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Bullying and cyberbullying experiences among university students reporting self-harm or urges

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Abstract

Background: Bullying and cyberbullying are forms of interpersonal aggression that may negatively affect individuals' psychological well-being, particularly among university students with self-harm experiences. Repeated exposure to verbal, physical, and social aggression, including negative interactions through digital platforms, may contribute to emotional distress, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and difficulties in emotion regulation. Understanding these experiences is important to identify the psychological consequences and coping responses among students who have experienced self-harm.
Purpose: To explore bullying and cyberbullying experiences among university students with self-harm experiences or urges.
Method: A qualitative descriptive approach. Eight active university students from various universities in Indonesia who reported self-harm experiences or urges were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The collected data were analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis, which involved data reduction, thematic grouping, data display, and conclusion drawing.
Results: The findings revealed that bullying experiences included social exclusion, teasing related to physical appearance, verbal and physical violence, and insults directed at parents. Cyberbullying primarily involved insults and negative comments on social media. Most participants reported experiencing bullying during primary and secondary school, which resulted in emotional consequences such as social withdrawal, low self-esteem, fear of participating in activities, resentment, and suicidal thoughts. Participants described different responses to emotional distress, including self-harming behaviour, urges to self-harm, and potentially harmful medication use.
Conclusion: Bullying and cyberbullying experiences were associated with various emotional and psychological difficulties among university students with self-harm experiences. These findings highlight the importance of early intervention, psychological support, emotion regulation strategies, and strengthening social support within family and university environments to address the consequences of bullying and cyberbullying.

Keywords: Bullying; Cyberbullying; Self-Harm; University Students; Psychological Distress.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a social problem that persists in various settings, including educational environments. It can occur in peer relationships and takes various forms, such as teasing, insults, intimidation, and social exclusion. Bullying can occur anywhere, for example, in schools, workplaces, campuses, social environments, and online. People who experience bullying often withdraw, lose self-confidence, feel ashamed, and even experience trauma. In the most severe cases, its effects may lead victims to think about harming themselves or ending their lives (Moore et al., 2017). Self-harm is also a concern among university students in Indonesia, as a study involving final-year university students identified tendencies toward self-harming behaviour, highlighting the importance of understanding this

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issue within the university population (Alifiando et al., 2022).

Over time, the internet has become an important part of people's lives across the world. Social media, a product of the development of the internet, is used for a wide range of activities and social interactions. However, the use of social media can also give rise to negative behaviour, one of which is cyberbullying. This phenomenon has become a widespread problem because it can take the form of harassment, insults, and intimidation directed at individuals or groups. In addition, there remains a perception that bullying occurs only directly or through verbal remarks, so some people have yet to realize that negative behaviour on social media is also a form of bullying (Ray et al., 2024). Cyberbullying victimization has also been documented among university students and has been associated with depressive symptoms, demonstrating that negative online interactions may have implications for students' psychological well-being (Alrajeh et al., 2021).

The relationship among bullying, cyberbullying, and self-harm is complex. Individuals who engage in self-harm sometimes use it as a form of self-punishment, as a way of expressing feelings that are difficult to put into words, or as an outlet for emotional distress that they are unable to express. Self-harm may also involve thoughts or urges to engage in self-injurious behaviour, even when these urges do not result in an actual act of self-injury. Understanding the emotional experiences associated with these thoughts and behaviours is therefore important when exploring self-harm experiences (Brown et al., 2022). In certain circumstances, experiences of bullying and cyberbullying may be among the negative experiences associated with such emotional distress. In addition, research has shown that interpersonal relationships, including social support, are among the factors that influence adolescents' emotional condition (Stea et al., 2024). Previous cyberbullying experiences during secondary school have also been associated with psychological difficulties, including anxiety and depression, among university students (Jenaro et al., 2021). The definition of self-harm varies across the literature. This is due to differences in how intentional self-injurious acts are categorized, particularly in distinguishing no suicidal self-injury (NSSI) from suicidal behaviour according to the presence or absence of suicidal intent (Brown et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

Several previous studies have demonstrated an association between bullying victimization and self-harming behaviours. Bullying victimization during childhood and adolescence has been associated with an increased likelihood of no suicidal self-injury (OR = 1.75), suicidal ideation (OR = 1.77), and suicide attempts (OR = 2.13), as reported in a systematic review and meta-analysis (Moore et al., 2017). Similarly, a systematic review of 22 studies identified a positive association between school bullying victimization and deliberate self-harm, with depressive symptoms acting as a mediating factor (Karanikola et al., 2018). Evidence from Indonesia also indicates a relationship between bullying and self-harm among 344 senior high school students in Pekanbaru. However, only emotional bullying demonstrated a statistically significant association with self-harm, whereas verbal, physical, and cyberbullying did not show significant associations (Putra et al., 2025). Other research involving adolescents has examined the contribution of social pressure, bullying, and limited social support to depressive symptoms, self-harm, and self-directed violence using structural equation modelling (Stea et al., 2024).

Although previous research has established the relevance of bullying to psychological distress and self-harming behaviours, studies specifically exploring these experiences among university students remain limited. Bullying victimization has also been documented among college students, indicating that bullying remains a concern beyond primary and secondary education (Lund & Ross, 2017). A qualitative study involving 40 undergraduate students from 17 universities in the United Kingdom identified four themes concerning bullying experiences in higher education through focus group discussions and thematic analysis (Harrison et al., 2022). Other qualitative research has explored cyberbullying and cyberstalking victimization within higher education communities, providing insights into victims' perceptions, psychological impacts, and experiences of available support mechanisms (Bussu et al., 2023).

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Similarly, research involving post-secondary students has highlighted their perspectives on cyberbullying and the importance of institutional awareness, policies, and support (Faucher et al., 2020). However, these studies involved university students in general rather than specifically focusing on individuals with self-harm experiences or urges.

Furthermore, a systematic review of 71 articles published between 2007 and 2022 highlighted inconsistencies in the definitions of cyberbullying and the limited representation of adult populations in existing research (Ray et al., 2024). A more recent narrative systematic review focusing specifically on university students also identified the need for further research into cyberbullying victimization, psychological vulnerabilities, and protective factors in higher education settings (Bussu et al., 2025). These findings indicate the need for further exploration of how bullying and cyberbullying are experienced and understood by university students, particularly those with self-harm experiences or urges.

Based on these research gaps, the present study explores bullying and cyberbullying experiences among university students in Indonesia who have experienced self-harm or urges to engage in self-harming behaviour. Unlike previous quantitative studies that primarily examined statistical associations between bullying and self-harming behaviours, this study focuses on participants' personal experiences, including the forms of bullying encountered, the contexts in which these experiences occurred, their emotional and psychological consequences, and the responses adopted to cope with distress. These experiences are examined through General Strain Theory, which explains how exposure to stressful or negative experiences, including interpersonal victimization, may generate negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and depression. Such emotional responses may encourage individuals to adopt different coping strategies, which can be either adaptive or maladaptive depending on their circumstances and available social support (Isom et al., 2025). The study also draws on an emotion-regulation perspective to understand how emotional distress may be associated with no suicidal self-injurious thoughts and behaviours (Brown et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aimed to explore experiences of bullying and cyberbullying among university students with self-harm experiences or urges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the experiences of bullying and cyberbullying among university students who had experienced or experienced urges of self-harm. The study focused on understanding the forms of bullying and cyberbullying encountered by participants, how these experiences affected their emotional and psychological well-being, and how they related to their experiences or urges of self-harm. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because it allowed participants to express their experiences and perspectives in their own words, rather than reducing them to numerical measurements or statistical relationships.

The participants were eight active university students from eight different universities in Indonesia, aged 18–25 years. They were recruited through invitation posts shared on Instagram and WhatsApp and selected using purposive sampling. To participate, individuals had to be active university students within the specified age range, have experienced bullying and/or cyberbullying, report experiences or urges of self-harm, and be willing to participate voluntarily. Individuals who did not meet these criteria or submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded. All eight participants who met the inclusion criteria and completed the questionnaire were included in the study. Information about self-harm was based entirely on participants' self-reports and was not assessed or clinically verified by a mental health professional.

Data were collected online through Google Forms between October 29 and 31, 2026. The questionnaire contained five open-ended questions developed by the researchers in accordance with the study objectives and reviewed by the supervising lecturer before distribution. The questions addressed participants' experiences of bullying and cyberbullying, the forms of treatment they had received, their emotional and psychological responses, their experiences or urges of self-harm, and their views on how these experiences were connected. All responses were collected in one round, and no follow-up interviews were conducted.

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The collected responses were analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The process began with exporting the responses from Google Forms and organizing them into separate documents for each participant. The researchers then read the responses several times to become familiar with the data and identify statements relevant to the research objectives. These statements were assigned initial codes, which were subsequently grouped according to similarities in meaning. The resulting categories were developed into broader themes covering experiences of bullying and cyberbullying, emotional and psychological effects, self-harm experiences or urges, and participants' perceptions of the relationship between these experiences. The findings were then described by considering both individual accounts and patterns that appeared across participants. Initial coding was carried out by the first author and independently reviewed by the second author and the supervising lecturer. Differences in interpretation were discussed to reach agreement on the final coding and themes.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained through a mandatory consent statement on the first page of the questionnaire. Before participating, students were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to decline participation or discontinue completing the questionnaire, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participant codes (P1–P8) were used when presenting the findings to protect their identities. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, contact information for psychological support and counselling services was also provided at the end of the questionnaire. The study did not receive formal ethical approval from an institutional research ethics committee before data collection. This is acknowledged transparently, and no formal ethical approval or exemption is claimed. The researchers nevertheless implemented participant protection measures through voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality of responses, and the provision of information about psychological support services. These measures are reported as part of the procedures followed during the study and are not presented as a substitute for formal ethical approval.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table Bullying and Cyberbullying Experiences and Self-Harm Status Among Participants (N = 8)

Participant	Bullying and Cyberbullying Experiences	Reported Self-Harm Status
P1	Social exclusion, belittling, and unpleasant treatment from peers during elementary and Islamic junior and senior secondary education.	Reported self-harm behavior, first experienced during the second year of Islamic junior secondary education and repeated in response to personal problems.
P2	Teasing and insults related to physical appearance at school and in a dormitory during elementary and junior secondary education.	Reported self-harm behavior, which eventually stopped with support from others. Also reported suicidal ideation without acting on it.
P3	Unpleasant treatment and negative remarks from peers during elementary education.	Reported self-harm behavior; specific behaviors were not described.
P4	Verbal and nonverbal aggression, social exclusion, insults concerning the father's physical condition, and physical violence during elementary and junior secondary education.	Reported self-harm urges without acting on them and suicidal ideation.
P5	Verbal and physical aggression, social exclusion, and insults concerning the father's	Reported self-harm urges without acting on them and suicidal ideation. No self-harming behavior was reported.

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	physical condition during elementary and junior secondary education.	
P6	Cyberbullying involving insults through digital media concerning the parents' occupation.	Reported taking sleeping pills beyond the recommended dose to escape emotional distress. The intention behind this behavior was not clarified.
P7	Social exclusion and verbal insults during junior secondary education.	Reported ongoing self-harm behavior when recalling previous bullying experiences.
P8	Cyberbullying involving negative responses and insults following a comment on social media.	Reported self-harm behavior associated with self-disappointment; the specific behavior was not described.

The table shows that participants experienced various forms of bullying and cyberbullying, including social exclusion, verbal aggression, physical violence, insults related to physical appearance and family background, and negative interactions through digital media. Most bullying experiences occurred during primary and secondary school, while cyberbullying was reported in online social interactions. Regarding self-harm-related experiences, five participants (P1, P2, P3, P7, and P8) reported having engaged in self-harming behaviour, although the specific behaviours described by P3 and P8 were not sufficiently detailed. Two participants (P4 and P5) reported urges to self-harm without acting on them. P6 described taking sleeping pills beyond the recommended dose to escape emotional distress, although the intention behind this behaviour remained unclear. Additionally, three participants (P2, P4, and P5) reported suicidal ideation without acting on these thoughts. These findings illustrate variations in participants' experiences of bullying, emotional distress, and self-harm-related responses.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that bullying experienced by participants took various forms, including social exclusion, verbal insults, teasing related to physical appearance, physical aggression, and unpleasant treatment from peers. Cyberbullying involved negative comments and insults through social media, including remarks directed at participants' family backgrounds. These findings demonstrate that bullying is not limited to direct physical aggression but also includes verbal, social, and digital behaviours. Previous research has similarly documented bullying and cyberbullying within higher education communities, including experiences of social exclusion, online harassment, and interpersonal aggression (Harrison et al., 2022; Bussu et al., 2023).

The emotional effects of bullying and cyberbullying varied among participants. Some described social withdrawal, difficulty socializing, low self-esteem, and persistent negative thoughts about how others perceived them. Others experienced sadness, crying, shame, anger, fear, and resentment toward the perpetrators. These experiences indicate that negative social interactions may remain emotionally distressing even after the incidents have ended. Previous research has identified an association between cyberbullying victimization and psychological difficulties, including anxiety and depression, among university students (Alrajeh et al., 2021; Jenaro et al., 2021). Limited social support and bullying victimization have also been associated with depressive symptoms and self-harm-related outcomes among adolescents (Stea et al., 2024).

Participants also described different responses to emotional distress. Five participants (P1, P2, P3, P7, and P8) reported self-harming behaviour, while P4 and P5 described urges to hurt themselves without acting on them. P6 reported taking sleeping pills beyond the recommended dose to escape emotional distress, although the intention behind this behaviour was not established. These accounts demonstrate that responses to psychological distress were not uniform. The distinction between actual self-harming behaviour, urges, and potentially harmful coping behaviours is important because each represents a different experience and should not be classified interchangeably. Previous research has identified an

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association between negative emotional states and no suicidal self-injurious thoughts and behaviours (Brown et al., 2022). Research involving university students has also highlighted the relevance of emotion regulation when understanding self-harm experiences (Putri, 2025).

The findings can be understood through General Strain Theory, which provides a perspective for examining how stressful interpersonal experiences may be associated with negative emotional responses and maladaptive coping. In this study, social exclusion, verbal aggression, physical violence, and negative comments on social media were among the experiences participants described in connection with sadness, frustration, anger, and psychological discomfort. Previous research has also identified associations among bullying, social pressure, low social support, depressive symptoms, and self-harm-related outcomes (Stea et al., 2024). Research applying a strain perspective to self-harm among college students further illustrates the relevance of stressful experiences in understanding self-harming behaviour (Isom et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the present qualitative descriptive study does not establish that bullying directly caused self-harm or demonstrate a specific causal pathway.

The findings also highlight the importance of distinguishing self-harm behaviour, self-harm urges, and suicidal ideation. Three participants (P2, P4, and P5) reported thoughts of ending their lives, while P4 and P5 also described urges to hurt themselves without engaging in self-harming behaviour. These experiences should not be treated as equivalent because self-harm behaviour, urges to self-harm, and thoughts of suicide represent different experiences. In addition, the accounts of P2, P4, and P5 do not establish that suicidal thoughts progressed to suicide attempts. This distinction is particularly important because the study relied on participants' self-reports and did not involve clinical assessment.

Another important finding is that several participants' experiences of bullying originated during elementary and secondary school and remained emotionally significant during their university years. Experiences of exclusion, insults, and physical aggression were not necessarily limited to the period in which they occurred, as some participants continued to recall these events and described their emotional effects. Previous research involving university students has also examined self-harm in relation to emotional regulation and earlier distressing experiences (Putri, 2025). Academic stress and family social support are additional factors relevant to understanding self-harming behaviour, particularly during adolescence and the transition toward adulthood (Aulyya & Ahyani, 2025). These findings suggest the importance of considering earlier interpersonal experiences when exploring the emotional difficulties faced by university students.

The findings also complement previous research on bullying and cyberbullying in higher education. Studies have explored bullying experiences among university students and identified cyberbullying and cyberstalking as concerns within higher education communities (Harrison et al., 2022; Bussu et al., 2023). Research involving post-secondary students has also emphasized the importance of institutional awareness, appropriate policies, and support mechanisms in addressing cyberbullying (Faucher et al., 2020). In the present study, however, most participants described bullying experiences that originated during their school years rather than exclusively during university. P6 and P8 reported cyberbullying through digital media, but their accounts did not establish a clear relationship between these online experiences and self-harm. This distinction indicates that the experiences of bullying and cyberbullying should be understood within the individual circumstances of each participant rather than assumed to produce identical psychological responses.

The findings have implications for addressing bullying-related psychological distress among university students. Prevention efforts should address not only physical and verbal aggression but also social exclusion, negative online interactions, and their potential psychological consequences. School-based bullying education programs have been examined as an approach to improving students' knowledge of bullying, addressing bullying behaviour, and strengthening self-esteem (Al Ali et al., 2025). In higher education settings, universities should provide accessible and confidential psychological counselling, establish supportive peer relationships, and develop clear reporting mechanisms for bullying and cyberbullying incidents. These measures are particularly important for students who continue to experience emotional distress from bullying

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encountered during their earlier education. Family involvement and social support should also be considered in strengthening emotional regulation and reducing vulnerability to self-harming behaviour (Aulyya & Ahyani, 2025; Al Rivaldi, 2024). Furthermore, students who report self-harm urges or suicidal ideation should be provided with appropriate psychological assessment and access to professional support. Support services should create safe opportunities for students to discuss distressing experiences without fear of judgment, stigma, or further victimization.

CONCLUSION

Bullying and cyberbullying experiences among university students involved various forms of verbal, physical, and social aggression, including negative interactions through digital media, which often began during school years and continued to affect participants' emotional well-being into university. These experiences were associated with emotional distress, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, and self-harm experiences or urges. Participants demonstrated different responses to distress, highlighting the importance of early intervention, psychological support, healthy emotion regulation, and strengthening social support within family and university environments.

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