

## Cross-Cultural Challenges: Bullying Experiences of Indonesian Expatriate Students in Malaysia

Tri Na'imah<sup>1</sup>, Herdian<sup>2-3</sup>, Gisella Arnis Grafiyana<sup>4</sup>, Fatin Rohmah Nurwahidah<sup>5</sup>, Nia Anggri Noveni<sup>6</sup>, Dian Bagus Mitreka Satata<sup>7</sup>, Suyoto<sup>8</sup>

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying among Indonesian students in Malaysia whose parents are expatriates. The focus on this specific demographic aims to uncover how their unique sociocultural backgrounds shape their experiences related to bullying, both as victims and perpetrators. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with 21 students from Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur, the research delves into their understandings and encounters with various forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, and cyber aspects. Thematic analysis of this group's vulnerabilities and behavioral patterns reveals a complex interplay of cultural integration challenges and social dynamics. The findings highlight a dual role of students as both targets and agents of bullying, influenced heavily by their transnational identities. This study proposes the development of culturally sensitive interventions that cater specifically to the needs of transnational students, aiming to enhance the efficacy of anti-bullying strategies within multicultural educational settings. By addressing the nuanced needs of these students, the research underscores the importance of implementing targeted educational and psychoeducational programs that promote understanding, empathy, and resilience across diverse student populations. This tailored approach is anticipated to foster safer, more inclusive school environments that prevent bullying and support expatriate students' holistic well-being.


### Keywords:


Bullying dynamics, Cultural integration, Cyberbullying, Multicultural education, Transnational students.


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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D., Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Psychology, Banyumas, Indonesia. [trinaimah@ump.ac.id](mailto:trinaimah@ump.ac.id),  Orcid ID: 0000-0001-8872-8693

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding Author, Lecturer, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Psychology, Banyumas, Indonesia,  Orcid ID: 0000-0003-3452-1843


<sup>3</sup> Ph.D Student, Nanjing Normal University, School of Psychology, Jiangsu, China. [31203027@njnu.edu.cn](mailto:31203027@njnu.edu.cn),  Orcid ID: 0000-0003-3452-1843

<sup>4</sup> Lecturer, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Psychology, Banyumas, Indonesia. [gisella.arnis@ump.ac.id](mailto:gisella.arnis@ump.ac.id),  Orcid ID: 0009-0009-6588-0524

<sup>5</sup> Lecturer, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Psychology, Banyumas, Indonesia. [fatinrohmahwahidah@ump.ac.id](mailto:fatinrohmahwahidah@ump.ac.id),  Orcid ID: 0000-0002-4955-179X

<sup>6</sup> Lecturer, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Psychology, Banyumas, Indonesia. [niaanggrinoveni@ump.ac.id](mailto:niaanggrinoveni@ump.ac.id),  Orcid ID: 0009-0009-6171-502X

<sup>7</sup> Lecturer, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Psychology, Banyumas, Indonesia. [dbagusms@ump.ac.id](mailto:dbagusms@ump.ac.id),  Orcid ID: 0000-0002-0444-7593

<sup>8</sup> Lecturer, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Faculty of Economics and Business, Banyumas, Indonesia. [suyoto@ump.ac.id](mailto:suyoto@ump.ac.id),  Orcid ID: 0009-0000-3147-5349



## **Introduction**

Bullying remains a profound challenge within educational settings, exerting detrimental effects on both perpetrators and victims. This concern is especially pronounced in Malaysian schools, where student interactions frequently escalate into varied forms of aggression. A comprehensive study by Sabramani et al. (2021) reveals that both victims and perpetrators in Malaysia engage in aggressive behaviors, encompassing physical actions like hitting or pushing and verbal abuses such as insults or threats. Such findings underscore the multi-dimensional nature of bullying, which includes physical, verbal, antisocial, and cyberbullying, each contributing uniquely to the hostile school environment.

Physical bullying in schools predominantly manifests through confrontations such as beatings and shoving, clearly showcasing aggression that can cause immediate physical harm. Conversely, verbal bullying involves insults and mockery, which can severely impact a victim's psychological health over time. Antisocial behaviors lead to social exclusion, subtly undermining a student's relationships and status among peers. Additionally, cyberbullying uses digital platforms to extend harassment beyond the school environment, showcasing the complexity of modern bullying dynamics (Nur et al., 2023). These varied forms of bullying not only reflect individual aggressive behaviors but also point to systemic issues within school cultures that permit or ignore such negative interactions. The intricate social dynamics in schools are further strained by behaviors such as extortion, defensive aggression in response to provocations, and discrimination against academically superior peers, all of which signify a deeply entrenched culture of intimidation (Salleh & Zainal, 2014). Such behaviors reflect individual aggressiveness and suggest a broader, systemic issue within the school culture that supports or overlooks such dynamics.

Bullying, a global concern, has been extensively studied for its pervasive impact through various lenses, emphasizing its repetitive nature and the power imbalances it creates (Berger, 2007; Hymel & Swearer, 2015). These incidents are not isolated, but rather form a consistent pattern that reinforces the victim's sense of helplessness and vulnerability over time. Farrington & Ttofi (2009) and Smith & Brain (2000) highlight that the consequences of bullying extend beyond immediate emotional and physical damage to include severe long-term outcomes like mental health issues, physical health problems, and significant academic difficulties (Graham, 2016). Beside that Bullying, including cyberbullying, profoundly affects mental health, with victims experiencing anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (Agustiningasih et al., 2024; de Freitas et al., 2024).

Moreover, the propensity for bullies to develop further aggressive and violent behaviors into adulthood suggests that early bullying behavior is a significant predictor of future antisocial outcomes (Ttofi et al., 2012). This correlation underscores the urgent need for effective preventive and remedial strategies in schools to address not only the symptoms but also the root causes of bullying, preventing a cycle of violence that might continue outside the school environment.

In Selangor, Malaysia, the selection of the region for this research was driven by its diverse demographic composition and significant representation of the broader national context regarding bullying incidents. Specific instances in this area have shown that bullying victims experience traumatic stress impacting their academic



performance and psychological well-being. The prevalence of such cases in Selangor is indicative of the urgent need for effective interventions, as the lack of comprehensive and systematic anti-bullying programs in schools exacerbates these effects, leaving many victims without adequate support (Sudan, 2016). Several measures have been adopted across schools in Selangor to counteract these dynamics, including the implementation of strict classroom rules, the reinforcement of teachers' roles as counselors, consistent enforcement of school policies, and broad socialization efforts aimed at promoting an inclusive and supportive educational environment (Muluk et al., 2021). This regional focus provides a critical lens through which to examine the effectiveness of existing policies and to develop targeted strategies that address the unique challenges faced by students in Selangor.

This study takes a novel approach by focusing on a specific demographic—Indonesian students in Malaysia whose parents are expatriates. This group provides a unique lens through which to examine bullying, considering the additional challenges of cultural integration and the impacts of living in a foreign environment on student behavior and social interactions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the specific understandings and experiences of these transnational students, assessing how their unique sociocultural backgrounds influence their involvement in bullying, both as victims and perpetrators. This study sought to identify and analyze the specific vulnerabilities and behavioral patterns exhibited by this group to develop tailored interventions that address the diverse needs of this population, thereby increasing the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies in multicultural school settings.

## Method

This study used a qualitative design with a semi-structured interview approach. Moreover, this study used open-ended questions to explore participants' in-depth understanding and experiences related to bullying, including cyberbullying. This method allowed participants to express their views and experiences freely, providing rich and diverse insights into the various forms of bullying, the mechanisms by which it occurs, and its emotional and social impacts. This approach also allowed researchers to capture the complexity and nuances of the bullying experience to figure out and develop effective intervention strategies in school environments.

## Participant

Twenty-one students from Sekolah Indonesia Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) participated in this study. Participants were males (10 participants) and females (11 participants), ranging in age from 13 to 16 years. Before the interview, all participants were given clear information about the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. They were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. Participants were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses and that all data would be anonymized in the final report.

## Interview Guide

The interview questions were developed based on a review of existing literature on bullying and cyberbullying, as well as theoretical frameworks that highlight the relational and contextual aspects of bullying. The primary aim



was to capture participants' attitudes and lived experiences in a transnational setting—particularly the ways Indonesian expatriate students in Malaysia understand and respond to different forms of bullying. Each question served a distinct role in eliciting detailed, nuanced insights into their perceptions, feelings, and behaviors. Questions asked included:

1. What do you know about bullying?
2. Have you ever been involved in a situation where bullying occurred?
3. What do you know about cyberbullying?
4. Have you ever experienced cyberbullying?
5. What forms of bullying have you seen or experienced? Can you explain how it happened?
6. In the bullying situations you have experienced, what role did you play? Can you describe your thoughts and feelings at the time?

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This method was chosen to capture the depth and variability of participants' perspectives, illuminating how SIKL students perceive and experience bullying in both physical and digital contexts. Thematic analysis was deemed suitable given the need to explore subjective experiences across diverse individual backgrounds. The analytic process consisted of familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. Importantly, coding was conducted by three experts in qualitative research, ensuring thoroughness and mitigating potential bias. By systematically identifying and categorizing key patterns related to bullying, the findings offer a robust account of participants' experiences while maintaining the study's reliability and validity.

### **Results and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the specific understandings and experiences of transnational students regarding bullying and cyberbullying. The study sought to assess how their unique sociocultural backgrounds influence their involvement both as victims and perpetrators. The WordCloud result is shown in Figure 1. Generated from the data analysis highlights critical terms such as bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, physical, social, and verbal. This reflection of the student's experiences indicates that bullying encompasses more than just physical aggression. It also involves verbal and social harassment, mainly through online platforms like social media and the internet. Furthermore, the roles of victim and perpetrator are prominently featured in WordCloud. This suggests that transnational students are involved in bullying either directly or as bystanders. Their diverse sociocultural backgrounds shape their understanding of intimidation, humiliation, and dominance as central aspects of bullying behavior. These findings reveal that the students' sociocultural environments significantly influence their experiences and perceptions of bullying. This emphasizes the need for interventions considering cultural differences among transnational students when addressing bullying issues.



**Figure 1.** Worldcloud bullying experience

### Students' Understanding of Bullying Types

Students explained the various forms of bullying, namely physical violence (e.g., hitting, body shaming), verbal abuse (e.g., name-calling, teasing), and online harassment (cyberbullying). Students recognized that physical violence includes acts of being hit or knocked down, which have a direct impact on the victim's body. Students also mentioned specific examples, such as body shaming, where students are teased or insulted based on their body shape. This understanding is important because physical violence is often the most visible form of bullying and has a significant direct impact on the victim.

"Bullying is a condition where it can occur physically or non-physically. Usually, bullying occurs in groups."

*(participant, 15 years old)*

"Bullying is an aggressive act that is usually done by someone to intimidate or dominate another person."

*(participant, 14 years old)*

These results indicate that the educational program can provide students with a comprehensive understanding of bullying behavior, including its forms and impacts (Hateriah & Sarkiah, 2023) and raise awareness of the importance of anti-bullying efforts (Razzaq et al., 2023). Psychoeducation is successful because of its comprehensive approach, providing students with in-depth knowledge about bullying, including its impact on both victims and perpetrators. Through psychoeducation, students become more aware of the negative consequences of bullying, which motivates behavioral change. The program also teaches social skills, allowing students to better understand others' perspectives and respond to bullying situations in a constructive manner, thus creating a safer and more enjoyable school environment.

### Bullying Characteristics

Students explain the characteristics of bullying, namely aggressive behavior that aims to intimidate or dominate



students considered weaker. The intention to cause physical or emotional harm is the beginning of problems that often arise. Students understand that bullying occurs because there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. Bullies tend to target individuals whom they consider weaker, either physically, emotionally, or socially, to assert their dominance. This understanding is essential because it makes students aware that bullying is not just violent behavior, but also involves elements of systematic intimidation. Psychoeducation has succeeded in helping students recognize that bullying is not behavior that occurs by chance or due to misunderstanding but is a deliberate act to hurt others. This understanding can help students distinguish between ordinary conflict and bullying and encourage them to be more alert to early signs of bullying behavior.

“aggressive actions that are usually carried out by someone to intimidate or dominate another person who is considered weaker.”

*(participant, 14 years old)*

Bullying as phenomenon deserves special attention by educators, parents, and schools because of two reasons. Firstly, the prevalence of bullying and the harm that it causes are seriously underestimated by many children and adults. The violence prevention strategy is critical to raise the awareness of children, school staff, and parents. Secondly, the nature of bullying does not necessarily lend itself to the same interventions because it involves harassment by powerful children against children with less power. Therefore, common conflict resolution strategies such as mediation may not be effective (Limber & Nation, 1998).

Psychoeducational programs can effectively improve emotional regulation, especially in the context of anger expression among adolescents, meaning that psychoeducational interventions can prevent bullying and violence in the school environment (Iuso et al., 2022). Psychoeducational programs are effective in improving emotional regulation because they equip adolescents with the skills to identify, understand, and manage their emotions, especially anger. By understanding the causal factors and learning self-control strategies, adolescents can express anger in healthy ways rather than through aggressive actions. When emotional regulation improves, the likelihood of engaging in bullying at school decreases, making psychoeducation an important role in preventing bullying and creating a safer and more enjoyable environment.

### Impact on Victims

Students understand the emotional impact on victims, leading to depression, hurt feelings, and social isolation. It demonstrates a strong awareness of the serious consequences that bullying can have on mental health. Students' understanding that bullying can lead to depression demonstrates an awareness of how the psychological stress of persistent mistreatment can lead to severe mental disorders. Depression in victims of bullying can affect many aspects of their lives, including academic achievement, social relationships, and general well-being. Students recognize that bullying causes deep hurt feelings in victims. It demonstrates an understanding of how aggressive words and actions can hurt a person's feelings, causing emotional wounds that are invisible but very real.

“Bullying is not a good example and makes people feel depressed.”

*(participant, 14 years old)*



"Bullying can make the victim feel hurt and offended by the treatment."

*(participant, 13 years old)*

Continuous bullying can result in severe emotional and psychological problems, including trauma, fear, depression, and anxiety. These effects can reduce academic performance and lead to other deviant behaviors (Hateriah & Sarkiah, 2023). Both victims and bullies experience negative impacts, such as decreased self-esteem and increased mental health problems. Victims of bullying often experience emotional dysregulation, which can manifest as difficulty managing emotions such as anger, sadness, and anxiety. It can lead to impulsive behavior and increased emotional responses, reducing emotional well-being (Iuso et al., 2022). Moreover, children who had vivid memories of being victim of an aggressive act manifested a high level of post-traumatic stress (Houbre et al., 2006).

In addition, there are some bullying victims who choose to forgive despite feeling sad but ultimately surrender their grievances to a higher power, focus on their education, and forgive the perpetrators even though they no longer want to be involved with them. This process is often supported by close relationships and a desire to avoid the burden of revenge (Warnaningrum & Na'imah, 2016).

Studies of bullying suggest that there are short- and long-term consequences for both the perpetrators and victims of bullying. Longitudinal studies have found that victims of bullying in early grades also reported being bullied several years later. Another study found that aggressive behavior at the age of 8 was a powerful predictor of criminality and violent behavior at the age of 30 (Limber & Nation, 1998).

### Forms of Cyberbullying

Students described cyberbullying in various forms, including online bullying, bullying through social media, and bullying carried out using devices such as mobile phones. Students' comprehensive understanding of various forms of cyberbullying indicates that they have a strong awareness of the dangers in the digital world. Students not only recognize cyberbullying in general but also understand the various methods that perpetrators can use to harm others online. These results also emphasize the importance of digital literacy among students. With the increasing development of technology and social media, understanding cyberbullying is becoming increasingly crucial to protect oneself from these dangers. This awareness is an essential first step in educating students to use technology responsibly and avoid actions that can harm others.

These findings suggest that psychoeducation about ethics in social media effectively increases students' awareness of cyberbullying, as supported by the study (Jalal, 2022), which recorded a 38% increase in students' understanding after the intervention. These results indicate that education focusing on digital ethics plays a vital role in equipping students with the knowledge needed to recognize and prevent cyberbullying, which can help reduce cases of online bullying.

"Distant/online bullying, on social media"





*(participant, 14 years old)*

"Cyberbullying is bullying that occurs using social media and the internet. Cyberbullying can also happen to anyone. Usually, the perpetrator will send something to the victim to bully the victim."

*(participant, 16 years old)*

"An oppression of the vulnerable or weak that is done online"

*(participant, 14 years old)*

### Cyberbullying Characteristics

Students understand that cyberbullying is characterized by the use of technology for intimidation, humiliation, and social isolation and that it is anonymous and carried out remotely. Students understand that cyberbullying is the use of technological devices, such as computers and smartphones, to intimidate or pressure another person. This bullying can occur through various digital platforms, including social media, text messages, email, or online forums. Students' understanding of the characteristics of cyberbullying demonstrates that they are aware of the unique challenges of this form of bullying. This awareness is important because cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in its methods, scope, and impact, which are often broader and more challenging to address.

"Being bullied on social media."

*(participant, 15 years old)*

"To scare, anger, or embarrass those targeted."

*(participant, 15 years old)*

Cyberbullying is caused by anger, hurt, and a desire for revenge, or arises from frustration and the urge to show power through excessive ego, causing them to hurt others. Therefore, there needs to be sanctions for perpetrators of cyberbullying, for example, being expelled from school and returning to the family to receive guidance and severe punishment (Akrim & Sulasmi, 2020). Through socialization efforts, students can increase their understanding of cyberbullying, essential for effective prevention. This awareness is expected to lead to more responsible behavior among teenagers using social media (Sari et al., 2023). Cyberbullying manifests through various forms of online interactions, where individuals can engage in harmful behavior without face-to-face confrontation, making it different from traditional bullying.

Cyberbullying may manifest through various channels, including the posting or dissemination of harmful comments and embarrassing videos, rumor-spreading, or explicit threats across multiple technological platforms such as text messages, emails, social media, online gaming, websites, and video chats (Agatston & Limber, 2018). For children and adolescents, who are navigating critical developmental milestones, the adverse effects of cyberbullying can be especially detrimental. This period of rapid cognitive, emotional, and social growth heightens their vulnerability to identity confusion, reduced self-esteem, and impaired peer relationships. Consequently, effective interventions should address not only the technological aspects of cyberbullying but also the developmental needs of this young age group—providing them with the tools to bolster resilience, develop healthy coping mechanisms, and maintain positive social bonds as they transition through these formative years.





Studies found strong associations between the perpetration of traditional bullying and cyberbullying, and between cyber victimization and traditional victimization. Those who had been cyberbullied, also tend to be bullied in at least one 'traditional way'. Similarly, among youth who had cyberbullied others, they also had bullied others in at least one 'traditional' way. (Kowalski et al., 2014; Olweus, 2013).

## Conclusion

This study offers a novel and insightful examination of bullying among Indonesian expatriate students in Malaysia, focusing on the unique sociocultural dynamics that shape their experiences both as victims and perpetrators. By focusing on this specific demographic, the research highlights these students' additional vulnerabilities, including cultural integration challenges, social isolation, and the pressures of living in a foreign environment. Through a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, this study successfully captured the nuanced and multifaceted nature of bullying experiences in physical and digital spaces. The thematic analysis identified significant findings regarding students' understanding of bullying, its forms, and its emotional and psychological impacts on victims. Notably, the results emphasize the critical need for anti-bullying interventions tailored to the distinct needs of transnational students. These interventions must address not only the overt physical and verbal aspects of bullying but also the subtle, often overlooked dynamics of cyberbullying, which presents unique challenges due to its anonymity and the extensive use of technology by students in this demographic.

## Recommendations

This research underscores the importance of comprehensive psychoeducation programs focusing on emotional regulation, social skills development, and digital literacy. Such programs can enhance students' ability to navigate complex social environments and reduce their susceptibility to bullying behaviors. By fostering greater awareness and empathy, these programs contribute to creating safer, more inclusive school environments that cater to students' diverse cultural backgrounds. Beyond these immediate implications, future research could build on the current findings in several ways. Comparative studies with other expatriate or transnational student populations would help clarify whether the vulnerabilities identified here are unique to Indonesian expatriate students in Malaysia or generalizable across different cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of tailored anti-bullying interventions could further elucidate how well programs aimed at emotional regulation, social skills, and digital literacy sustain their effectiveness over time. Overall, the study offers valuable insights into the specific vulnerabilities of expatriate students in Malaysia, laying a foundation for interventions aimed at addressing bullying in multicultural educational settings. The findings highlight the necessity of culturally informed approaches to bullying prevention and underscore the importance of continued efforts to protect the mental health and well-being of transnational students.

## Author(s)' Statements on Ethics and Conflict of Interest

**Ethics Statement:** We hereby declare that this study adhered to established research and publication ethics, as

well as proper citation principles, at every stage. We accept full responsibility for the content of the paper in the event of any dispute. This research was approved by the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto (KEPK/UMP/126/III/2024).

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