Exploring the Bullying Behaviors and Coping Mechanisms in Undergraduates: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed at investigating the direct or indirect experiences of bullying behavior and coping mechanisms opted by university students during their academic life. The philosophical view of the study comprised constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. The snow-ball technique of purposive sampling criteria was used wherein open-ended survey was distributed to one person who further invited another instance of bullying behavior which ended up with 150 bullying incidents. After a close examination, only 20 incidents were found complete and met the requirement for further investigation. The data were thematically analyzed which yielded five themes: malign and non-malign bullying experiences; perceived bullying behaviors among students; popular forms of bullying; major causes of bullying; functional and non-functional; and coping strategies. Moreover, survived, assisted, rescued, and lost were other bullying behaviors that potential participants narrated. The findings revealed assisted behaviour as the most demanding and preferably exhibited behaviour of the victims. Furthermore, this study identified the functional and non-functional strategies opted by students to mitigate the effects of bullying episodes. Similarly, the functional coping strategies included: help-seeking, avoidance, self-defense, and self-acceptance. Whereas, counterattack, surrender, and quitting were the non-functional coping strategies. Thus, this study contributed in understanding the lived experiences, current circumstances, and needs or desires of bullied students, and help future victims who were saved by their parents and/or teachers, but wanted to change their attitude by educating their kids against this societal challenge. The analysis of the role of parents, teachers, media, and social milieu in promoting bullying behaviors among students could be a future dimension for study.
Keywords*: bullying behavior, coping mechanism, victim, bully, bully-victim, bystander*

Introduction

Bullying is the constant coercive behavior of a more powerful individual or group toward a less powerful individual or group (Sureda-Garcia et al., 2021). The context of bullies, victims, and witnesses make bullying a complex phenomenon. Moreover, bullying impacts those who observe and others who are its victim (Somani et al., 2021); and also affects witnesses (Jan & Husain, 2015). Every two out of three individuals experience bullying either in schools or at similar institutions (Ulfah & Gustina, 2020). The national center for educational statistics (2019) reported mocking, calling names, teacher and classmates insulting behavior, gossiping subject, excluding from activities, pushing, kicking, tripping, beating, or spitting on as bullying behaviors. Interestingly, students do bully in schools against other students, which is alarming for any society. Since the fundamental goal of educational institutions is to inculcate humanistic values among students, they must not serve as a hub for promoting inhumane practices of bullying (Al-Darmaki et al., 2022).

To address this nuisance, Olewus (1994) diagnosed bullying in the end of eighteenth century which, afterwards, became the center of attraction for most researchers, for its scope covers the domain of education and psychology. Despite exploring various aspects and perspectives about bullying, there it still stands as an unresolved phenomenon. Surprisingly, bullying mitigation strategies have received less attention more in developing countries than in the developed nations (Kreski et al., 2022). Internationally, several researches conducted to investigate bullying behavior, however, it received little attention in Pakistan (Hussain & Shah, 2021). Moreover, bullying is mostly studied in chunks, which raises questions of its reliability. Similarly, most studies approached bullying from the quantitative lens. Therefore, the dearth of an inquiry in the context of Pakistan indicates exploring the experiences of bullying behavior from multiple frames, and the mitigation strategies to tackle bullying. The suggested epistemology stemmed from interpretivism which considers that knowledge is subjective and lies within the individuals; and the ontology grounded into the belief that there exist many subjective realities, and each of these realities between individuals is socially constructed. The data collection process involved open-ended surveys for the victims of bully.

The seminal study of literature highlighted gaps which guided the formulation of the following questions:

1. What types of bullying behaviours students exhibit?
2. What forms of bullying students have witnessed?
3. What factors cause bullying behaviour in students?
4. What coping strategies students devise to mitigate bullying effects?

Literature Review

Bullying and Types of Bullying

Olewus (1970) coined the term 'bullying'. Most recently, Waseem and Nickerson (2023) defined bullying as an issue related to public health that occurs and continues across many contexts, affecting children and adolescents of all ages. Bullying is the repetition of uninvited, violent behavior involving a perceived or real power disproportion (DHHS, 2023). The initiation of encountering bullying experiences starts from school as it serves as the first social institution (Xu et al., 2022), where students experience negative effects of bullying (Evans et al., 2019). Everyone in the vicinity of bullying is impacted—bystanders, victims, and bullies. Bullying in schools is still a complex social and cultural issue (Ulfah & Gustina, 2020). Similarly, bullying is making derogatory remarks, ridicule, ignoring someone by anyone, compelling someone to be left out of activities, hitting, kicking, shoving, locking in the room, pushing, defaming by spreading false rumors, telling lies about them, sending sarcastic notes for them to be disliked by others, or using other harmful stuff similar to these (Kallestad & Olweus, 2003). In sum, power imbalance, intentionality, and repetition serve as prime factors of bullying (Solberg & Olweus, 2003, p. 246).

Some important forms of bullying include: malign bullying involves an obvious intent to seek harm to others while non-malign bullying does not involve obvious intent, this form of bullying is further divided into—mindless bullying refers to the unintentional harm caused by the perpetrator to the victim, for example, teasing, taunting, mocking, jesting or disturbing the victim for the sake of fun or enjoyment, while educational bullying is the work-related hazard especially when it comes to any authoritative person taunting the victim in a way that his argument or criticism leads him to be hesitant and pessimist, and the victim tends to lose all hopes and energies and start stepping backward to isolate himself from that environment (Rigby, 2003). The complexity around bullying and types of bullying qualifies it for further inquiry.

Forms of Bullying

Direct bullying is the direct form of bulling that includes—striking, kicking, stealing, damaging property, and constant taunting (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Inversely, indirect bullying is intentional action that causes social distancing or damage to the reputation of a different child in an attempt to get others to avoid interacting with the victim; for example, making threats, spreading rumors, and painting offensive images on walls (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Verbal bullying includes gossiping and spoken remarks meant to ridicule or block students from participating in specific activities. Bullying often terrifies bullied students, particularly when they involve extortion, defamation, and blackmail (George & Strom, 2017). Sex and race are also other forms of bullying (Hong et al., 2022). Cyberbullying is used for sending texts or emails to someone with the goal of embarrassing them in order to reveal their secrets in public (Talwar, 2022); more often it is used to harass, humiliate, intimidate or torture someone on the internet or on a cell phone. Finally, Psychological bullying affects how the bullied feels about themselves, however, the victim's damaged reputation affects their relationship with peers (Landau, 2012) raising worries about safety and security or undermining self-worth and confidence.

Factors of Bullying

Bullying in schools is a pervasive social and cultural issue that can be influenced by a range of factors, including issues, social expectations, family dynamics, and environmental influences (Huddleston et al., 2011). For example, it is expected that students who witness or experience domestic violence between adults or parents in the home will engage in bullying behaviors at school on a regular basis (Khawar & Malik, 2018). This is because children can learn bullying behaviors from things they witness in their homes. Conversely, dietary components and environmental factors combine to influence a child's behavior, which can result in either positive or negative outcomes (Gallardo-Pujol & Pereda, 2013). In addition, loneliness is a factor in student bullying, suggesting that introverted students are more likely victims of bully because it provides an outlet for their resentment and rage (Kreski et al., 2022). Marginalized groups like immigrants or refugees rarely approach relevant authorities to report bullying encounters. The reason might be that children may feel too embarrassed to tell their instructors when and why they are being bullied (Peker, 2016). Special students suffering from learning, physical, and psychological challenges experience more frequent victimization as compared to normal classmates (Somani et al., 2021). Resultantly, victims including specials frequently exhibit violent behaviour as a defensive measure as a response to bullying assault.

Effects of Bullying

A significant correlation found between bullying and low academic grades, lack of social adjustment, and psychological well-being (Siddiky, 2020). Children who have been the target of bullying frequently exhibit negligible interaction and rarely speak in social environments; they act in solitary play, choose to remain quiet and reserved, and remain in isolation (Huddleston et al., 2011); moreover, once peers discover a child with a reputation for being bullied, they tend to avoid him. Bullied students may be really capable, but they may appear inept after the incident, which might affect their academic performance (Somani et al., 2021). Bystanders are excellent performers in school than bullied individuals (Olweus, 2005). Even high school students experience insecurity and decide not to go to school, and harassed individuals typically find it difficult to concentrate on their studies (Evans et al., 2019). Anxiety in children who are bullied can result in a range of mental and physical issues, such as body aches, nail biting, depression, suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, and appetite loss (Murshid, 2017). Bullying and victimization associate with suicidal thoughts, particularly in young females (Alotaibi & Mukred, 2022). In conclusion, severe bullying can have fatal consequences such as suicide and murder (Flores et al., 2022). Compared to people who are not bullied, bullies and victims experience a higher prevalence of psychosomatic problems that negatively impact their overall mental health (Hong et al., 2022). The consequences of bullying are detrimental and prevalent in various contexts; however, this gap still exists at higher education level in the local context.

Bullying in Educational Institutions

The frequency of victimization, bullying, and fighting among school children has become a common phenomenon in Pakistan. For example, sixth graders of government and non-government schools were found at a greater risk of being bullied where bullying was reported more prevalent among boys (Shujja et al., 2014). Similarly, the desire for vengeance, authority, rivalry, and animosity are the main causes of bullying (Jan & Husain, 2015). Moreover, majority of advisers are the bullies who mostly harass medical students in Pakistan (Ahmer et al., 2008). In same vein, more than 60 percent of the medical students encountered verbal abuse, behavioral gestures, lack of social support, and isolation (Mukhtar et al., 2010). Due to low moral and ethical values, bullying incidences rise to alarmingly high peaks in the educational institutions of Pakistan (Khawar & Malik, 2018). Unfortunately, bullying has become so normalized at schools that the even educationists are often found involved in such malpractices (Jan & Husain, 2015).

Furthermore, besides students, teachers and ministerial staff are also found involved in spurring bullying experiences (George & Strom, 2017). In contrast, inside and outside the classroom, students are classified as either bullies, victims, or bullies and victims (Rigby, 2003). Overall, schools are not accountable for any incidents of bullying in Pakistan (Ashfaq et al., 2018). Literature portrays a bleak situation of bullying in the schooling system; similarly, at higher education this phenomenon is still open for study.

Mitigating Strategies for Bullying

The mitigating strategies for bullying include: ongoing staff development activities—prevention and awareness campaigns, to combat bullying and harassment in schools (Majed et al., 2022); establishing good ethos, evaluating its needs and goals, training its teachers, administrators, and other staff, including parents, and seeking resources for bullies, victims, and their families; inclusion of anti-bullying curriculum in the textbook exercises (Rigby, 2003); peer counselling empowers young students to help their peers struggling with bullying (Chen, 2022); mentorship programs for older students can help younger students to avoid bullying problems (Norton & Duke, 2021); discussion with the instructors, victims of bullying, bullies, and bystanders can do to help those who need to combat bullying (Paul et al., 2012); bullies can seek out a counselor's help, list their justifications for bullying, and make a commitment to stop bullying for at least one day (Huddleston et al., 2011) then bystanders may also start reporting bullying incidents and start an anti-bullying movement (Chen et al., 2022). Moreover, the instructor's attention and positive reinforcements coupled with valuing and loving students can modify behavior (Olweus, 2005). These mitigating strategies showcase controlling external factors to curb bullying, however, people have unique ways to tackle bullying experience, which need further exploration in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

The five faces of oppression, the theory of power (Foucault, 1998, p. 63), and the theory of socialization (Harro, 2000) were recognized in this study. Power is the ability to get someone to do what you want (Foucault as cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2014). Similarly, power struggle is the root cause of violent confrontations, which begin in kindergarten and persist throughout an individual's lifetime (Twemlow & Sacco, 2003). According to Domhoff (2005), power is the factor that fosters hierarchy, ruling classes, opposing gangs, imposed companies, and interstate conflicts. Penning (2009) asserts that bullying is a component of the power-based social

networks that males form. Harro (2000) and Young (2014) both included power in their theories of the socialization cycle. Young (2014) defined oppression as unequal social power relations. The five faces of oppression are: violence, helplessness, marginalization, exploitation, and cultural imperialism (Young, 2014). The power dynamics, oppression, and socialization process set the theoretical framework to explore the current state of bullying in higher education.

Methodology

The research philosophy comprised the ontology that bullied inform multiple realities and the epistemology drawn on the subjective experiences of the bully victims (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Thus, the interpretivist research paradigm lens was used to understand multiple meaning of the bullying experiences undergrads faced (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Further, the qualitative research approach used in the study informed about the experiences of bullying behaviors undergrads encountered (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Similarly, using the psychological phenomenology strategy, the lived experiences of bullying behaviors were approached while the researcher muted their own voice (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, psychological phenomenology framework was used to investigate how bullied interpret the meaning of the bullying experience from objective and cognitive components (Moustakas, 1996).

Data Collection

Considering the widespread use of social media, an open-ended questionnaire was designed to elicit participants' beliefs and experiences over Facebook and WhatsApp. The questionnaire was shared with one participant to complete and return, and also suggest another participant who once being the victim of bullying to seek their consent for participation in the study.

Sampling

Snowball sampling gives the facility of finding victims of bullying for eliciting pertinent data (Maxwell, 2021). Forty key informants of second semester university students were tasked with gathering at least two instances of bullying experiences happened with them or their personal or social networks. Instructions were given to data collectors to use social networking websites. Given that, Facebook and WhatsApp are popular and easily accessible to most people. Out of 150 questionnaires only 20 met data analysis requirements.

Data Analysis

Yüksel and Yıldırım's (2015) eight steps were used for data analysis: 1) *horizontalization*: after data collection, transcription, and organization every statement or phrase pertaining to

phenomenon was listed and valued equally (Moustakas, 1994); 2) *elimination and reduction*: data relevant to the phenomenon was retained; 3) *thematizing and clustering the invariant constituents*: significant themes clustered to form themes; 4) i*dentification of the themes by application and invariant constituents*: the themes were cross-checked with data until all themes were generated; 5) *individual textural description*: each transcript was re-read for highlighting the parts relevant to 'what' participants experience; 6) *individual structural description:* the transcripts were re-read to search 'how' participants experienced the phenomena; 7) *textural-structural description:* the textural and structural meanings were combined to make sense by adding the themes and quotes of the transcription; and 8) *composite description:* all participants' textural-structural descriptions were synthesized for students' bullying experiences.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are factors that determine a qualitative research's reliability (Stahl & King, 2020). The researchers were conscious of the experiences, biases, and values in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016), and considered at every step from data collection to data interpretation.

Ethical considerations were adhered to in seeking informed consent, voluntary participation, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, refraining from any potential harm to the participants, and communicating the findings with utmost honesty (Bhandari, 2023).

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Findings

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The purpose of the study was to learn about students' bullying experiences, and the copying techniques they employ to handle bullying behaviour. The data analysis framework of Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015) was employed along with frequencies of occurrence for determining the magnitude of bullying. The analyzed data generated five themes:

I-Malign and Non-Malign Bullying Experiences

The findings indicate that students experience a variety of bullying incidents. The experiences of bullying start from the pre-primary level up to the university, where the victims are unintentionally subjected to bullying of varying intensities. A total of 20 cases were selected which revealed malign and non-malign bullying experiences students faced. The number of cases explored and classified under malign and non-malign bullying, which is characterised by the bully's repetitive behaviour with or without an intent to harm the victim, and indicative of power imbalance where bully sought pleasure out of bullying behaviour (Table 1).

Table 1
Types of Bullying Experiences

Case	Type	Experiences
C1	M	B1 was bullied from grade 6th till undergrad because of having some effeminate characteristics.
C2	M	B2 was bullied and brutally victimized at undergrad level by senior comrades of the university on account of ragging.
C3	M	B3, at grade 10, was bullied and victimized by hostellers because of lingual differences and on account of non-compliance with their commands.
C4	M	B4 was bullied and tortured by classmates throughout the middle schooling because of social class and power differences.
C5	M	B5 started facing bullying from grade 5 by a house neighbour group of boys and were more in power and age.
C6	NM	B6, in grade 9, was mentally abused and tortured by his own uncle (mother's step-brother) for no reasons. The victim eventually committed suicide.
C7	NM	B7 was called names at grade 5 and was teased by his classmates because of his appearance and looks.
C8	NM	B8 was bullied, ignored and insulted by the teachers at college level for asking so many (but relevant) questions.
C9	M	B9, in grade 7, was bullied and abused by classmates for securing good grades and active participation in the class.
C10	NM	B10 was a bully perpetrator and 8th grader. He used to do physical bullying with classmates and cousins for fun.
C11	M	G1, at grade 4, was bullied and teased by classmates due to her dark complexion.
C12	NM	G2 was bullied and verbally abused at grade 9 by peers and classmates due to her excessive weight. She left no remedies to overcome it, but couldn't get succeed, so, committed suicide.
C13	M	G3, at grade 10, was cyber-bullied at school. Bully-perpetrator misused her name and profile on social media for unethical purposes.
C14	NM	G4 was bullied on account of religious differences at grade 7. She was forced to recite the Quranic verses and to wear the dupatta by her Muslim peers.
C15	M	G5, an undergrad girl, was bullied by some elder persons at an international platform on account of disregarding cultural diversity.
C16	NM	G6 was physically challenged victim studying in grade 4. She was bullied by her friends and peers due to her physical disability.
C17	M	G7, a grade 6 student was bullied and harassed by elder cousin at very young age.
C18	NM	G8 was bullied for her looks in grade 9 by her fellows. Verbally bullying compelled her to commit suicide but fortunately rescued by her family.
C19	NM	G9, grade 10 student, was bullied and abused for being obese. She tried her every best to get in to shape but couldn't succeed and attempted suicide. Luckily, the immediate medical aid saved her.
C20	NM	G10, grade 8 student faced bullying at Madrassa. Her mates tried to bully her and her friends for no reasons.

Note. C1=case 1 to C20=case 20, Malign=M, Non-malign=NM, B=boy, and G=girl

Students in secondary schools are mostly at risk of bullying. It is staggering to note that despite the perpetrators' lack of malicious intent, case 6 and 12 victims attempted suicide but saved, while case 18 and 19 committed suicide. Participants C12 quoted *My peers enjoyed while mocking at my dark complexion. It was fun for them but it led me to the darkest verge of despair and I found no anyway except escape so I committed an attempt to suicide.*

Furthermore, results showed the trajectory of bullying encounters may begin at home C17 and may continue at international level C15. Moreover, the direct concern and intentions of the bully do matter when classifying an experience against malicious and non-malignant bullying. These accounts were further categorized based on the victims' perceptions and interpretations.

II-Support for Bullying Behaviour for Victims

A representation of the most frequently displayed bullying behavior is given in table 2 which shows 20 of bullying behaviors. According to the computations, 3/5 were 'victims', 1/4 was 'bystander', and 1/10 was 'bully/victim', while one participant admitted themselves as a 'bully'.

Table 2

Bullying Behaviours

Behaviors	Cases	Total
Victim	1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19	12
Bully	10	1
Bully/Victim	5, 20	2
Bystander	2, 11, 12, 13, 16	5

The data revealed that bully-perpetrators are less likely to identify themselves as bullies or even agree that they are bullies, participants C10 acknowledged

I am not a perpetrator. In fact, I do not bully my friends at all. I just do it for the sake of entertainment and pleasure. I never mean to hurt anyone. So, I do not count myself as Bully.

Yet the higher number of reported incidents from victims clarified that bullying coexists with bullies.

Table 3 shows perceived ramification of bullying behaviors emerged as survived, assisted, rescued, and lost.

Table 3
Ramifications of Bullying Behaviours

Behaviors	Cases	Total
Survived	2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 20	06
Assisted	1, 3, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	09
Rescued	18, 19	02
Lost	6, 12	02

The numbers suggest students need support to combat with the consequences of the bullying experiences. If students fail to identify support, they are found among the *rescued* and the *lost*. Contrarily, the first row represents the victims as survivors who valiantly fought against bullying and bullies without any support. Second row holds victims who received assistance from

surroundings. Third row indicate bully victims who attempted suicide but were rescued.

Unfortunately, two victims committed suicide after being bullied.

III-Forms of Bullying

In most cases, bullying manifests itself in multiple forms as a result of a single event.

Table 4
Forms of Bullying

	Physical & Verbal	Verbal & Non-verbal	Cyberbullying
No. of cases	08	11	01

Most students expressed the impact of verbal and non-verbal bullying but was unnoticed.

Physical bullying is present but frequently mixed with disputes and altercations among students.

However, an instance of cyberbullying also reported which reflected students' awareness about

dealing with it.

IV-Miscellaneous Ramifications of Bullying

Students experience several factors which contribute to bullying behaviours. Individual

differences, including those in social class in C4, age and power in C5, language, religion, caste,

culture, and creed in C2, C3, C14, C15, physical appearance and looks in C1, C7, C11, C12,

C18, C19, strength and abilities in C16, academic and cognitive competence in C8, C9, and the

unidentified difference in C6, surfaced as the root causes of bullying. Moreover, bullying

occasionally occurs as a result of the perpetrator's desire for seeking pleasure and entertainment

e.g. C10, C13, C17, and C20. Participant C13 shared:

My classmates used my name for a social media account, and made me feel disgusted by its

unethical use. When the school principal asked that why they did so, they said that they just took

it as an entertaining activity.

Furthermore, physical appearance, gender identity, ethnicity, linguistic or social differences,

gender, poverty, and social status were all taken into consideration:

Disability

Persons with disabilities are more susceptible to bullying than others Participant C16 stated *my*

buddies have always wanted me to run despite knowing that I am unable to do so. I wish, I had

functional legs, so, my friends would not forgive me from being in their company. This confirms

that bullies and victims have different physical strengths. Additionally, this also highlights the

power imbalance and that bullies mostly target weaker people, which denotes essential feature of

bullying. Here, bullying ignores the concepts of oppressor and oppressed, hence, the existence of

bullying with same or more power of victim is rare.

Gender

Physical bullying mostly occurs in males and verbal bullying in females. Participant C7 agreed *my pals hurt me physically and do not care. They claim that we were joking, when I complained. They frequently tortured me in groups because they know that I am alone*. Whereas, Participant C18 reported *my mates keep passing me bad comments on my looks and also insisted me to mock at my own self. Although, they do not physically harm me, the emotional suffering I endure is even worse*.

The quotes demonstrate how gender difference determine how bullies choose to behave. Moreover, both sexes experience the severe anguish brought on by bullying episodes.

Socio-economic Status

Bullying in schools begins with inequalities in class and persists through higher grades to the workplace. Participant C4 stated *I hate my childhood because I was always marginalized by my so-called elite class friends because I couldn't feed myself, and dress up nicely. I wish the class system didn't exist*.

This show that a social class system has a crucial role in the occurrence of bullying incidence, particularly among adolescents. Thus, the class-system breeds bullying which encourages bullying.

Social Differences

Bullying spreads due to imbalances and differences in ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic conditions. The differences are based on accepting diversity, which influences more bullying occurrences. For example, participant C15 articulated *I was degraded by a foreigner on a global stage simply because I was from Pakistan. I was compelled to wonder why people are marginalized based on their national identity, which made me feel so horrible about that*.

The irony is that the cultural diversity is also subjected to bullying. In this regard, Participant C3 revealed:

Because I am unable to read and write Sindhi, my hostel roommates used to physically abuse me. They forced me to correctly pronounce the trickiest terms in their language, and I had to suffer the harsh consequences, if I did not follow.

The world as a global village now embraces diversity, however, still some quarters show intolerance toward individual differences. Moreover, an acceptance of cultural dynamics may reduce bullying behaviors.

Physical Appearance

Bullies make others feel self-conscious about their appearance and make it a funny experience. The most frequent and harmful causes of bullying is physical appearance. Participant C18 affirmed *people do not like me because I do not have good looks. I wish, I were beautiful. So, no one would dare to hurt me*. Participant C11 expressed *my friends say that I am ugly because I do not have a beautiful face, but I have a beautiful heart. I wish, my friends could see it.*

The quotes suggest hopelessness bully victims feel, who may refuse to accept themselves, and may give up. This alludes to the decline of contemporary society, where people receive appreciation for their physique more than their character and conduct. Interestingly, findings exhibited female students experience bullying because of their physical appearance than their male counterparts.

Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity

Sexual orientation is the most unethical and violent factor of bullying. Students with prominent gender identities are the most preferable and easiest targets of the bullies. Although this study did not find bullying experiences of transgender, however, an effeminate case of C1, stated *I am bullied because I have some feminine traits. My family, friends, and classmates make fun of my body language. Nobody wants to be my friend.*

This quote conveys the suffering that bullying causes over sexual orientation and gender identity.

V-Coping Strategies

The study investigated the functional and dysfunctional coping mechanisms of students to deal with bullying. The functional coping strategies yield positive consequences and assist victims in coping up with bullying. The dysfunctional coping techniques have unfavorable outcomes and are detrimental when applied. The categorized coping mechanism from the data analysis include:

Table 5
Classification of Coping Strategies and Expected Bullying Behaviour

Type	Strategies	Cases Reported	Total	*EBB*
Functional	help-seeking	3, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17	7	Survivors, Assisted
	avoidance	2, 9	2	Survivors, Assisted
	self-defense	4	1	Survivors
	self-acceptance	1, 7, 16	3	Survivors, Assisted
Dysfunctional	counterattack	5, 20	2	Survivors
	surrender	18, 19	2	Rescued
	quitting	6, 12	2	Lost

Note. C10 doesn't fall in any of the above categories.

More than half students who received assistance found help-seeking strategy as the survival tool against bullying behaviors (Table 5). Similarly, a few students believed in individual differences and after receiving assistance they survived to deal with the unfavorable behaviours of the bully. Moreover, some survivors of the bullying behaviors were given advice to avoid the scene where bullying occurs. One student survived using self-defense strategy to fight bullying behaviours. These strategies proved functional as the effect of bullying could not recur or diminished incrementally. Conversely, the counter-attackers somehow survived, while one who lost hope in themselves was rescued. Unfortunately, a quitter underwent psychological trauma and lost their life. Whereas, 'quitting' has more or less similar connotations like surrender, the only difference is that the unlucky victims could not get rescued timely, therefore, they quitted from everything including their precious life.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

In this phenomenological research, the bullying behaviors and coping mechanisms of university students were explored. Through an open-ended online survey, the lived experiences of 20 participants from various universities were documented, and five themes emerged. The first finding informed the classification of bullying behaviours into malign and non-malign cases. This implies that a bully as perpetrator with and intent or without intent harms the victim. Whereas, Thornberg and Delby (2019) found that the subconscious intent of the bully-perpetrator is always to harm the victim for seeking pleasure. Moreover, Gerli (2019) maintained that young bullies are more preferably engaged in non-malign bullying, while adult bullies are found to have a malign intent behind planning the bullying episode. The second finding suggested that victims report most bullying behaviours (Rigby, 2003). Malamut et al. (2020) also claimed that in any context, the number of victims is always greater than the bullies. Further, Hellström and Beckman (2020) hold that victims of bullying always look for assistance to help them overcome the harmful effects of bullying. Studies also confirmed the third finding that the verbal and non-verbal are the widely practiced forms of bullying (Chen et al., 2022). Eisenberg et al., 2021 study corroborates with the fourth finding that disability, gender, socio-economic status, social differences, physical appearance, and gender identity are the causes of bullying. Furthermore, Temko's (2019) study affirmed that gender and sexual orientation as social identities contribute to bullying. Moreover, the study of Kashif et al. (2020) acknowledged that differences are the

main causes of bullying. Contrarily, the disabled victims were found as the easiest targets of perpetrators. The final finding described students' functional and non-functional coping mechanisms for mitigating the effects of bullying, which confirms that victims exhibit help-seeking behavior to get rid of the severe repercussions of bullying (Wójcik & Rzeńca, 2021). According to Yen et al. (2015), victims with no listening ear and helping hand tend to think of quitting in terms of suicide. The account of the study informed about four suicidal attempts, of which two survived and two failed to live; three were female and one male. Klomek et al. (2011) affirmed that girls are more prone to suicidal thoughts in comparison to boys when they are exposed to bullying.

Conclusion

The study aimed to look into the bullying behaviors and the coping strategies of undergrads. the study focused on understanding bullying experiences pertaining to types, forms, and causes of bullying episodes reflect the behaviors and suggest remedial actions. The cases of 20 bullying behaviours were studied. In the study, phenomenological strategy was used to draw descriptive themes. Using eight steps of Yüksel and Yıldırım (2015), five themes emerged: malign and non-malign bullying experiences, perceived bullying behaviors, forms of bullying, causes of bullying, and coping strategies. The other bullying behaviors also appeared: survived, assisted, rescued, and lost. The assisted behavior was the most preferably shown behaviour by the victims. Furthermore, while coping the bullying behavior—help-seeking, avoidance, self-defense, and self-acceptance emerged as the functional coping strategies, and counterattack, surrender, and quitting as appeared as the non-functional coping strategies. The findings indicated that bullying is a serious issue for parents, educators, students, and policymakers. Further, the pervasiveness of bullying affects individuals, for which everybody needs to play their role. Therefore, studying bullying and exploring the lived experiences, present realities, and needs or desires of students who are bullied, contributes a little but significant part, and informs future victims who want to be saved either by their parents or educators to revise their approach by educating the victims and their children about this social evil.

Implications

Students need to be cautious of their own behavior and notice peers and classmates whenever they experience bullying. Therefore, self-defense and self-acceptance reduce mental suffering and suicidal ideation. Similarly, teachers can play a positive role in helping victims to overcome

traumatic bullying situations by suggesting appropriate coping strategies pertinent to bullying behaviors. Combating bullying requires parents' positive response and support to rescue children from its detrimental effects. Moreover, the school administrators be thoughtful and proactive in formulating anti-bullying policies and practicing zero tolerance policy for non-compliance. Likewise, the policymakers to formulate anti-bullying policies each for a specific education levels because participants did not tell about the laws and policies to protect them from bullying encounters. Therefore, the study suggests the policymakers to make policies with the presumption that laws are not for students only, but also for all stakeholders in order to curtail the social nuisance of bullying. The curriculum developers may target syllabus content to incorporate the coping strategies for mitigating and addressing bullying behaviors.

Recommendations

The study recommends future researchers to analyze the role of parents, teachers, media, and social milieu that promote bullying behaviors among students. Furthermore, the researcher may examine how students' positive and negative roles can affect and regulate the choices of defense mechanisms in secondary education or elementary education. To understand the phenomenon further, the factors affecting students' decisions for coping strategies against bullying may be investigated.

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