

Bullying Awareness and Experiences of Tertiary Students in a Higher Education Institution in Region II

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in higher education poses a significant threat to student mental health, self-esteem, and academic achievement. Grounded in Agnew's General Strain Theory and Paludi's framework on social power dynamics in higher education, this study assessed awareness, personal experiences, reporting barriers, and institutional responses to campus bullying and cyberbullying at Aldersgate College during Academic Year 2022–2023. The study employed a descriptive survey design and gathered responses from N = 441 tertiary students across various degree programs and year levels. The study analyzed quantitative data using frequency and percentage distributions, while qualitative feedback underwent thematic synthesis. Results indicated that while physical classroom bullying occurred infrequently, cyberbullying was prominent, with 30% of respondents frequently observing online harassment. Overall, 37% of participants reported direct experiences with bullying, primarily perpetrated by groups through verbal insults, rumors, and social exclusion, which severely compromised their self-esteem, psychological well-being, and social relationships. Primary barriers to reporting included fear of retaliation, anxiety about escalation, and a lack of trust in existing reporting mechanisms. To foster a safe academic environment, institutional recommendations include enforcing zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies, deploying confidential digital reporting channels, expanding proactive mental health counseling, and conducting mandatory cyber-wellness orientations.

Keywords: *Campus bullying, cyberbullying, higher education, student mental health, institutional interventions*

INTRODUCTION

A survey conducted by the Stairway Foundation in 2015 found that 60% of children (seven to 12 years old) were victims of bullying. UNICEF (2019), in a press release, says that violence, including online or cyberbullying, has distressing effects on the physical and emotional well-being of its victims. Incidents such as these can lead to depression and anxiety, health complaints, and decreased academic achievement.

According to an international survey of 79 countries, the Philippines has the highest number of students exposed to bullying in school. A 2016 National Baseline Survey on Violence against Children led by the Council for the Welfare of Children indicated that 65% of Filipino students

have been bullied nationwide (Fernandez, 2023). This is despite the implementation of the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 1067). Macasero (2023) lists the types of bullying experienced from 2013 to 2020 as follows:

- Physical bullying: 56.79%
- Social bullying: 25.43%
- Gender-based/biased: 5.92%
- Cyberbullying: 6.03%
- Retaliation: 5.83%

While bullying is often associated with younger students, research shows that bullying also exists in higher education. This motivated the researchers to study tertiary students' experiences of bullying at Aldersgate College, its nature and extent, and ways the institution can respond effectively to instances of bullying.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to evaluate tertiary students' awareness of and experiences of bullying at Aldersgate College for School Year 2022–2023. Specifically, it sought to address the following questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of course and year level?
2. What is the level of awareness of tertiary students regarding campus bullying and cyberbullying?
3. What are the specific bullying experiences of tertiary students in terms of frequency, perpetrators, nature of bullying, and affected aspects of personal life?
4. How do students react to bullying incidents, and what factors hinder them from reporting such incidents?
5. Is there a significant difference in the prevalence of bullying experiences among tertiary students across different year levels or age groups?
6. What preventive measures and institutional actions can be undertaken to mitigate bullying within the campus?

Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on determining the level of awareness and bullying experiences among tertiary students at Aldersgate College during the 2022–2023 academic year. Data collection was conducted through an online survey from October 17, 2022, to December 26, 2022, yielding 441 responses across various academic programs and year levels. The study is delimited to the self-reported perceptions, experiences, and suggestions of the enrolled college students within the specified timeframe.

Review of Related Literature

Morin (n.d.) suggests that bullying is a widespread issue on college campuses, with 60% of college students witnessing a student bully another student and about 25% of college students self-identifying as victims of bullying (Chapell et al., 2004; Pontzer, 2010). Additionally, rates of cyberbullying victimization among college students range from 1% to

11% (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Kraft & Wang, 2010; Smith & Yoon, 2013). College creates an environment of broader social networks, novel peer interactions, and changes in the balance of power among students (Paludi, 2008).

A study by Schenk & Fremouw (2012) found that cyberbullying is increasing at the college level, where students experience cyberbullying through gossip, rumors, slut-shaming, and sexual bullying. Gordon (2020) notes that females engage in cyberbullying to advance social status or intimidate female peers, or to establish influence over boys. Conversely, males may use cyberbullying to embarrass or assert dominance over other boys, or seek retribution following a breakup.

In the local context, De la Fuente (n.d.) notes that among PISA-participating countries, the Philippines reports the highest incidence of bullying, with 65% of students reporting being bullied at least a few times a month, compared to the 23% OECD average. Bullying can manifest physically, verbally, psychologically, or sexually. Triggers frequently relate to physical appearance, life status, and skin color, commonly carried out via verbal abuse, teasing, menacing gestures, and social exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on General Strain Theory (Agnew) and Social Power Dynamics in Higher Education (Paludi, 2008). In post-secondary environments, new social structures and shifting power balances contribute to interpersonal conflict and dominance behaviors.

Cyberbullying and traditional bullying serve as mechanisms through which perpetrators attempt to assert dominance, establish social hierarchy, or relieve personal stress, directly affecting the victim's psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an Input-Process-Output (IPO) model to analyze how student challenges influence academic achievement:

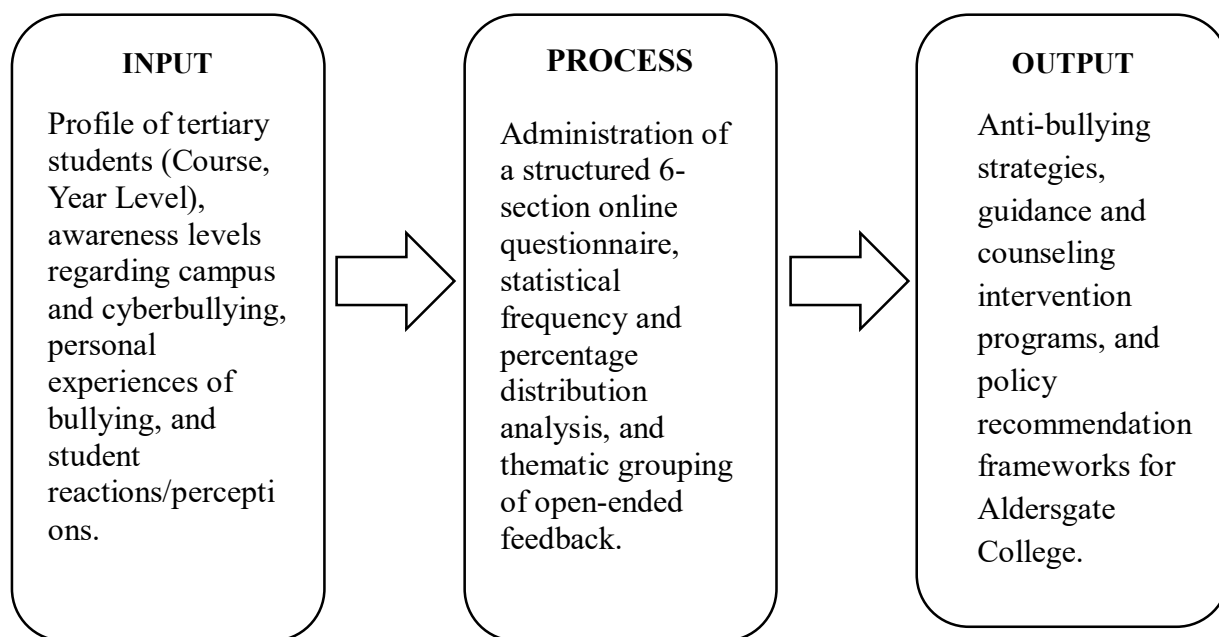


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a descriptive survey research design to assess tertiary students' awareness levels, bullying experiences, reactions, and recommendations.

Research Steps

The study was carried out in four main parts, beginning with the formulation of a structured online questionnaire divided into six functional sections to systematically collect relevant data.

Data collection was conducted through the online dissemination of the survey form, which remained open to respondents from October 17, 2022, to December 26, 2022.

Following data collection, the quantitative survey responses were tabulated and subjected to statistical analysis to identify key patterns and metrics.

Finally, the qualitative data, including open-ended feedback, suggestions, and comments from the respondents, underwent thematic analysis and synthesis to extract meaningful insights.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

A total of 441 tertiary students at Aldersgate College responded to the online survey. The sample spans multiple degree programs and year levels.

Data Analysis Methods

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies (f) and percentage distributions (%), were employed to quantify demographic profiles, awareness ratings, and incidence metrics. The study used descriptive thematic synthesis to analyze qualitative recommendations.

Research Hypothesis and Validation

The study tested the null hypothesis that no significant difference exists in the prevalence of bullying experiences among tertiary students across year levels or age groups.

The survey findings rejected this hypothesis, revealing that 37% of tertiary students reported direct experiences with bullying. Furthermore, first-year students constituted the largest proportion of respondents at 42.86% and exhibited distinct patterns of campus engagement and vulnerability when compared to upperclassmen.

Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Section 1 of the instrument allowed optional disclosure of respondent names while requiring course and year level, ensuring voluntary anonymity. The researchers strictly maintained data privacy during online collection. The study is limited by its reliance on self-reported online survey metrics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

SOP 1. What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of course and year level?

Nursing students (BSN) comprise the largest cohort at 23.13% (n=102), followed by Accountancy (BSA) at 16.55% (n=73), Secondary Education (BSED) at 10.88% (n=48), and Criminology (BSCRIM) at 10.20% (n=45).

Participation was highest among first-year students (42.86%, n=189) and second-year students (27.44%, n=121), with representation declining among third-year (15.65%) and fourth-year (10.20%) students.

This decline aligns with patterns in student participation studies, where younger cohorts' enthusiasm and novelty drive higher initial survey responsiveness, while upperclassmen prioritize intensive academic or professional preparation.

SOP 2. What is the level of awareness of tertiary students regarding campus bullying and cyberbullying?

The level of awareness among tertiary students regarding campus bullying and cyberbullying varies across specific settings and media:

Most respondents reported "seldom" seeing or hearing about someone being bullied on campus, though 10% (44 respondents) stated that they "always" witness bullying incidents on campus.

Most respondents indicated that they "never" notice someone being bullied in the classroom, while 7% (31 respondents) reported "always" seeing classroom bullying.

While 39% of respondents stated they "never" observe bullying outside the classroom on campus, 8% (35 respondents) reported that they "always" see bullying in these areas.

Awareness and observation of online bullying were notably high, with 30% of respondents reporting that they "often" notice someone being cyberbullied.

SOP 3. What are the specific bullying experiences of tertiary students in terms of frequency, perpetrators, nature of bullying, and affected aspects of personal life?

The specific bullying experiences of tertiary students across these four dimensions are as follows:

41% of respondents reported that they "seldom" experienced bullying, 30% reported that they "never" experienced it, 25% stated that they "often" experienced bullying, and 4% indicated that they "always" experienced being bullied.

Out of the 37% of respondents who reported being bullied, the majority were targeted by a group of students (50%), while 29% reported being bullied by a single individual.

The primary forms of bullying reported revolved around being called names or being insulted, being made fun of, and being the subject of rumors.

The aspects of respondents' personal lives most negatively affected were their self-esteem, mental health, and social relationships with others.

SOP 4. How do students react to bullying incidents, and what factors hinder them from reporting such incidents?

The survey revealed that most respondents feel capable of taking action by telling someone or other students to stop bullying them or another student.

Out of 441 respondents, 12% admitted to having personally engaged in bullying or joining someone in bullying another student, while 88% had not been involved in bullying others.

Despite feeling able to speak up in some situations, many victims of bullying choose never to report what they experienced due to several primary barriers.

Students reported that they often simply do not know what to do or say when an incident occurs. They also worry that telling someone or reporting the issue might make the bullying worse. Victims harbor fear of physical or emotional retaliation, leading to a general feeling of powerlessness or the belief that reporting will not resolve the issue. Peer pressure, shame, embarrassment, and a lack of trust in reporting systems further discourage students from coming forward.

SOP 5. Is there a significant difference in the prevalence of bullying experiences among tertiary students across different year levels or age groups?

The study found no significant difference in the prevalence of bullying experiences among tertiary students across different year levels or age groups. This significant difference in reported experiences across year levels is attributed to shifting social and academic dynamics

Data reveals that 37% of tertiary students reported direct experiences with bullying, but these experiences were not distributed evenly across year levels. First-year students comprised the largest proportion of respondents at 42.86% (189 students), followed by second-year students at 27.44% (121 students), third-year students at 15.65% (69 students), and fourth-year students at 10.20% (45 students).

SOP 6. What preventive measures and institutional actions can be undertaken to mitigate bullying within the campus?

Preventing bullying in schools is a multifaceted effort that requires collaboration among educators, administrators, students, parents, and the broader community.

Initially, the respondents believe it is of utmost importance to address bullying behavior and enforce rules to students who bully others. Schools should develop and implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies that clearly define bullying, outline consequences, and establish reporting mechanisms. Schools must have safe and anonymous systems in place for students to report bullying incidents. These reports must then be promptly investigated, and appropriate actions must be taken, including disciplinary measures if necessary.

Respondents also identified intervention through counseling as an effective measure against bullying. Guidance counselors offer emotional support and guidance to students who have experienced bullying. They can provide a safe and confidential space for victims to talk about their experiences and feelings. Counselors can work with both the victim and the bully to address the issue. They can provide conflict-resolution strategies and facilitate discussions between the parties involved, helping them find a resolution.

Finally, anti-bullying educational programs and initiatives that teach students about empathy, tolerance, and the negative effects of bullying need to be implemented. These programs can be integrated into the curriculum. Awareness campaigns must also educate students, staff, and parents about the consequences of bullying and the importance of reporting incidents.

Preventing bullying requires a holistic approach that involves education, awareness, a safe school environment, and a commitment from all stakeholders to create a culture of respect and empathy. Addressing bullying is an ongoing effort that requires the dedication and collaboration of the entire school community.

SUMMARY

The study evaluated 441 tertiary student responses at Aldersgate College regarding bullying awareness, experiences, and prevention. While the majority reported low frequency of classroom incidents, cyberbullying remains prominent, with 30% observing it often. Overall, 37% of respondents experienced bullying firsthand, most frequently by groups, which negatively impacted their self-esteem, mental health, and social relationships. Key barriers to reporting include fear of escalation and retaliation. Guidance counselors and strict enforcement of administrative policies were highlighted as crucial solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

Bullying remains a present challenge within higher education institutions. Although direct physical classroom bullying is reported less frequently, cyberbullying and psychological harassment (insults, rumors, social exclusion) significantly affect student mental health and academic wellbeing. Addressing this requires systemic institutional interventions rather than relying solely on individual coping mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate bullying within the campus, several comprehensive institutional recommendations are proposed.

First, the institution should implement transparent anti-bullying regulations paired with a zero-tolerance policy that enforces escalating disciplinary measures, such as warnings, suspensions, and community service, for any violations.

To address students' fear of retaliation, schools should establish secure, confidential digital reporting platforms that allow safe, anonymous reporting.

Additionally, the institution should expand proactive guidance and mental health counseling services to provide dedicated victim support, bully rehabilitation programs, and open communication forums. Educational efforts can also focus on cyber wellness and awareness campaigns, integrating mandatory orientation seminars, digital hygiene workshops, and gender-sensitivity trainings into student onboarding.

Finally, the institution may conduct annual student climate and bullying surveys to continuously monitor campus trends and evaluate the ongoing effectiveness of these intervention strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors extend their appreciation to the administration, faculty, and tertiary students of Aldersgate College for their participation and support in completing this research study.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

This paper was structured and formatted with AI tools to organize existing empirical survey data, section headers, and tabular presentations according to standard academic research templates.

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