

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING AMONG STUDENTS OF A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

There are many forms of cyberbullying and many who are cyberbullied are unaware that they have been victims. Some are unaware that they are perpetrators. There has been much misunderstanding on this topic. We assume that cyberbullying does not exist in institutions of higher learning. Our aim here is to assess the prevalence of cyberbullying in a private University in Malaysia, specifically focusing on any perceivable discrimination in cyberbullying based on gender and different courses of study. This is a cross-sectional study using a pre-validated questionnaire. Students were initially asked if they were either a victim or a perpetrator of cyberbullying. They were then given a definition of the various forms of cyberbullying and assessed on prevalence. We also assessed their internet usage and preferred social media platforms. Of the 269 respondents, most (95.9%) used the internet every day, started at primary school or earlier (69.6%), all had at least one social media account, and 94.4% had 3 or more accounts. After the definitions of the various forms of cyberbullying were presented, the number of people who admitted to being a victim or a perpetrator increased. Being male and from the Faculty of Medicine (FOM) were significantly associated with being a victim. Overall, 29.0% admitted to being a victim of at least one form of cyberbullying and 11.2% admitted to being a perpetrator. Cyberbullying does exist in this institution, and though the numbers are small, this needs to be addressed.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying, perpetrator, victim, university

## INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is bullying with the use of digital technologies<sup>1</sup> and is a serious form of victimization<sup>2</sup>. It takes place over computerized gadgets like cell phones, computers, or tablets. The aim is to use technology to repeatedly and intentionally harass, hurt, embarrass, humiliate, or intimidate another person. Cyberbullying includes sending, posting, or sharing negative, destructive, untrue, or cruel substances about somebody else. It can incorporate sharing individual private data to shame someone. In some instances, cyberbullying crosses the line into illegal or criminal behavior<sup>3</sup>.

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, being in cyberspace is inevitable as we depend on the internet for our daily activities, such as working and learning. The more the internet is being used, the greater the chance for cyberbullying to occur. Based on a survey done by IPSOS, a market research company, Malaysia ranks second in Asia for cyberbullying among youth<sup>4</sup>. Through research, it has also been found that awareness about cyberbullying in Malaysia is high at 85%. Despite this there are many instances of cyberbullying in this country and prevalence seems to be increasing. In a recent incident it has driven a teenager to take her own life due to malicious comments on TikTok<sup>5</sup>. Laws such as the Computer Crimes Act 1997<sup>6</sup> and the

Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 have been enacted in Malaysia, yet there are people in our society who do not consider cyberbullying a serious issue. Malaysia relies on Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 to prosecute cyber bullies.

According to Nancy Willard<sup>7</sup>, there are seven forms of cyberbullying, which include flaming, harassment, dissing, impersonation, outing and trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking. Flaming means fights that take place online with the usage of vulgar language. Harassment is sending offensive, insulting and rude messages repeatedly. Dissing someone online means spreading gossip and rumors about a person causing damage to his or her reputation or relationships with other people. Impersonation means breaking into someone's account and pretending to be that person. This includes posting, sending, or sharing materials that make that person look bad. Outing and trickery mean sharing someone's secrets, embarrassing images, or information online. Trickery means tricking someone into revealing embarrassing information and then sharing it online. Exclusion means intentionally excluding someone from an online group or friendship list. Cyberstalking is repeatedly sending messages that include intimidating threats or harm, making them feel afraid for their safety.

Multiple studies have been conducted on the prevalence of cyberbullying, the frequency of different cyberbullying behaviors as well as their associated factors. In the United States, college students were found to experience cyberbullying, repeated harassment, insults, or threats via email or instant messaging applications. Sexual orientation is also found to be one of the associated factors of cyberbullying, where the sexual minority has a higher probability of receiving online harassment compared to heterosexual students<sup>8</sup>. Among University students in Arab communities, 91% of the respondents agreed that cyberbullying exists on social media platforms although they did not discuss their involvement<sup>9</sup>. Another study in Saudi Arabia showed an overall 42.8% prevalence, with a slightly higher prevalence among males. Added to this, 26.3% of those who were victims had their academic performance significantly affected by cyberbullying<sup>10</sup>. In Finland, amongst University staff, it was found that 30% of participants, experienced online harassment over the previous months<sup>11</sup>. In contrast, a study amongst college students in Greece yielded different results. Only 11% of the participants were cyberbullying victims, 14% were cyberbullying perpetrators, and 33% were both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying<sup>12</sup>. Although results acquired from various research have shown varying degrees of frequency of cyberbullying, the results did point out that cyberbullying, either cyber-victimization or cyber-perpetration, did occur among college students in modern society.

In Malaysia, it was found that 66% of the 712 public and private college/university students who participated in a study have been cyberbullied<sup>13</sup>, and female cyber-users experienced higher cases of cyberbullying when compared to male participants. Amongst young adolescents in Penang, it was found that the prevalence of cyber-victimization and cyber-perpetration were 31.6% and 20.9%, respectively, if the participants recalled their past one-month experience. However, when asked to recall their past 3 months experience, the prevalence of both cyber-victimization and cyber-perpetration increased (73.7% and 64.2% respectively)<sup>14</sup>.

Cyberbullying has been a very well-studied topic worldwide and our objectives were to study the prevalence amongst the students in this private University in Malaysia, to find out if gender plays a role, and to see if there was a difference in prevalence amongst the students from different courses of study. This University was chosen due to its locality in a rural setting, with the nearest town situated about 5 km away. There are no other universities nearby, and it also has a varied group of students with many faculties - medical, dental, pharmacy, engineering, nursing, allied sciences and foundation being the main ones.

## METHODS

We conducted a cross-sectional study among the undergraduate students at this private University. Consent was obtained prior to the study, and incorporated into the questionnaire. Data was collected using a pre-validated questionnaire that was distributed using Google Forms.

### *Questionnaire*

Demographic data was collected in terms of the participant's gender and the faculty they were in. We first studied the pattern of internet usage and the various common social media applications used. The questionnaire then focused on the different forms of cyberbullying from the perspective of being a victim and a perpetrator. The participants were initially asked if they were either a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying in the general sense, without divulging its true definition. Their response was recorded. The definitions of the various forms of cyberbullying (flaming, online harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, exclusion, and cyberstalking) were then given, and their response was taken again as to whether they were involved as either a victim or a perpetrator. The questionnaire consisted of a choice of yes, no, or unsure. A pilot test was conducted to verify the reliability of the questionnaire for the actual survey. Existing literature guided the development of this study.

### *Sample size*

Using Raosoft sample size calculator<sup>15</sup>, based on the undergraduate student population of 3500 students, 90% confidence level, margin of error of 5%, and response distribution of 50%, the minimum required sample size was calculated to be 252 individuals. Participants were randomly selected from the different faculties.

### *Reliability*

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the reliability test was conducted on 29 samples and based on 26 variables. The Alpha Cronbach value showed satisfactory results for this research study (Alpha = 0.724).

The statistics of patterns of internet usage, cyberbullying, and types of cyberbullying were reported in frequencies and proportions. The data was categorized according to the demographic variables. We analyzed the responses on being a victim or a perpetrator by gender and course of study. Categorical data was analyzed using the appropriate chi-square test. The value of  $p < 0.05$  was taken as statistically significant.

### *Ethical consideration*

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants prior to answering the

questionnaire. No personally identifiable data were collected in the study, and all data was kept confidential. Ethical approval was given by the University from the Faculty of Medicine Research and Human & Animal Ethics Committee (FOMRHAEC). FORMHAEC reference number: FOM/SSM/2021/07.

**RESULTS**

*Sociodemographic Data*

We have 269 respondents, who are mostly female (195, 72.5%). The mean age of the participants is 21.2 years old with ages ranging from 18 to 26. Most of the participants (37.2%) are from the Faculty of Medicine (FOM), followed by 20.8 % from the faculty of dentistry (FOD), 14.5 % from the faculty of Pharmacy (FOP). Another 13.4 % are from foundation studies and 14.1% from the other smaller faculties.

*The internet Usage and Social Media*

Most of the respondents (95.9%) use the internet daily and most of them started using the internet before (7.1%) or during (62.5%) primary school. All own social media accounts and most (94.4%) have three or more social media accounts. Although most (72.9%) use their own identity there were some who either do not (0.7%) or use their own identity sometimes (26.4%).

The most common social media application used is WhatsApp (97.8%) followed by Instagram (92.2%) and YouTube (90.7%). Before the definitions of the various types of cyberbullying were presented, most (88.5%) stated they were not involved in cyberbullying neither as victim nor perpetrator. However, 21 (7.8%) of the respondents claimed they were victims of cyberbullying, 9 (3.3%) as perpetrators and 8 (3.0%) were involved in cyberbullying as both victim and perpetrator.

*Victim & Perpetrator (after definitions were given)*

After the various forms of cyberbullying were presented in the questionnaire, more respondents admitted to being cyberbullied (Table 2). Exclusion (14.9%) was the most common, followed by flaming (11.2%) and online harassment (9.7%). There were a number who were unsure of whether they were cyberbullied.

Similarly, the number who claimed they were involved in being a perpetrator also increased. This overall number was less than that of being a victim. The most common was flaming and denigration (4.8%) followed by exclusion (3.7%). There was also an equivalent number of students who were unsure if they were a perpetrator.

**Table 1: Pattern of internet usage among the respondents**

Variables	Sub variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Frequency of internet use	Everyday	258	95.9
	1-3 times	2	0.7
	4-6 times	9	3.3
Period of first internet use	Before primary school	19	7.1
	Primary school	168	62.5
	Secondary school	82	30.5
Ownership of social media account	Yes	269	100
	No	0	0
Usage of real identity in social media	Yes	196	72.9
	No	2	0.7
	Some of them	71	26.4
No. of social media accounts or profiles	None	0	0
	One	6	2.2
	Two	9	3.3
	Three or more	254	94.4

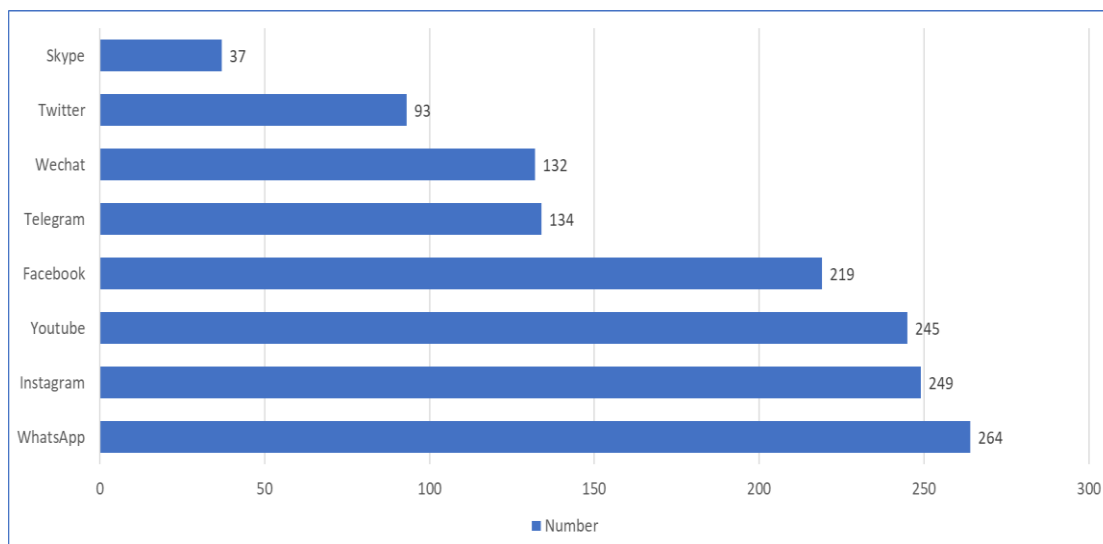


Figure 1: Social Media applications used by respondents (>1 response)

Table 2. Experience as victim or perpetrator of the various types of cyberbullying after joining the University (after definitions were presented)

Types of bullying	Victim			Perpetrator		
	No (%)	Yes (%)	Unsure (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	Unsure (%)
Flaming	215 (79.9%)	30 (11.2%)	24 (8.9%)	245 (91.1%)	13 (4.8%)	11 (4.1%)
Online harassment	231 (85.9%)	26 (9.7%)	12 (4.5%)	259 (96.3%)	3 (1.1%)	7 (2.6%)
Denigration	214 (79.6%)	25 (9.3%)	30 (11.2%)	242 (90%)	13 (4.8%)	14 (5.2%)
Impersonation	236 (87.7%)	23 (8.6%)	10 (3.7%)	263 (97.8%)	2 (0.7%)	4 (1.5%)
Outing	241 (89.6%)	13 (4.8%)	15 (5.6%)	257 (95.5%)	4 (1.5%)	8 (3%)
Exclusion	198 (73.6%)	40 (14.9%)	31 (11.5%)	249 (92.6%)	10 (3.7%)	10 (3.7%)
Cyberstalking	228 (84.8%)	16 (5.9%)	25 (9.3%)	252 (93.7%)	6 (2.2%)	11 (4.1%)

Table 3: Overall number of respondents who admitted to at least one form of cyberbullying (either as victim or perpetrator)

	None	To at least 1 form of cyberbullying	Unsure
Victim of cyberbullying	162 (60.2)	78 (29.0)	29 (10.8)
Perpetrator of cyberbullying	222 (82.5)	30 (11.2)	17 (6.3)

Table 3 shows the overall number of respondents who admitted to at least one form of cyberbullying either as a victim or a perpetrator.

The number who are victims (78, 29.0%) is higher than those who are perpetrators (30, 11.2%)

**Table 4: Prevalence of Cyberbullying as Victim and Perpetrator by Gender and Course of Study**

	Victim			X <sup>2</sup> (p)	Perpetrator			X <sup>2</sup> (p)
	No (%)	Yes (%)	Unsure (%)		No (%)	Yes (%)	Unsure (%)	
Gender	36 (48.6)		13 (17.6)	7.439	56 (75.7)	10 (13.5)	8 (10.8)	5.716
Male	126 (64.6)	25 (33.8)	16 (8.2)	(0.023)	166 (85.1)	20 (10.3)	9 (4.6)	(0.445)
Female		53 (27.2)						
Course of study				15.21				5.716
FOM	47 (47.0)	39 (39.0)	14 (14.0)	(0.019)	79 (79.0)	15 (15.0)	6 (6.0)	(0.445)*
FOD	40 (71.4)	11 (19.6)	5 (8.9)		49 (87.5)	4 (7.1)	3 (5.4)	
Foundation	27 (75.0)	5 (13.9)	4 (11.1)		33 (91.7)	1 (2.8)	2 (5.6)	
Others	48 (62.3)	23 (29.9)	6 (7.8)		61 (79.2)	10 (13.0)	6 (7.8)	

\*Fisher Exact Test used

*Gender, course of study and cyberbullying*

Overall prevalence of cyberbullying as victims (Table 4) was higher in males (33.8%) compared to females (27.2%). The faculty with the highest number of students who admitted to being victims is FOM at 39.0%, followed by others (29.9%) FOD (19.6%) and Foundation (13.9%). There is a significant association between prevalence of victims in cyberbullying among gender (p=0.023), and course of study (p=0.019). The others here include the Faculty of Allied Health Professionals and FOP.

Overall, more males (13.5%) admitted to being perpetrators, with the highest response from FOM (15.0%). Being perpetrators is not associated with gender (p=0.445), nor course of study (p=0.445) among the University students.

**DISCUSSION**

*The internet usage and Social Media*

Social media started as a means of connecting people around the world but has since evolved into a coveted hobby that is being used by all age groups. In this study, 95.9% of respondents use the internet every day, all of them having at least one social media account, with the most used being WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. This is the current global trend<sup>16</sup>, with social media gaining popularity daily. It is estimated that 4.80 billion people globally use social media, of which Facebook is the most popular<sup>17</sup>. In this study, Whatsapp was the most used, but this is not surprising as this is the platform on which the students communicate with each other for their assignments and learning schedules.

Cyberbullying is a growing social problem globally, especially in countries like Malaysia where technology is readily available to young people. The findings in our study show that though the numbers are small, this is an

important finding and must be addressed. The lower prevalence rate of cyberbullying is particularly interesting, as it opposes the idea that increasing online exposure of students during this pandemic would increase their susceptibility to cyberbullying. Similar results could be found in the US, where a study showed an overall decline in cyberbullying during the pandemic due to decreased in-person schooling<sup>18</sup>. In contrast, another study recorded a very high prevalence rate of cyberbullying (60%) among the students in Malaysia’s higher learning institutions<sup>19</sup>.

*Victim and perpetrator of cyberbullying*

Most of the victims in this study experienced social exclusion (14.9%). Social exclusion can lead to psychological stress and pain for the students<sup>20</sup>, affecting their studies. It can also lead to mental health consequences such as depression<sup>21</sup>. Flaming as a form of cyberbullying is popular due to the anonymity it provides in social media<sup>22</sup>.

A crucial effort is to make students aware of cyberbullying through education<sup>23</sup>. An important finding here is that many were not aware that their actions constituted cyberbullying, as seen in the figures before and after the definitions of the various forms of cyberbullying were given to them. Therefore, awareness campaigns are held in schools to incorporate this knowledge into the children. Although social media is the crime scene of cyberbullying, it can be a powerful tool against it as well. In 2017, UNICEF collaborated with Miami Ad School by changing the logos of Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to raise awareness of cyberbullying<sup>24</sup>. Celebrities also contributed to the cause by voicing this issue to their fellow fans on social media<sup>25</sup>. Telenor Group launched a cyberbullying awareness campaign titled “Be a Cyberhero” and started an anti-cyberbullying trend online so that citizens can actively be a part of the solution<sup>26</sup>.

### *Gender, course of study and cyberbullying*

There is a significant relationship between the prevalence of victims of cyberbullying and gender. As this study's result shows, males here have a higher prevalence of being victims and more males admitted to being perpetrators. Cyberbullying and gender have shown mixed results. In one study, although more males admitted to cyberbullying, it was females who were at greater risk of being victims<sup>27</sup>, whilst in another, on gender differences in prevalence rates of cyberbullying, males accounted for a higher proportion of perpetrators<sup>28</sup>. Men have been found to bully others more frequently and repeatedly than women<sup>29</sup>. However, the opposite is seen in data from the Pew Research Centre in 2021, which has shown that girls are more likely to be a victim of cyberbullying than boys<sup>30</sup>. This finding is interesting to promote justification for countering the stigma that women are often the victims.

In our findings, the faculty with the highest number of students who admitted to being victims is the Faculty of Medicine (FOM). There is a significant relationship between the prevalence of victims of cyberbullying with gender, and the course of study. FOM (15.0%) were the most likely to report being a perpetrator. The largest number of students is in the FOM, and the chances of having a varied group with differing outlooks and opinions are high. Admitting to being perpetrators is not associated with gender, or course of study among these University students.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the study, most of the students at this University use the internet every day, and all of them use social media. They are aware of cyberbullying, the different types of cyberbullying and the increase in cases of cyberbullying in Malaysia. However, cyberbullying does exist here at this University, even though most of the students are not involved in cyberbullying either as victims or perpetrators. It is important for everyone to be aware of cyberbullying to avoid being a victim or a perpetrator. It is equally important for a University to be free of cyberbullying as it leaves very damaging impacts that may disrupt studies, and cause emotional damage. Cyberbullying worsens the academic performance of victims due to mental and physical health problems caused by it. Therefore, educational authorities, educators, and parents must work hand in hand to combat cyberbullying. This can only be done by first providing awareness on the subject.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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