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EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL BULLYING: PERCEPTIONS, GENDER DIFFERENCES, AND LEARNING IMPACTS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Bullying remains a persistent and complex issue within school environments, impacting the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of students worldwide. This research aims to investigate students' perspectives on school bullying and its impact on the quality of learning. Students' viewpoints are divided into three dimensions: the ability to bully, the reason for bullying, and the prevention of bullying at school. By using the quantitative approach, data are collected through a questionnaire from a sample of 150 students in a secondary school in Johor, Malaysia. A Likert scale was used to gauge students' perceptions of school bullying and its effects on learning quality. The findings reveal that a significant number of school students were least inclined to engage in bullying activities. In fact, there is no significant difference between genders in the students' perceptions of school bullying. However, there is a significant difference between genders in their perception about its effect, particularly on the victims' mental state. The findings can be a source of reference for the Ministry of Education or any

school administrators in providing information and a clear understanding about bullying and its impact

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1. Introduction

A safe setting for learning is necessary to produce a globally competent student. School is always considered the second home to students. They learn major lessons in their lives, from academics to moral values. A classroom should be a learning environment that is physically and psychologically safe. It should be free from harm or violence for all children and youth in educational institutions. One of the primary factors contributing to the current lack of safety in schools is bullying, which frequently occurs among students. Bullying in school refers to repeated aggressive behaviour intended to harm, intimidate, or exert control over another student or group of students. The behaviour can take various forms, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. All such acts affect individuals or collectively, as they may involve many sections, including verbal and physical assaults, threats, jokes or language, and criticizing (Al-Raqqad et al., 2016). Bullying is also an aggressive behaviour shown by repetition and an imbalance of power (Mohan & Bakar, 2021).

One of the primary ways in which bullying affects learning is through its impact on student's mental and emotional well-being. Bullying potentially damages student's confidence, self-esteem, and academic performance in school (Sabramani et al., 2021). It is a worldwide problem that affects the emotional, social, and physical well-being of children (Boswell, 2016). Victims often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, which impact their concentration and cognitive functioning. The constant fear of harassment or humiliation also demotivates students to attend school and participate actively in classroom activities, leading to decreased academic performance and learning disengagement. Therefore, bullying should not be neglected any longer, as the consequences are severe and damaging.

School bullying has drawn increased attention among peers for the past few years. Why do children become bullies at school? The role of the school is to harmonize the attitudes, ideas, habits, customs, emotions, and sentiments of the students (Huwaida, 2018). Since children spend a significant portion of their lives in schools, any educational environment should be free from harm and aggressive behaviour that affect learning development. Therefore, this study intends to examine students' perceptions of school bullying and its impact on the learning quality.

2. Literature Review

Physical bullying is a prevalent issue within the secondary school context, manifesting as acts of aggression occurring directly in classrooms. These acts, including hitting, kicking, pinching, and the destruction of personal belongings, constitute instances of physical bullying, as highlighted by Rambaran et al. (2020). Research conducted by Griezel et al. (2012) found that males tend to engage in physical bullying more frequently than females in school.

Meanwhile, verbal abuse emerges as a more profound issue within the school setting, leaving victims with lasting emotional scars. Verbal bullying occurs when a perpetrator uses insulting or demeaning language to mock, embarrass, or insult another person (Robichaud, 2017). Name-calling, threats, and other disrespectful comments are employed to denigrate individuals

(Duverge, 2016). Verbal bullying encompasses various forms, including the use of profanities and hurtful language, as well as negative comments regarding a person's appearance. Interestingly, verbal bullying equally transpires among both genders (Daljević, 2014). Daljević (2014) suggested that high-achieving students; who demonstrate exceptional dedication to their studies; are often

more susceptible to mockery and rejection by their peers. This observation raises questions about the dynamics of verbal bullying and its potential correlation with academic success. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to and mitigating verbal bullying in secondary schools. Sarzosa's (2024) investigation delves into the impact of bullying on the skill development of schoolchildren. The study reveals that victimization results in a substantial 40% reduction in current skill levels for the average child, measured in standard deviations utilizing a distinctive longitudinal dataset focusing on middle school students. The skill depletion, in turn, elevates the likelihood of the victims bullying another by 34%. Consequently, bullying sets in motion a self-reinforcing mechanism that perpetuates an expanding skill gap over time.

In an educational context, bullying has far-reaching consequences, negatively affecting self-confidence, diminishing self-belief, and eroding the desire to learn (Daljević, 2014). For instance, consider a scenario in a classroom where an exemplary student, consistently active and dedicated to learning, becomes the target of verbal bullying by classmates. They mockingly label her as a "nerd" and express disdain when she participates in class discussions. While this situation may seem commonplace, its impact on the student's motivation and willingness to embrace new challenges can be profound. It is essential to recognize that the repercussions of bullying extend beyond the victims. Adverse health consequences are associated with bullies and their targets, as emphasized by Wolke & Lereya (2015). Bullying is a risky behaviour with semi-permanent consequences. Hence, there is an urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address and prevent bullying in educational settings.

The imperative to enhance the quality of education has grown in tandem with technological advancements. In this evolving landscape, the school bullying issue has garnered attention, necessitating proactive measures to address its consequences and improve the overall education quality. Existing research predominantly focuses on school-based programs employing a comprehensive whole-school approach, encompassing individual students, parents, classrooms, and the broader school community within a unified structure (Costantino et al., 2019).

Divecha (2019) advocates for an effective strategy to prevent recurring instances of school bullying by emphasizing students' social and emotional learning (SEL) advancement. The approach involves imparting skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship management. By doing so, academic achievement and social interactions improve, whereas negative outcomes later in life decrease, as evidenced by Gunn (2013). SEL shows that it equips individuals with the competencies to endure throughout their lifetime.

To prevent school bullying, guiding students to be participants in their learning journey rather than being mere spectators is paramount. Encouraging discussions and regrouping students within the classroom foster engagement and relationships among students. A nurturing and positive relationship environment is instrumental in preventing school bullying. Incorporating strategies to prioritize social and emotional learning while involving students creates a safer and more conducive educational environment. Sainz et al. (2023) provided an overview of bullying prevention programs, specifically concentrating on the three widely implemented initiatives in

schools: TEI, KiVa, and Mediation Teams. The study conducted a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative analysis utilizing semi-structured interviews with tutors, coordinators, and experts from nine schools. Each program was assigned three schools. The findings indicate that the programs were crucial in heightening awareness of the issue throughout the school community. As a result, it enhances the school environment and diminishes conflicts and bullying.

In short, bullying, whether physical or verbal, poses significant challenges within the secondary school setting, impacting students' well-being and the overall quality of education. The reviewed literature underscores the importance of proactive interventions, including comprehensive whole-school approaches and social and emotional learning programs. It is imperative to foster a positive and nurturing educational environment involving students in their learning journey, ultimately contributing to a safer and more conducive educational experience.

3. Methodology

The research adopted a quantitative approach to explore the perceptions of secondary school students regarding bullying in their school environment and its repercussions. The target population encompassed 150 respondents from a secondary school in Selangor, Malaysia. The study employed cluster random sampling, whereby groups were utilized as the sampling unit instead of individuals. The research design incorporated a structured questionnaire organized into three sections. Section A encompasses demographic information; Section B analyzes students' perceptions of school bullying; and Section C evaluates the impact of school bullying on the quality of learning.

The questionnaire items in Sections B (i) and (ii), as well as Section C, gauge responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Meanwhile, Section B (iii) employs a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The dimensions of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Dimension of Questionnaire

Section	***Dimension***
A	Respondents' demographic information
B	Respondents' perceptions of school bullying (i) The ability to bully at school (ii). Reasons for bullying behavior at school (iii) Prevention of bullying behavior at school
C	Effect of school bullying on the quality of learning (i) Psychological (ii) Social (iii) Academic (iv) Physical

A pilot study involving a sample of 10 respondents was carried out, prior to disseminating the questionnaires to participants. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The results of the pilot study demonstrate that the value of Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.7, signifying a satisfactory level of reliability. Refer to Table 2.

Table 2
Reliability Statistics on The Impact of School Bullying on The Quality of Learning

Cronbach's Alpha	***N of items***
.804	20

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Section A: The demographic details

Section A - the demographic details consist of the background information of the respondents in relation to their gender and age. The findings are shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3
The distribution of the respondents based on gender

Gender	***Frequency***	***Percentage (%)***
Male	55	36.7
Female	95	63.3
Total	150	100.0

Table 3 illustrates that 55 (36.7%) were male, while 95 (63.3%) were female out of 150 respondents.

Table 4
The distribution of the respondents based on age

Age	***Frequency***	***Percentage (%)***
13 - 15	39	26.0
16 - 17	111	74.0
Total	150	100.0

Table 4 indicates that the respondents' age ranged from 13 to 15 years old, with a frequency of 39 (26.0%) representing lower-form students. Meanwhile, 111 (74.0%) of the respondents were 16 to 17-year-old students from upper-class families.

4.2 Section B: Students' perceptions of school bullying

This section analyses students' perceptions of school bullying. The dimensions of perception in the study are the ability to bully, the reason for bullying, and the prevention of bullying in schools.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for the Students' Ability to Bully at School

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. deviation***
I was bullied at school for the past few months.	150	1.59	0.997
I participated in bullying other students at school in the past few months.	150	1.12	0.490
I used to feel like hurting or bothering other students.	150	1.97	1.237
I can bully other students if I want to do so.	150	2.21	1.377
I think I might join in bullying students they don't like one day.	150	1.56	0.993
Overall Scores	150	1.69	0.668

Table 5 presents the mean scores obtained across the dimension of students' ability to engage in bullying behaviour, with an overall mean of 1.69 (SD = 0.668). The results suggest that, on the whole, the respondents tended to disagree with the idea of being involved in bullying behaviour. Notably, the highest mean score of 2.21 (SD = 1.377) is associated with the perception that they could bully other students if they chose to do so. However, the students reported being least inclined to hurt or bother other students, as reflected by the mean score of 1.97 (SD = 1.237). Furthermore, the lowest mean score of 1.12 (SD = 0.490) pertains to their reported participation in bullying other students at school in the past few months.

Table 6
Descriptive Statistics for the Reasons for Bullying Behavior at School

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***
I think someone is bullying just for fun	150	3.31	1.404
I think someone is bullying because they crave attention	150	3.53	1.384
I think someone is bullying to show how strong they are	150	3.66	1.413
I think someone is bullying because other people do it	150	3.09	1.318
I think someone is bullying to take revenge	150	3.55	1.359
Overall Scores	150	3.43	1.171

The comprehensive mean score, as outlined in Table 6, within the dimension of reasons for engaging in bullying behaviour is 3.43 (SD = 1.171). The majority of students exhibited a moderate level of agreement with all the provided statements. According to the respondents, the primary motive for bullying was to showcase strength, as indicated by the highest mean score of 3.66 (SD=1.413), followed closely by the perception that individuals bully to seek revenge, with a mean of 3.55 (SD=1.359). In contrast, the belief that individuals bully because others engage in similar behaviour garnered the lowest mean score of 3.09 (SD = 1.318).

Table 7
Descriptive Statistics for the Prevention of Bullying Behavior at School

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***
I can stand up and stop my peers from bullying me.	150	3.87	1.168

I will try to put a stop when I see a student being bullied at school	150	3.36	1.249
The teachers or other adults at my school will try to put a stop when a student being bullied	150	3.77	1.239
My school takes firm and appropriate action in handling bullying cases	150	4.25	1.061
Overall Scores	150	3.81	1.179

The overall mean score, as outlined in Table 7, within the dimension of bullying prevention is 3.81 (SD = 0.816). A predominant level of satisfaction was observed among students regarding the actions taken by both the school and them in addressing bullying incidents. The data in Table 7 reveal that the respondents believed the school took resolute and appropriate measures in handling bullying cases, with the highest mean score of 4.25 (SD = 1.061). Additionally, the students expressed a willingness to intervene and prevent their peers from engaging in bullying behaviours, as reflected by a mean score of 3.87 (SD = 1.168). The lowest mean score of 3.36 (SD = 1.249) pertains to their readiness to intervene when witnessing a student being bullied at school.

Subsequently, a T-test was conducted to assess the significant difference between genders in students' perceptions of school bullying. The hypotheses tested are:
H_0: There is no significant difference between genders in students' perceptions of school bullying.
H_1: There is a significant difference between genders in students' perceptions of school bullying.

Table 8
T-test between Students' Perception of School Bullying and Gender

		F	***Sig.***	***t***	***df***	***Sig. (2-tailed)***	***Mean Difference***	***Std. Error Difference***
Perception	Equal variances assumed	0.939	0.334	0.331	148	0.741	0.031	0.094
	Equal variances not assumed			0.343	125.111	0.732	0.031	0.091

Table 8 indicates that there is no substantial difference in students' perceptions of school bullying between males (n = 55, M = 2.9364, SD = 0.50763) and females (n = 95, M = 2.9053, SD = 0.57855), with t=(148)=0.331, p=0.741. Consequently, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

The findings reveal that secondary school student's ability to exhibit bullying behaviour was low. On average, the students were least inclined towards exhibiting bullying behaviours. The result of the independent t-test suggests that there is no statistically significant difference between genders in their perception of school bullying. However, the finding contrasts with Halim et al. (2022). Their study showed that there is a significant difference between the mean perception scores of males and females university students. The contradiction is probably due to the age gap between school and university students, which might affect their perspectives.

4.3 Section C: the effect of school bullying on the quality of learning

This section analyses the effect of school bullying on the quality of learning. The dimensions include psychological, social, academic, and physical effects.

Table 9
Descriptive Statistics for the Psychological Effect of School Bullying

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***
Bully victims show low self-confidence and do not want to speak up in class, often suffer from depression, and think about suicide	150	4.28	1.024
Bully victims experienced anxiety about going to school and meeting people	150	4.33	0.993
Overall Scores	150	4.31	0.861

Table 9 presents the mean scores for the psychological impact of school bullying, with an overall mean score of 4.31 (SD = 0.861). The results suggest that the majority of the respondents agreed that bullying behaviour has psychological effects on individuals, with the highest mean score of 4.33 (SD = 0.993). Hence, this indicates that bully victims often experience anxiety about going to school and interacting with others.

Table 10
Descriptive statistics for the Social Effect of School Bullying

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***
Bully victims less participate in programs and activities carried out because of fear of standing out in school	150	4.15	1.045
Bully victims have fewer friends and worse relationships with their peers as well as fewer opportunities to learn from them	150	4.09	1.016
Bully victims face negative relationships with teachers and the school	150	3.23	1.221
Bully victims have low communication and social skills with teachers in the classroom	150	3.98	0.916
Overall Scores	150	3.86	0.759

Table 10 depicts the overall mean score of 3.86 (SD = 0.759) for the social impact of school bullying. The results indicate the widespread agreement among students regarding its effects on individuals' social well-being. The highest mean score of 4.15 (SD = 1.045) points out that victims of bullying tend to participate less in school programs and activities due to a fear of standing out. Conversely, the social effect with the lowest mean score pertains to bully victims' negative relationships with teachers and the school more than other social impacts.

Table 11
Descriptive Statistics for the Academic Effect of School Bullying

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***
Bully victims have worse attendance rates and drop out of school	150	3.87	1.197
Bully victims receive lower grades and participate less in class discussions	150	3.41	1.176
Bully victims have lower levels of education and are not good at managing finances	150	2.95	1.140
Overall Scores	150	3.41	9.924

Table 12
Descriptive Statistics for the Physical Effect of School Bullying

Items	***N***	***Mean***	***Std. Deviation***
Bully victims feel uncomfortable, tired, have a stomach ache or dizziness being in the same class as the bully	150	4.11	0.991
Overall Scores	150	4.11	0.991

Table 11 presents the descriptive statistics for the effects of school bullying on the academic performance towards the victims. As can be observed in the table, the overall mean score is 3.41 (SD = 0.924) indicating that students generally agreed that bullying adversely affects individuals' academic performance. The highest mean score of 3.87 (SD = 1.197) is associated with the belief that bully-victims exhibit poor attendance rates and are prone to dropping out of school. Similarly, the lowest mean score of 2.95 (SD = 1.140) suggests that bully-victims may have lower education levels and struggle with financial management. Meanwhile, Table 12 displays the effects of school bullying on the physical health towards the victims. As can be seen in the table, the overall mean score of 4.11 (SD = 0.991) indicates that the respondents agreed that bullying behaviour has a physical impact on the individuals involved.

Subsequently, a T-test was performed to ascertain any significant difference between genders in the impact of school bullying on the quality of learning among secondary school students. The hypotheses tested are:
H_0: There is no significant difference between genders in the effect of bullying on the quality of learning.
H_1: There is a significant difference between genders in the effect of bullying on the quality of learning.

Table 13
T-test Between the Effect of Bullying on the Quality of Learning and Gender

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Effect	Equal variances assumed	2.079	0.151	-2.520	148	0.013	-0.294	0.117
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.346	90.493	0.021	-0.294	0.125

Table 13 portrays a notable difference in the impact of bullying on the quality of learning between male respondents (n = 55, M = 3.6509, SD = 0.80505) and female respondents (n = 95, M = 3.9453, SD = 0.61311), with t=(148)=-2.520, p=0.013. As a result, the null hypothesis asserting no difference is rejected.

The findings show that the psychological effects of bullying have the highest mean than other effects. Hence, it supports the assumption that bullying has a harmful effect on individuals' psychology. They do not only affect the victims, but in some cases, they have the same effect on the bully. The result substantiates Rivara et al.'s (2016) study which proves that individuals who bully are more likely to suffer from negative emotional, behavioural, and mental health implications. Moreover, the findings highlight a significant difference between male and female students in relation to the effects of school bully and learning quality. It suggests that males are more likely to engage in bullying and be victims of bullying at school. Casper & Card (2017) discovered that males experience more direct and physical victimization (overt victimization) than females, with a small to medium effect size. As a matter of fact, males are more likely to practice all types of bullying compared to females (Kamal et al., 2023).

To assess any significant relationship between students' perception of school bullying and its effects on learning quality, a Pearson Correlation Test was conducted. The hypotheses are:
H_0: There is no significant relationship between students' perception and the effect of school bullying on the quality of learning among secondary school students.
H_1: There is a significant relationship between students' perception and the effect of school bullying on the quality of learning among secondary school students.

Table 14
Relationship between Students' Perception of School Bullying and its Effect on the Learning Quality

Perception	Pearson Correlation	1	0.293**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	150	0.000
	N		150
Effect	Pearson Correlation	0.293**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	150
	N	150	

Table 14 indicates a statistically significant relationship between students' perception of school bullying and its effect on the quality of learning [r = 0.293, p = 0.000] at the 0.05 level. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The findings denote that students' perceptions of ability, reasons, and prevention positively relate to school bullying impacts on learning quality. It implies that a student's perception of school bullying can significantly influence its impact. Those who perceive they have experienced bullying in their school environment tend to have low learning outcomes. Zalba et al. (2018) support the notion as they discovered that students who were involved in bullying situations exhibited low-grade averages in language practice and Mathematics.

Understanding the impact of bullying on learning quality is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. Bullying can create a hostile learning environment and reduce students' ability to focus, engage, and perform academically. It may lead to deteriorating motivation and low academic achievement. Furthermore, bullying has long-lasting psychological effects on both victims and bullies. Those include impacts on cognitive ability, emotional well-being, and learning outcomes. Addressing bully in schools is essential for promoting positive mental health and creating conducive learning environments. By identifying how bullying affects learning, educators and policymakers can implement targeted interventions to address those issues. It is imperative in order to create a safe and more supportive learning environment for all students.

The findings of the study shed light on various dimensions of school bullying and its multifaceted impacts on secondary school students. Notably, the results reveal that a majority of the students perceive bullying to have significant psychological, social, academic, and physical effects on the victims. Those effects are not uniform across genders, as indicated by the gender-based analysis, where differences emerge in students' perceptions and bullying experiences.

The significant relationship between student's perceptions of school bullying and its impact on learning quality underscores the interconnectedness of those factors. It highlights the importance of addressing the psychological and social aspects of bullying to create an environment conducive to effective learning.

Moreover, the gender-based analysis reveals the variations in how male and female students perceive and experience the effects of bullying, suggesting a need for gender-sensitive interventions. Understanding those differences assists in the development of targeted strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of bullying on student's well-being and learning outcomes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study provides valuable insights into the pervasive issue of school bullying and its far-reaching effects on secondary school students. The comprehensive analysis of students' perceptions, including gender-specific considerations, enhances our understanding of the nuanced nature of bullying experiences.

The rejection of the null hypotheses, with regard to gender differences and the significant relationship between students' perceptions and learning impacts, reaffirms the urgency of comprehensive anti-bullying initiatives. Addressing those issues contributes to students' well-being while creating an environment conducive to optimal learning outcomes.

Future research ought to evaluate the efficacy of broad, multi-tiered anti-bullying measures at the school level by assessing how school policies, peer assistance, and involvement from parents can collectively reduce the incidence of bullying. The study is limited as it only measures students' views on bullying and its effects. It is also recommended to conduct cross-cultural studies to investigate how cultural variations affect bullying. Such studies will aid in developing culturally appropriate and context-specific anti-bullying solutions.

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