin et al., 2023). According to Lee et al. (2023), a study on university students in Malaysia found that cyberbullying victimization was linked to a doubled likelihood of experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Research by Hu et al. (2021) further indicated that the risk of depression following cyberbullying increases with age, particularly among individuals between the ages of 10 and 24, with college students being the most severely affected. According to Teh and Amat (2024), Cybersecurity Malaysia (2020) reported that over 53% of young Malaysians are at risk of becoming cyberbullies, while around 25% have been victims of online bullying. Furthermore, more than 44% of young Malaysians experienced significant levels of cyber-related anxiety,

depression, and stress due to their involvement in cyberbullying. Among those who were cyberbullying victims, 72.2% reported experiencing high levels of anxiety, 68.1% suffered from elevated depression, and 75.2% exhibited high stress levels.

Cyberbullying is a growing global concern that significantly affects individuals across age groups, genders, and cultures, with particularly high prevalence among youth in Malaysia. Despite increasing internet access and digital engagement, many cases remain unreported due to cultural stigmas and fear of social repercussions. In Malaysia, societal values such as maintaining harmony and avoiding shame often discourage victims from speaking out, resulting in underreporting and a lack of adequate support systems. While existing research highlights the psychological consequences of cyberbullying, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies, there are notable gaps in understanding the nuanced impacts of cyberbullying within specific cultural contexts, especially in Southeast Asia. Therefore, this study aims to explore the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying among Malaysian youths. By addressing these gaps, the research seeks to inform culturally sensitive policies and promote safer digital environments for young people in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Malaysian youths who have been victims of cyberbullying. Phenomenology was chosen for its strength in capturing the essence of personal experiences and uncovering the emotional, behavioural, and psychological impacts of cyberbullying from the participants' perspectives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals aged 15–30 who had firsthand experience with cyberbullying. A total of six participants were recruited via social media platforms using an online screening form. This sample size aligns with phenomenological research standards and was sufficient to reach data saturation.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, conducted both face-to-face and online depending on participant preference. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions focusing on the impacts of cyberbullying, with each session lasting approximately one hour. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained through journaling, peer debriefing, and the use of field notes to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and researcher reflections during and after interviews. The data were analysed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach, a qualitative method that identifies, examines, and reports patterns within the data. Member checking and expert validation were employed to ensure the accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness of the findings. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman's Scientific and Ethical Review Committee, ensuring adherence to ethical standards throughout the research process.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed a complex interplay between emotional and behavioural responses, highlighting how participants navigate psychological stressors in contemporary contexts. Two overarching themes emerged: emotional impacts and behavioural impacts, each encompassing distinct yet interconnected sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
Emotional Impacts	1.1 Fear, Anxiety and Panic 1.2 Numbness 1.3 Depression and Sadness
Behavioural Impacts	2.1 Social Withdrawal and Isolation 2.2 Online Disengagement and Avoidance

	2.3 Changes in Communication Style 2.4 Changes in Life Choices
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Theme 1: Emotional Impacts

Sub-theme 1.1: Fear, Anxiety and Panic

Based on the responses, all six participants experienced emotional impacts of fear, anxiety and panic. This sub-theme captures participants' intense emotional responses to cyberbullying, including a persistent sense of fear of being watched, worry over future attacks, and panic during or after incidents.

"... then the perpetrator started telling me about my personal information, what they wanted to do, then it was fear and then anxiety. "

(E59, Participant P1)

This quote directly reflects emotional impacts such as fear, anxiety, and panic, as the participant's distress escalates when the perpetrator reveals her personal information along with threats. The invasion of privacy combined with violent intentions triggers intense emotional reactions, showing how fear quickly turns into overwhelming anxiety.

"These emotions are because of my friend. Since this incident has affected her a lot, I am afraid that her condition will become worse. "

(E24, Participant P2)

This quote illustrates the emotional impacts of fear, anxiety, and panic, as the participant expresses constant worry about their friend's deteriorating mental health. The fear that their friend's condition could worsen creates ongoing emotional tension, showing how concern for a friend's well-being can trigger persistent anxiety and emotional instability.

"There is one of my friends had a similar incident with me. After this incident, everyone was boycotting her, which I do not think is fair because sometimes it is not what you wanted. So, it makes me more anxious because what if my videos and photos are being leaked. "

(E40, Participant P3)

This statement highlights the emotional impacts of fear, anxiety, and panic experienced by the participant. Observing her friend being boycotted by others for a similar situation instilled a deep sense of fear that she, too, would face public humiliation and social rejection if her private images were ever exposed. Although she believed her friend didn't deserve such treatment, the incident made her internalize the possible consequences of her own experience, triggering persistent anxiety.

"I felt scared because suddenly there were a lot of people posting and commenting about me, even adding me to a group chat to attack me. "

(E30, Participant P4)

This statement strongly reflects the emotional impacts of fear, anxiety, and panic. The participant describes feeling scared due to the sudden and overwhelming number of people posting and commenting about them, as well as being added to a group chat specifically created to attack them.

"It felt like the perpetrator was monitoring me 24/7, knowing every move I made...No matter where I was — at home or at university — he seemed to always know my whereabouts, which scared me. "

(E21, Participant P5)

This experience reflects intense emotional impacts of fear, anxiety, and panic. Feeling like the perpetrator was monitoring the participant constantly created a sense of being trapped and unsafe, even in familiar environments like home or university. The unpredictability and perceived loss of privacy triggered constant fear, leading to heightened anxiety and paranoia.

“Before I realized it was cyberbullying, I was feeling anxious about how to reply to them so they would accept me as friends and let me join them.” “After I realized it was cyberbullying, I felt anxious about how I could react and handle the situation...”

(E36, Participant P6)

These statements illustrate how the participant's anxiety evolved into a persistent emotional impact rooted in fear and panic. Initially, she felt anxious about gaining acceptance and belonging, constantly worrying about how to respond to avoid rejection. Once she realized she was being cyberbullied, that anxiety intensified into fear, fear of being ridiculed, further excluded, or emotionally harmed.

Sub-theme 1.2: Numbness

According to their experiences, three out of six participants reported experienced emotional impacts of numbness. This refers to the emotional desensitization that victims of cyberbullying may experience over time. After prolonged exposure to distressing situations, victims may begin to feel emotionally “numb”—that is, they stop feeling strong emotions like fear, sadness, or anger.

“I think my feelings went numb, not as strong as the previous time... as the incidents continued, I just thought that ‘Okay, here comes again.’”

(E24, Participant P2)

It reflects a gradual emotional desensitization due to repeated exposure to distressing incidents. Over time, the participant stops reacting as strongly, which is a common defence mechanism to cope with overwhelming or chronic stress.

“For a very long time, this incident hurt me and I will cry at midnight every day. But, after this, I just went numb as the incident continued.”

(E46, Participant P3)

This statement reflects the emotional impact of numbness as a response to prolonged distress. Initially overwhelmed by pain and sadness, the participant cried every night, but over time, the constant emotional strain led her to shut down emotionally.

“Over time, I began to accept it and even got used to being harassed in the middle of the night. I became numb to it.” “I gradually became numb and started getting used to that kind of life.”

(E18; E51, Participant P5)

The participant's statements illustrate the emotional impact of numbness, where prolonged exposure to stress and helplessness led the participant to emotionally shut down. Rather than continue to feel overwhelmed, she became desensitized to the harassment, accepting it as part of daily life.

Sub-theme 1.3: Depression and Sadness

Based on their responses, four out of six participants experienced depression and sadness. Refer to the deep emotional pain experienced by cyberbullying victims. This includes crying at night, feeling low for extended periods, and anticipating the worst, all of which are signs of depressive symptoms triggered by cyberbullying.

“I was depressed and cried a lot when I was worrying about the videos or photos getting leaked.”

(E54, Participant P3)

This statement reflects the emotional impacts of depression and sadness, as the participant experienced intense emotional distress driven by fear of her private images being leaked. Her frequent crying and persistent worry indicate depressive symptoms, showing how the threat of exposure deeply affected her mental health, leading to prolonged sadness and emotional suffering.

“After processing all of these things, I felt sad because they are saying something bad to me.”

(E30, Participant P4)

This statement reflects the emotional impacts of depression and sadness, as the participant expresses feeling deeply hurt after internalizing the repeated negative comments directed at them. The emotional pain arose from being verbally attacked and devalued, leading to lingering sadness and a sense of emotional burden commonly associated with depressive experiences.

“The biggest emotion I felt during this incident was sadness, because I couldn’t continue with the debate competition...it affected the thing I loved most — debating — and caused harm to my teammates as well.”

(E19, Participant P5)

This reflects the emotional impacts of sadness and depression as she was forced to withdraw from something she was deeply passionate about, debating. Losing the chance to compete and feeling like she let down her teammates triggered deep regret, disappointment, and emotional pain. This sense of loss and hopelessness over something meaningful being taken away is a key indicator of depressive feelings.

“When I found out that there are some people that I don’t even know have blocked me on Facebook and the intensity of being made fun of were becoming higher, like they started spreading the rumors saying that I am weird and do not be friends with me, then I realized that it was cyberbullying.” “I felt sad and disappointed, but this was after I realized a few months later.”

(E24, Participant P6)

These statements show how the participant’s realization of being targeted, through being blocked by strangers and having rumours spread, led to deep feelings of sadness and disappointment. The delayed understanding intensified the emotional weight, reflecting the emotional impact of depression-like symptoms, such as feeling rejected, misunderstood, and emotionally hurt.

Theme 2: Behavioural Impacts

Sub-theme 2.1: Social Withdrawal and Isolation

Based on participants’ responses, all six of them experienced behavioural impacts of social withdrawal and isolation. This refers to noticeable changes in how victims of cyberbullying interact with others, often leading them to distance themselves from social environments.

“I stopped going out, because I know that he has people in my school that can give him my information.” “My social circle became very, very, very small and close friends that I used to have, I stopped talking to them.”
(E73, Participant P1)

This statement reflects the behavioural impacts of social withdrawal and isolation as a response to the fear and anxiety caused by cyberbullying. Participant P1 describes intentionally avoiding social settings and cutting off contact with others due to the perceived threat that the perpetrator could still access their personal information through people at school. This fear led them to drastically reduce their interactions, shrinking their social circle

to only a few individuals they felt they could trust. By choosing not to go out and distancing themselves even from previously close friends, the participant demonstrates a significant behavioural change driven by the need for self-protection.

"I will think that since I grew up, I did not go along with friends anymore and tend to live alone and stay with myself. But now, after reflecting on this incident, I think that I have brought some of the ways that I survived in the online settings to reality. I did not make a lot of friends in reality."

(E42, Participant P2)

This quote reflects the behavioural impact of social withdrawal and isolation, as the participant describes how her experience with cyberbullying led to a noticeable change in how she engages with others in real life. Although she initially believed her growing distance from friends was simply a part of becoming more mature, she later recognized that the way she interacted with others online had started to shape her offline behaviour. After facing repeated hostility and mistreatment in the online environment, she began to limit her social interactions in reality, choosing not to make many new friends and instead keeping to herself.

"I would not share too much with others as before and become more introverted...sometimes you talk to them then they seem like they do not care about it...I will be afraid that if I share more, what if the person may whisper and spread it around."

(E62; E68, Participant P3)

These statements reflect the behavioural impacts of social withdrawal and isolation, which developed as a protective response to the participant's experience of cyberbullying and the emotional harm that followed. After feeling invalidated and dismissed by those she confided in, who seemed not to care or take her seriously, she began to withdraw from social interactions, becoming more introverted and guarded.

"I didn't even go outside with my family members because I was scared to be recognized..." "I became more introverted... I do not dare to make friends... my social circle is small with just a few friends."

(E24; E36, Participant P4)

These statements reflect the behavioural impacts of social withdrawal and isolation experienced by the participant as a direct result of the cyberbullying. The fear of being recognized and judged by others led the participant to avoid going out in public, even with close family members, which shows a significant disruption in their normal social routines. Additionally, the participant became more introverted, no longer feeling safe or confident in forming new friendships. The negative attention and ridicule they received caused them to question how others perceived them, leading to a shrinking of their social circle and reluctance to engage with peers.

"I avoided appearing in the debate competition and not attending any of it anymore."

(E25, Participant P5)

This statement reflects the behavioural impacts of social withdrawal and isolation resulting from the cyberbullying experience. After being publicly humiliated and harshly criticized due to the maliciously edited debate video, she chose to completely withdraw from debate competitions, something that had previously been a significant and meaningful part of her life. The emotional distress, fear of judgment, and intense pressure made her feel too exposed and vulnerable to continue participating. This avoidance behaviour wasn't limited to the event itself; it symbolized her retreat from social and public environments where she once thrived.

"I would sense that there is a distance even between my close friends. I won't actively approach my secondary school close friend. I think it is getting better now, but sometimes it will reappear again, and I do not know why."

(E59, Participant P6)

This statement reflects the behavioural impact of social withdrawal and isolation resulting from the participant's experience of cyberbullying. Even after the incident had passed, she continued to feel a sense of emotional and relational distance, not only from acquaintances but even from her close friends. This ongoing reluctance to actively approach others, including those she previously felt comfortable with, indicates a lasting behavioural change shaped.

Sub-theme 2.2: Online Disengagement and Avoidance

According to their experiences, five out of six participants experienced behavioural impacts of online disengagement and avoidance. The behavioural impacts of online disengagement and avoidance describe how participants intentionally reduce or cease their online activities to protect themselves from further cyberbullied by perpetrators.

"I stopped posting on social media. I deleted a lot of things from my Facebook account... even Instagram, everything, I stopped posting."

(E73, Participant P1)

This statement illustrates the behavioural impacts of online disengagement and avoidance as a direct result of the cyberbullying experience. The participant describes completely withdrawing from social media by deleting posts and personal information from platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Her actions indicate an attempt to erase her digital presence, limiting access to her personal life and reducing visibility to others online.

"I have deleted the Facebook app and even my Facebook account... I do not play Tinder anymore after this."

(E48, Participant P3)

This statement illustrates the behavioural impacts of online disengagement and avoidance as a direct response to the trauma the participant experienced through cyberbullying. Her decision to delete the Facebook app and permanently close her account, along with stopping the use of Tinder, signifies a conscious effort to distance herself from the digital spaces where the abuse occurred.

"I reduced my frequency of posting online at that time because I was afraid of being judged by them."

(E38, Participant P4)

This statement reflects the behavioural impacts of online disengagement and avoidance, as the participant deliberately reduced their presence on social media due to fear of judgment and further harassment. This led him to withdraw from online activities that previously have been normal or enjoyable.

"For online platform...I avoided using it because they said something bad to me and were attacking me...But, after this I still can use the online platform but will be noticing myself to be more cautious."

(E25, Participant P5)

This reflects the behavioural impacts of online disengagement and avoidance brought on by the cyberbullying experience. Initially, the constant attacks, hateful comments, and personal threats caused her to avoid using online platforms altogether. Moreover, her boyfriend have stopped her to use it to avoid further emotional hurt. She felt unsafe engaging online due to the fear of being targeted again, which led her to withdraw from digital spaces where the bullying took place. Even after the peak of the harassment passed, her behaviour online was permanently altered, she becoming cautious of how she presented herself.

"I did not post anything again online because I was afraid that there would be someone who would screenshot and talk about me..."

"I stop commenting on others' posts as before. It is because I am afraid that they will think I am annoying..."

(E40; E44, Participant P6)

These statements clearly illustrate the behavioural impact of online disengagement and avoidance as a result of the participant's cyberbullying experience. Her decision to stop posting content and commenting on others' posts was driven by an ongoing fear of being targeted, ridiculed, or misinterpreted online. This shift reflects a conscious effort to minimize her visibility in digital spaces, avoiding any actions that could potentially expose her to further criticism or social harm. Such behaviour marks a significant change in how she navigates social media, moving from open and expressive participation to silence and invisibility.

Sub-theme 2.3: Change in Communication Style

According to their responses, four out of six participants experienced behavioural impacts of change in communication style. The behavioural impacts of change in communication style reflect how cyberbullying alters the way participants interact with others, both online and in person.

"I used to be very outgoing and very friendly to everyone. But after that, I became very reserved and more introverted than I really was... I don't share a lot of my thoughts or even information to people that I feel like it's not necessary to."

(E87; E79, Participant P1)

This statement highlights the behavioural impacts of a change in communication style following the cyberbullying experience. The participant reflects on a noticeable transformation in how she interacts with others, shifting from being outgoing and friendly to becoming reserved and introverted. Her decision to limit how much she shares, even with people she knows, reveals a heightened sense of caution and a reluctance to open up.

"I am not as friendly as before. On the internet, I am not as talkative and friendly as I am in reality. I talk less because I do not want anyone to find the chance to attack me."

(E30, Participant P2)

This quote illustrates the behavioural impact of a change in communication style, as the participant describes a significant shift in how she interacts with others online after experiencing cyberbullying. Before the incident, she was more open, friendly, and talkative in online spaces, engaging actively and building relationships with server members. However, the continuous exposure to harassment, betrayal, and personal attacks caused her to become more guarded. She now speaks less and intentionally limits her friendliness to avoid giving others a reason or opportunity to target her.

"I would be more cautious when communicating with others. Also, I would not be as friendly as before."

(E62, Participant P3)

The statement reflects a behavioural impact of change in communication style, as the participant described noticeable differences in how she interacts with others after experiencing cyberbullying. This shows that she no longer communicates with the same openness or warmth as she did previously. Her communication style has shifted from being friendly and engaging to being brief, cautious, and distant.

*"When interacting with others, I constantly remind myself to be cautious, to not share everything with people."
"I started feeling like people were always observing me, which made me very conscious of my words and actions, always trying to be extra careful."*

(E25; E27, Participant P5)

This illustrates the behavioural impacts of a change in communication style resulting from the cyberbullying experience. After being targeted and betrayed, the participant developed a persistent sense of being watched and

judged by others. This heightened self-awareness made her significantly alter how she interacted with people. She became guarded in conversations, avoiding open expression and deliberately withholding personal information. This incident leading her to a more reserved and defensive communication style.

Sub-theme 2.4: Changes in Life Choices

Based on participants' experiences, two out of six participants experienced behavioural impacts of change in life choices. The behavioural impacts of changes in life choices refer to the significant decisions participants made in response to their experiences with cyberbullying, which altered their daily routines, future plans, or social involvement.

"The controversy caused by it was so intense that I decided to back out and quit the competition because I didn't know how to face it and couldn't bring myself to prepare for the match. The hardest part was missing out on a rare opportunity for a university competition." "I avoided appearing in the debate competition and not attending any of it anymore."

(E17; E25, Participant P5)

These statements highlight the behavioural impact of changes in life choices resulting from the emotional toll of a distressing cyberbullying incident. The participant chose to withdraw from a significant university-level debate competition, a rare and valuable opportunity, due to the intense controversy and pressure surrounding the situation. What began as an emotional struggle evolved into a concrete decision that altered her personal trajectory.

"As I mentioned before, girls in my primary school can straight up go to the secondary school under the same organization without looking at the results. At first, I intended to go to this secondary school. However, this incident became the major reason that I gave up going to this secondary school because I did not want to meet them again."

(E32, Participant P6)

This statement demonstrates a clear behavioural impact of changes in life choices driven by the participant's experience with cyberbullying. Although she initially planned to continue her education at a secondary school affiliated with her primary school, a transition that would have been natural and straightforward, she ultimately decided against it solely because the perpetrators of the bullying would also be attending that school. Her avoidance of the environment where the bullying took place indicates how the experience profoundly influenced her decision-making process, overriding academic or practical considerations. The fear of encountering those who had harmed her online translated into a significant real-world decision that altered her educational path.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the impacts of cyberbullying victimization including emotional impacts, behavioural impacts, relationship impacts, cognitive impacts and physical impacts. The emotional impact's theme captures the intense and wide-ranging emotional responses experienced by participants as a result of cyberbullying. Across all six cases, participants reported feeling overwhelmed by difficult emotions that emerged during and after the incidents. These emotional reactions included fear, anxiety, and panic, often triggered by the anticipation of further attacks or reminders of previous harassment. Many also described prolonged sadness, emotional numbness, and depressive symptoms, including frequent crying and low mood. Some participants experienced anger or frustration at being targeted or misunderstood, while others struggled with feelings of guilt, regret, and self-blame related to how they responded to the bullying or the consequences that followed.

Research supports the strong link between cyberbullying and anxiety (Martínez-Monteaudo et al., 2020). For example, Participant P5 reported extreme anxiety and fear, feeling as though the perpetrator was constantly watching her. This sense of being monitored led to a continuous feeling of insecurity and emotional unease, even in safe environments like her home or school, and resulted in frequent panic and heightened paranoia. Depressive

symptoms are another serious outcome of cyberbullying. Maurya et al. (2022) found that victims of cyberbullying were over twice as likely to experience depression compared to non-victims. Participant P6, for instance, felt deeply sad and disappointed upon realizing she had become a target, as rumours and exclusion from others, including strangers, escalated over time, contributing to significant emotional strain. Interestingly, half of the participants reported experiencing emotional numbness. Victims can go through intense mood fluctuations, quickly shifting from feelings of anger to sadness and then to emotional numbness (NeuroLaunch, 2024). For example, Participant P3 initially coped by crying nightly but eventually became emotionally numb due to the constant pressure, reflecting how prolonged distress can lead individuals to emotionally shut down.

The behavioural impact's theme encompasses the noticeable changes in participants' actions, habits, and decision-making that occurred as a result of experiencing cyberbullying. These changes were reflected in how participants interacted with others, both online and offline, and how they adjusted their daily routines to avoid further harm. Many individuals described withdrawing from social environments, becoming more isolated, and reducing their participation in group activities or public spaces. Online, they often disengaged from platforms where the bullying took place—deleting accounts, limiting interactions, or avoiding social media altogether. Communication styles also shifted, with participants becoming more reserved, cautious, and less expressive in conversations. In some cases, the bullying experience influenced major life decisions, such as quitting competitions or avoiding certain schools. These behavioural responses demonstrate how cyberbullying affected not only the participants' emotional states but also their outward behaviours.

Research by Coelho et al. (2022) found that students who experienced bullying, including cyberbullying, showed a significantly greater increase in social withdrawal over time compared to their peers who were not involved. In this study, all participants reported social withdrawal and isolation as consequences of cyberbullying. For instance, Participant P1 avoided social activities due to fear that people at school connected to the perpetrator might share her personal information. This fear led to a shrinking social circle and the loss of close friendships. Such withdrawal highlights how cyberbullying can drive victims to isolate themselves as a form of self-protection, cutting off even long-standing relationships due to fear and mistrust.

Additionally, Liu et al. (2025) reported that victims of cyberbullying often undergo noticeable shifts in personality traits, particularly marked declines in agreeableness and extraversion. Agreeableness is a personality trait reflected in behaviours that are kind, cooperative, empathetic, and friendly toward others (Eva et al., 2021), appears to diminish as a result of these experiences. Participant P2 reflected this change, noting she became significantly less friendly and communicative online, choosing to stay quiet to avoid provoking potential attacks. This demonstrates how cyberbullying can alter communication behaviour, making victims more reserved and less trusting in their interactions with others.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the profound and multifaceted impact of cyberbullying victimization on young individuals. Emotionally, victims endure a spectrum of distressing reactions, from fear and anxiety to prolonged sadness and emotional numbness, that can persist long after the bullying incidents have ceased. These emotional responses are not only intense but also deeply personal, often reshaping how victims perceive themselves and their environments. Behaviourally, cyberbullying leads to significant changes in social engagement and communication patterns. Victims frequently withdraw from both online and offline interactions, alter their routines to avoid further harm, and in some cases, make life-altering decisions to escape the threat of continued abuse. The psychological toll is further reflected in shifts in personality traits, particularly declines in agreeableness and extraversion, which suggest a lasting erosion of trust and openness in interpersonal relationships. These changes highlight how cyberbullying can fundamentally alter a victim's emotional landscape and behavioural tendencies, reinforcing the need for early intervention, supportive counselling, and culturally sensitive prevention strategies. Ultimately, the study reveals that cyberbullying is not a fleeting digital encounter, it is a deeply disruptive experience with enduring consequences for emotional well-being, social functioning, and personal development.

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