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FROM WITNESS TO WOUNDED: HOW CYBERBULLYING POISONS THE PEER ECOSYSTEM OF A MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of ten undergraduates at Universiti Islam Pahang Sultan Ahmad Shah who witnessed or experienced cyberbullying. Through semi-structured interviews, four interlocking themes emerged: profound psychological distress, social withdrawal, academic-cognitive disruption, and defensive digital behaviour. Fear, shame and rumination spread rapidly from targeted students to witnesses, eroding self-esteem, friendship networks and classroom concentration. Victims muted chats, deactivated accounts and self-censored, shrinking both social presence and academic participation. The findings frame cyberbullying as an ecological toxin that poisons the entire peer ecosystem rather than isolated individuals. To counteract this systemic risk, the paper recommends a 24-7 rapid-response team integrating counsellors, academics and IT staff; compulsory digital-citizenship modules; encrypted in-app reporting; and peer-led "digital defenders." National-level advocacy for a dedicated Cyberbullying Act and platform accountability mechanisms is urged. Limitations include single-site,

retrospective, female-majority sampling; multi-campus quantitative and longitudinal designs are proposed to establish prevalence, causality and protective factors.

Keywords: *cyberbullying, university student, peer ecosystem, psychological impact, qualitative phenomenology*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying was first recognized as a distinct social problem in the early 2000s, coinciding with the rapid expansion of internet access, mobile phones, and social media platforms among youth (Zhang et al., 2022). Early academic and media reports highlighted how digital technologies enabled new forms of harassment, such as sending threatening messages, spreading rumours, or sharing embarrassing images online, which could reach victims instantly and repeatedly, often with anonymity (Evangelio et al., 2022). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time and place, making it difficult for victims to escape and for adults to monitor or intervene (Wiederhold, 2024).

The core problem of cyberbullying lies in its pervasive and persistent nature. Victims may experience repeated psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation (Maurya et al., 2022). The digital environment amplifies the impact: harmful content can be rapidly disseminated to a wide audience, and the anonymity of perpetrators can embolden more aggressive behaviour (Evangelio et al., 2022). Furthermore, the lack of clear boundaries between online and offline life means that the effects of cyberbullying often spill over into victims' academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being (Gohal et al., 2023).

Another challenge is the difficulty in defining and measuring cyberbullying consistently. While most definitions agree that it involves intentional, repeated harm using electronic means, there is ongoing debate about the role of power imbalance and the distinction between cyberbullying and other forms of online aggression or hate speech (Mahmud et al., 2023). This lack of consensus complicates efforts to track prevalence, compare studies, and develop effective prevention and intervention strategies (Zhang et al., 2022).

In summary, cyberbullying emerged as a recognized problem with the rise of digital communication technologies, presenting unique challenges due to its reach, persistence, and psychological impact. Its complex nature requires ongoing research and coordinated action from educators, parents, policymakers, and technology companies to mitigate its harmful effects.

The present study is important since it offers an insight into the psychological, social and academic effects of cyberbullying. Given that digital communication is a fact of life in modern times, and the growing numbers of young users exposes them to potential online harms, it is important to assess the impact of cyberbullying on their well-being. The results of this study will provide valuable information for educators, parents and policy makers to detect early warning signs, develop interventions tailored to the needs of those at risk as well as support systems for victims. Additionally, the research adds to the emergent literature by highlighting

ways in which cyberbullying can be associated with psychosocial pathology in the contemporary digital context and has implications for interventions and policy designed to make cyberspace a safer environment.

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Cyberbullying has become a critical and escalating issue in Malaysia, with the country ranking among the highest in Asia for reported cases, particularly among youth and adolescents (E. Z. Samsudin et al., 2023), (Kee et al., 2024). The widespread use of social media and digital communication platforms has facilitated the rapid growth of cyberbullying incidents, making it a pervasive problem that affects individuals across various age groups and backgrounds (So'od et al., 2023). Recent statistics indicate that up to 54% of Malaysian adolescents have engaged in or experienced cyberbullying, and nearly 30% report being victims, with the majority of cases occurring on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (E. Z. Samsudin et al., 2023), (So'od et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning have further intensified the problem, as increased internet usage has exposed more young people to the risks of online harassment and abuse (Pang et al., 2023).

The impact of cyberbullying on Malaysian victims is severe and far-reaching. Victims commonly experience significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation and behaviour (N. Samsudin et al., 2024), (Lee et al., 2023). Studies have shown that cyberbullying is strongly associated with higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts among Malaysian adolescents, and the negative effects often extend to academic decline, social withdrawal, and long-term emotional trauma (Kee et al., 2024). The anonymity and persistence of online harassment make it difficult for victims to escape or seek help, compounding the psychological harm and sense of helplessness (Razali et al., 2022).

Despite the high prevalence and serious consequences of cyberbullying, Malaysia currently lacks comprehensive and specific legal frameworks to address the issue effectively (Razali et al., 2022). Existing laws are fragmented and do not directly criminalize cyberbullying, resulting in challenges for law enforcement and limited protection for victims (Abd Aziz et al., 2022). This legal gap, combined with low public awareness and insufficient institutional support, hinders efforts to prevent, monitor, and respond to cyberbullying cases.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Cyberbully

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that takes place through digital technologies such as smartphones, computers, tablets, and the internet. It involves the use of electronic communication to intentionally and repeatedly harm, harass, or humiliate another person who may find it difficult to defend themselves (Mittal, 2024). This behavior can occur via social media, messaging apps, online forums, emails, or gaming platforms, and includes actions like sending threatening messages, spreading

rumours, sharing embarrassing images, or excluding someone online (Zhang et al., 2022).

3.1 Cyberbully In Malaysia And The Effect

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant social and public health issue in Malaysia, particularly among youth and young adults. The rapid expansion of internet access, social media, and digital communication platforms has contributed to the increasing prevalence and complexity of cyberbullying in the country.

Malaysia ranks among the highest in Asia for cyberbullying incidents, with studies indicating that up to 30% of young Malaysians have experienced cyberbullying, and even higher rates of exposure as bystanders or perpetrators (Kee et al., 2024), (Hazlyna et al., 2021). The problem is particularly acute among adolescents and university students, who are the most active users of social media and digital platforms (Samsudin et al., 2023), (Kee et al., 2024). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp are the most common environments for cyberbullying, with offensive comments, body shaming, and intelligence-related insults being the most frequent forms of abuse (So'od et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the issue, as increased reliance on online learning and social interaction has exposed more young people to the risks of cyberbullying (Kee et al., 2022). Reports from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission and Cyber Security Malaysia show a sharp rise in complaints and cases during the pandemic years (Samsudin et al., 2023).

The impact of cyberbullying on victims in Malaysia is profound and multifaceted. Victims commonly experience significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation and behaviour (Kee et al., 2024). Studies have shown that cyberbullying is strongly associated with higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts among Malaysian adolescents and young adults (Fadhli et al., 2022). The negative effects often extend to academic decline, social withdrawal, and long-term emotional trauma (So'od et al., 2023).

For example, research by Lee et al. (2023) among Malaysian medical students found that those who experienced cyberbullying were more than twice as likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress. Another study by Samsudin et al. (2024) highlighted that psychological distress mediates the relationship between cyberbullying and feelings of loneliness and reduced well-being among adolescents. The emotional toll is not limited to victims; bystanders and even perpetrators may experience guilt, anger, and regret, further complicating the social dynamics of cyberbullying (So'od et al., 2023).

Despite the high prevalence and serious consequences of cyberbullying, Malaysia faces challenges in addressing the issue effectively. Existing laws, such as the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, provide some legal recourse, but enforcement is often limited, and there is a lack of comprehensive legislation specifically targeting cyberbullying, especially among minors (Ayub et al., 2023). Schools and universities have been slow to implement effective prevention and

intervention programs, and many educators lack the training and resources to address the problem (Ayub et al., 2023).

Public awareness remains low, and many victims are reluctant to report incidents due to stigma, fear of retaliation, or lack of trust in authority's (So'od et al., 2023). This underreporting further obscures the true scale of the problem and hinders efforts to develop targeted interventions.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative inquiry utilizing phenomenology as the research methodology. Phenomenology, as explained by Creswell and Poth (2016), explores the shared meaning of lived experiences among individuals who have encountered a particular phenomenon. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method to understand the experiences of Universiti Islam Pahang Sultan Abdul Shah (UnIPSAS) students who had experienced cyberbullying. Participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique, which is suitable for reaching hard-to-access populations (Etikan et al., 2016).

A total of ten UnIPSAS students with nine women and one man who self-identified as victims of cyberbullying participated in the study. The sample size was deemed sufficient as data saturation was achieved, with no new information or themes emerging from the final interviews. All interviews were conducted face-to-face between October and November 2025, each lasting between 40 and 75 minutes, depending on participant comfort and depth of discussion. Interviews were conducted primarily in Malay, with occasional code-switching to English when participants preferred.

An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to steer the conversations, focusing on topics such as the nature and platform of cyberbullying encountered, emotional and psychological impacts, support networks and coping strategies employed within the Islamic university context.

Although UnIPSAS does not currently have a formal ethics committee, the interviews were carried out under the supervision of a licensed counsellor, ensuring that all ethical safeguards were strictly observed. Participants provided written informed consent, pseudonyms were used to protect identity, and all audio recordings and transcripts were encrypted and stored on a password-protected device to maintain confidentiality. The collected data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, allowing key patterns and meanings to emerge from participants' narratives.

5.0 RESULTS AND FINDING

Cyber-bullying is no longer a marginal risk of digital campus life; it is a routine threat that can erode mental health, academic performance and social cohesion. The present study amplifies the lived experiences of ten undergraduates at Universiti Islam Pahang Sultan Ahmad Shah who were either victims or eye-witnesses of recent online attacks. Table 1 summarises the demographic footprint of the sample: all are between 19 and 23 years old, nine are female, one is male, and they represent

programmes ranging from counselling and media to dakwah Islamiyah. TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Threads and Twitter are the arenas in which the abuse unfolded.

This study interrogated the real-time effects of cyberbullying on ten undergraduates at Universiti Islam Pahang Sultan Ahmad Shah. Semi-structured interviews conducted between October and November 2025 generated ninety-seven pages of verbatim transcript that were analysed reflexively. Four themes surfaced consistently across the data set.

The first theme, psychological and emotional impact, captures the immediate wound inflicted by online abuse. Participants recalled waves of fear, shame, sadness and self-depreciation that often arrived within minutes of a humiliating post. Victims described waking to racing hearts, loss of appetite and intrusive replays of cruel comments. Witnesses were not spared; they reported secondary trauma characterised by helplessness, anger and anticipatory anxiety that they could be next. The emotional load was magnified when perpetrators were course mates or housemates whose offline smiles contrasted sharply with their online vitriol. Several students linked the distress to pre-existing vulnerabilities such as introversion or prior family conflict, suggesting that cyberbullying intensified rather than created psychological strain.

Social withdrawal and interpersonal strain formed the second theme. Fear of repeated attack prompted victims to mute group chats, deactivate accounts and avoid cafeteria tables where gossip flourished. The vacuum created by digital absence quickly translated into offline distance; laboratory partners worked with others, study groups reformed without the bullied member and roommates tiptoed around awkward silence. Informants stressed that the withdrawal was not voluntary hermitage but protective survival, a calculated retreat to regain control over at least one sphere of life. Unfortunately, the strategy fed a vicious cycle, less visibility meant fewer allies, and fewer allies translated into greater vulnerability when the next wave of abuse arrived.

Academic and cognitive disruption emerged as the third theme. Participants described how intrusive rumination eroded concentration during lectures and sabotaged exam preparation. One student counted forty-six separate occasions in a single study night when she paused to check her phone after rumours spread that a deep fake image would be released. Another detailed losing presentation marks because teammates side-lined him after his mockery went viral on a class WhatsApp group. The constant vigilance consumed working memory bandwidth essential for comprehension and retention, resulting in grade slippage that further damaged already fragile self-concept.

Behavioural changes in digital engagement constituted the fourth theme. Almost every informant tightened privacy settings, pruned friend lists and migrated to alternative platforms perceived as safer. Some adopted anonymous handles, others stopped sharing original content entirely, choosing instead to lurk or repurpose neutral memes. While these adjustments provided short term relief, they also shrank opportunities for legitimate academic networking, peer support and creative expression. Several students acknowledged that self-censorship had begun to erode their digital literacy and confidence, skills once considered vital for graduate employability.

Taken together, the four themes portray cyberbullying as a multi-dimensional stressor that simultaneously wounds the mind, fractures social bonds, undermines scholarly performance and narrows digital participation. The findings echo recent regional scholarship while adding granular texture from a Malaysian public university context, underscoring the urgency for holistic intervention that blends mental health support, peer education and platform accountability.

Table 1: Demographic of Informant

Informant	Age	Gender	Programme / Field of Study	Platform(s) Mentioned	Role in Incident
1	19	F	Not specified	TikTok	Witness
2	19	F	Not specified	Threads	Witness
3	19	F	Not specified	WhatsApp & IG	Witness
4	20	F	Not specified	TikTok	Witness
5	21	F	Media	WhatsApp	Witness
6	23	F	Dakwah Islamiyah,	WhatsApp & IG	Witness
7	22	F	Diploma in Counselling	WhatsApp	Witness
8	20	M	Diploma in Counselling	TikTok & IG Story	Witness
9	19	F	Diploma in Counselling	Twitter	Victim & witness
10	19	F	Diploma in Counselling	TikTok	Witness

5.1 Psychological And Emotional Impact

The psychological and emotional consequences of cyberbullying emerged as a dominant and cross-cutting theme across all informant accounts. These effects were not only profound but also persistent, often manifesting in the form of fear, sadness, low self-esteem, and emotional withdrawal. The data suggest that such emotional

harm is not limited to victims alone, but also extends to witnesses who experience secondary trauma or empathetic distress.

Informant 1, who witnessed cyberbullying on TikTok, expressed a deep emotional reaction:

> *"I felt scared for people around me and lost the courage to express myself... it made me feel demotivated to show my true self."*

Similarly, Informant 2, who observed the non-consensual sharing of personal images on Threads, stated:

> *"I felt a loss of self-confidence and became afraid of being ridiculed... it made me more cautious and fearful online."*

Informant 3, recounting a WhatsApp group incident where a peer was mocked using stickers, noted:

> *"My classmate felt very sad, ashamed, and angry... she was deeply hurt and began to distance herself from social media."*

Informant 5, who observed a classmate being ridiculed on both WhatsApp and Instagram, shared:

> *"I felt very sorry and angry... it was unfair how others could insult someone without thinking about their feelings."*

Informant 7, who witnessed a friend being bullied through hateful messages and slander, stated:

> *"My friend felt very depressed, ashamed, and lost confidence in himself... he became quiet and withdrawn."*

Informant 10, who saw a roommate being bullied after posting a TikTok video, said:

> *"I felt sad and disappointed... my roommate became moody and less talkative, and it affected his studies and relationships."*

The psychological and emotional impact of cyberbullying spreads far beyond the person originally targeted. Every participant in the study, whether victim, observer, or confidant, reported the same compact cluster of feelings: fear, sadness, shame, anger, and a sudden shrinking of self. These reactions arrive within minutes of an incident, yet they do not vanish when a post is deleted or a chat muted. Instead, they lodge inside the body and the personality, guiding how young people measure their own worth and the safety of any social space. Emotional harm travels: it leaps from screen to witness, from witness to friend, and back again, gaining force at each stop.

Witnesses describe absorbing the victim's emotional state. Informants 1 and 2, who only watched ridicule on TikTok and Threads, speak of the same loss of confidence and courage that the targeted student presumably felt. Their words, "I lost the courage to express myself" and "I became afraid of being ridiculed," show that the threat has been taken into their own bodies. This secondary trauma is not distant sympathy; it is real dread that changes future behavior. Informant 5's outrage

and Informant 10’s disappointment adds another layer: the guilt of the uninjured, which can harden into constant vigilance or total retreat. Simply by watching, these young people pay a measurable psychological price that narrows their digital and emotional range.

For those directly attacked, the injury is deeper and longer lasting. The classmates described by Informants 3, 7, and 10 endure a tight knot of shame from public exposure, sadness from lost trust, and anger from powerlessness. Each steps away from the very platforms that adolescence now requires for friendship and identity work. This self-exile feeds loneliness. The phrase “he became quiet and withdrawn” is not a side note; it marks a detour in normal development. Schoolwork, friendship maintenance, and identity experiments stall because social media now reads as dangerous. The result is a smaller self: less talk, less posting, less risk, less growth.

When the stories are placed side by side, cyberbullying looks like an ecological toxin. It does not merely wound one fish; it poisons the whole pond. Fear moves sideways through networks of witnesses and forward into the future, limiting how young people imagine their chances to speak and connect. The emotional vocabulary stays the same across TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Threads, and across every role, showing that the psychological mechanism works regardless of platform or label. Healing, then, cannot focus on one person; it must cleanse the social climate itself. Programs that overlook witnesses, or that treat cyberbullying as a simple two-person conflict, will underestimate the true reach of emotional harm and miss the relationships that make recovery possible.

5.2 Social Withdrawal And Interpersonal Strain

Another salient theme that emerged was the social withdrawal of victims and the subsequent strain on interpersonal relationships. Many informants reported that victims of cyberbullying tended to isolate themselves, both online and offline, as a coping mechanism. This withdrawal often led to broken friendships, reduced peer interaction, and a general decline in social engagement.

Informant 3 observed:

> *“My classmate began to avoid social media and became less friendly with others... she was afraid the same thing would happen again.”*

Informant 5 echoed this sentiment:

> *“There was a bit of tension in our class group... communication became strained for a while, and she kept to herself more.”*

Informant 7 noted:

> *“He blocked the bullies, became less active on social media, and even deleted some apps... he didn’t want to interact much anymore.”*

Informant 9, reflecting on a childhood incident, stated:

> *“My friend lost confidence in facing people... even though his appearance improved, he still remembered the hurtful words.”*

Informant 10 added:

> *"My roommate distanced himself from others and became less active in group activities... his relationships became distant."*

Social withdrawal after cyberbullying fractures the entire peer network. Victims leave group chats, delete apps, and skip gatherings, hoping to vanish. Each disappearance chills the digital room: jokes freeze, memes stop, plans dissolve. Friends read silence as rejection and pull back, so withdrawal multiplies. Informant 3's classmate turned off social media and grew cold in person; Informant 5 felt the class group tense as talk thinned.

Offline, the pattern repeats. Informant 7's friend blocked bullies, erased apps, then carried the shield into corridors and cafeterias, avoiding eyes and voices. Informant 10's roommate closed his door, and a once busy dorm floor became a row of untouched handles. These absences wound peers who do not know how to reopen contact without seeming pushy, so friendships corrode twice: first from fear, then from confusion.

The body keeps the score. Informant 9's friend still braces for ridicule years later, even though mirrors say he looks fine. Every new hello is scanned for threat, shortening talks and cancelling plans. Old buddies label him "different now," and the tag hardens into exclusion.

The strain spreads beyond single friendships. Group projects lose a contributor, birthday lists shrink, teachers see participation scores fall yet rarely link the drop to a sticker storm week earlier. Withdrawal acts as both signal and engine of harm: it shows existing pain and creates fresh social wounds. Healing must reknit the whole fabric: restore routines of shared presence, teach peers to reach in without pressure, and prove that spaces can be safe again.

5.3 Academic And Cognitive Disruption

A less visibly apparent but equally critical theme was the impact of cyberbullying on academic performance and cognitive focus. Several informants reported that victims experienced significant difficulties concentrating on their studies, often resulting in declining academic performance and disengagement from educational activities.

Informant 5 stated:

> *"Her focus in studies was affected... she couldn't concentrate and became less participative in class."*

Informant 7 observed:

> *"Yes, his studies were affected... he couldn't focus in class and became less sociable."*

Informant 8, who witnessed a K-pop-related bullying incident on Twitter, shared:

> *"It affected my willingness to share my interests... I became hesitant to speak up or engage with others, even in class discussions."*

Informant 10 noted:

> *"His studies were slightly affected... he often lost focus and was no longer active in group work."*

Cyberbullying erodes the mental space required for learning. Victims describe a mind crowded by replayed insults, imagined laughter, and the next possible attack; textbooks stay open but unread. Informant 5's classmate "couldn't concentrate and became less participative," her attention sliced into fragments by notifications she no longer dares to check. Informant 7 watches the same student "lose focus and grow less sociable," the two declines feeding each other until silence dominates both chat bar and classroom desk. Informant 10's roommate drifts during group work, once reliable ideas now buried under looping worry. Even witnesses surrender cognitive ground: Informant 8, bullied for loving K pop, stops raising a hand, fearing that any voiced interest will invite fresh ridicule. The result is a measurable drop in grades, missed assignments, and a narrower classroom discourse as victims and bystanders alike pull back from the very verbal risk taking that deepens understanding. Recovery demands more than counselling; it requires teachers to notice the quiet shift, peers to restore intellectual safety, and platforms to quiet the noise so that curiosity, not fear, occupies working memory.

5.4 Behavioural Changes In Digital Engagement

The final thematic category pertains to behavioural adaptations in digital engagement following cyberbullying incidents. Across the board, informants reported heightened caution, increased privacy settings, and a general shift toward more guarded online behavior.

Informant 1 stated:

> *"After seeing such incidents, I immediately blocked people I felt uncomfortable with and distanced myself from strangers online."*

Informant 2 shared:

> *"I became more cautious and blocked people who made me feel uneasy... I also kept evidence by taking screenshots."*

Informant 4 noted:

> *"I made my profile more private and thought twice before posting anything... I didn't hesitate to block or report accounts that sent hurtful messages."*

Informant 6 said:

> *"I became more careful with stickers and memes in group chats... I started advising others if conversations seemed offensive."*

Informant 9 added:

> *"We became more selective about who could follow our accounts and blocked those we didn't trust."*

After an attack, the phone feels like a loaded object. Every ping could be the next insult, so thumbs move to armour. Informant 1 blocks strangers at the first flicker of discomfort; Informant 2 screenshots everything first, turning chat into evidence. Informant 4 triple checks privacy toggles and rehearses captions in his head, asking "could this be twisted?" before he taps post. Informant 6 polices group chats, warning friends when a meme edges toward cruelty, becoming the unpaid moderator no one planned to be. Informant 9 and friends run follower audits, deleting the unfamiliar, shrinking their circles until only the proven remain. The net result is a quieter, colder timeline: fewer likes, less spontaneity, but also fewer land mines. Risk is traded for safety, discovery for control, and the open playground of childhood turns into a gated courtyard where every guest is frisked at the door.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study gives voice to ten Universiti Islam Pahang Sultan Ahmad Shah undergraduates who live with cyberbullying every day. Their accounts show that a single mocking post or sticker can unleash fear, shame and rumination that move from screen to body, from body to lecture hall, and from lecture hall to friendship circle. Victims lose sleep, appetite and concentration; witnesses carry a secondary load of dread; both groups mute chats, delete apps and self-censor their creative voices. Academic work slips because intrusive thoughts crowd out working memory, while digital engagement shrinks to a defensive minimalism that undermines the online literacy graduates need. Harm travels sideways through peer networks, poisoning the whole pond rather than one fish, so interventions that focus only on the singled-out student will always underestimate the damage and miss the relationships that make recovery possible.

The recommendation, the university should therefore treat cyberbullying as a systemic risk. A 24-7 rapid-response team that blends counsellors, academic advisers and IT staff should be empowered to suspend abusive accounts, preserve evidence and offer same-day psychological first-aid. Digital-citizenship and bystander-intervention modules must move from optional workshops into compulsory first-year courses, using real but anonymised campus incidents to build relevance. Lecturers need short training to spot sudden grade slippage or seminar silence as possible red flags and to refer students quickly. A confidential, encrypted "Report-it" button should sit inside the university LMS and student app, funnelling every complaint to the rapid-response team within minutes. Peer-led "digital defenders" who receive micro-credential training in supportive messaging and evidence capture can normalise help-seeking and regrow a culture of intervention. At the national level, university management should use these campus data to lobby for a dedicated Malaysian Cyberbullying Act and to pilot a trusted-flagger channel with TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp and X that guarantees review of student-targeted abuse within thirty minutes.

The depth that gives these findings urgency also limits their breadth. A qualitative, single-site design rooted in snowball sampling can map lived experience but cannot yield prevalence rates or causal inference. All participants came from one Islamic university, nine were women, and all self-identified as victims or witnesses; their interconnected circles may have produced convergent stories that overstate

agreement. Retrospective accounts are vulnerable to recall bias, and the absence of perpetrator, educator or platform-generated trace data means we hear only the receiver's side. Future work should scale up: a quantitative, multi-campus survey of more than one thousand students that includes Dark Triad personality measures could test whether perpetrator traits moderate intervention success. Longitudinal three-wave designs would clarify the temporal order between cyberbullying exposure, psychological distress and academic impairment, while mixed-methods projects that examine parental mediation, religious coping and digital-resilience training can identify protective factors. Comparing public, private and polytechnic institutions and deliberately oversampling male and gender-diverse students will produce the generalisable evidence base that policymaker need to turn today's small, guarded courtyard of self-protection back into an open, trustworthy digital commons.

Author Contribution

Nor Fadzilah Md Yusof and Wan Hashridz Rizal Wan Abu Bakar: involved in all sections of writing. This involved writing the introduction, discussing and categorising themes, language and style checking of the text, as well as editing and preparing a final draft of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

This manuscript has not been published elsewhere, and all authors have agreed to its submission and declare no conflict of interest regarding the manuscript.

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