

Cyberbullying Awareness Among University Students: Evidence From Public Universities In Perlis, Malaysia

Nur Salimah Alias, Wan Ashiqin Wan Ali, Nor Syamimi Mohamed Adnan, Muhammad Fandy Fauzi, Luqman Hakim Dahlan Tabah & Habeebatul Ain Mohamad Dzahir

Faculty of Business & Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis

ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has become a significant challenge in the digital era, particularly among university students who are active users of online platforms. However, existing literature in the Malaysian context has yet to sufficiently examine students' awareness of cyberbullying. Therefore, this study aims to assess the level of cyberbullying awareness among university students, with a focus on emotional, social, and legal aspects. This study employed a quantitative survey approach. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. A total of 126 respondents from public universities in and near Perlis were selected using simple random sampling. The analysis examined students' awareness across the three dimensions of cyberbullying. The findings indicate that university students demonstrate moderate to high levels of awareness in emotional, social, and legal aspects of cyberbullying. These findings provide useful insights for educational institutions to better understand students' perceptions of cyberbullying and to support the development of initiatives that promote safer digital environments.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, emotional, social, legal, university students.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and the widespread use of social media have transformed the way individuals communicate, interact, and share information. While digital platforms provide numerous benefits for social interaction, learning, and information exchange, they have also created new challenges, including cyberbullying. Cyberbullying refers to the use of digital technologies such as social media, messaging platforms, online forums, and gaming communities to harass, threaten, embarrass, or harm others (Mat So'od et al., 2023). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time and reach a wider audience, making its psychological and social consequences potentially more severe (Bai et al., 2020).

University students are among the most active users of digital technology. Their frequent engagement with social media platforms, online communication tools, and digital learning environments increases their exposure to online interactions that may involve harmful behaviours such as cyberbullying. Previous studies have highlighted that cyberbullying can lead to various negative outcomes, including emotional distress, anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, and social isolation among victims. In addition, cyberbullying may also affect the broader online community by creating hostile digital environments that undermine healthy communication and social relationships (Ademiluyi et al., 2022).

Although cyberbullying has been widely studied in relation to adolescents and school students, research focusing on university students remains relatively limited, particularly in the Malaysian context. University students are often assumed to possess adequate digital literacy and maturity to navigate online environments responsibly. However, awareness of cyberbullying does not solely involve recognizing harmful behaviour; it also includes understanding its emotional impact, social consequences, and legal implications. In Malaysia, several laws and regulations, such as the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, have addressed online misconduct, yet awareness of these legal aspects among students may still be limited.

Existing studies have primarily focused on the prevalence and psychological effects of cyberbullying, while fewer studies have examined the level of awareness among university students regarding different dimensions of cyberbullying. Understanding students' awareness is important because awareness can influence attitudes, behaviours, and responses toward cyberbullying incidents. Students who are more aware of the emotional harm, social implications, and legal consequences associated with cyberbullying may be more likely to engage in responsible online behaviour and contribute to safer digital environments.

Therefore, this study aims to determine the level of cyberbullying awareness among Malaysian university students, with a particular focus on emotional, social, and legal aspects of cyberbullying. Using three public universities in and near Perlis as the study context, this research provides empirical insights into students' understanding of cyberbullying in higher education settings. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature on cyberbullying awareness and provide useful implications for educational institutions in developing awareness programs, digital citizenship education, and preventive strategies to address cyberbullying among university students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cyberbullying in the Digital Era

The rapid development of digital technologies and social media platforms has significantly transformed patterns of communication and social interaction. Online platforms such as social networking sites, messaging applications, and online forums allow individuals to interact instantly regardless of geographical boundaries. While these technologies provide numerous benefits for information sharing, collaboration, and social engagement, they have also created new forms of online risks and harmful behaviours, one of which is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is generally defined as an aggressive and intentional act carried out through electronic forms of communication repeatedly against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008).

Cyberbullying behaviours may include sending threatening or insulting messages, spreading rumours online, posting embarrassing photos or videos, impersonating someone, or deliberately excluding individuals from online communities. Compared with traditional bullying, cyberbullying possesses several unique characteristics that make it particularly harmful. These include anonymity of perpetrators, the rapid dissemination of harmful content to a wide audience, and the potential for continuous harassment regardless of time or place (Kowalski et al., 2014). The permanent and shareable nature of digital content may further intensify the psychological impact on victims, as harmful messages or images can remain accessible online for extended periods.

Research has consistently highlighted the negative psychological consequences associated with cyberbullying. Victims of cyberbullying often experience emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem (Kowalski et al., 2013). In severe cases, cyberbullying may also contribute to social withdrawal, academic difficulties, and mental health problems among young people. As digital communication continues to expand, cyberbullying has become an important issue that requires attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers.

2.2 Cyberbullying Among University Students

Although early research on cyberbullying primarily focused on adolescents and school-aged populations, recent studies indicate that cyberbullying is also prevalent among university students. University students are among the most active users of digital technology, as they frequently rely on online platforms for communication, social interaction, and academic purposes. Their constant engagement with social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and messaging applications increases their exposure to online interactions that may involve cyberbullying behaviours. Unlike school environments where bullying often occurs face-to-face, cyberbullying among university students may take place in online communities, digital learning platforms, or social networking spaces. These behaviours may negatively affect students' emotional well-being, academic motivation, and social relationships.

Previous studies have shown that university students who experience cyberbullying may suffer from emotional distress, anxiety, and decreased academic engagement (Kowalski et al., 2014). In addition, cyberbullying may create hostile online environments that discourage open communication and collaboration among students. In the Malaysian context, research has also indicated that cyberbullying is becoming increasingly common among youths and young adults, particularly with the widespread use of social media and digital communication technologies (Samsudin et al., 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of cyberbullying among university students, many studies have mainly focused on the prevalence and psychological impacts of cyberbullying rather than examining students' awareness of the issue. Understanding the level of awareness among university students is important because awareness influences individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours toward cyberbullying.

2.3 Cyberbullying Awareness

Cyberbullying awareness refers to an individual's ability to recognise behaviours that constitute cyberbullying and to understand the potential consequences associated with such behaviours. Awareness is considered an important factor in preventing cyberbullying because individuals who understand the harmful impacts of cyberbullying are more likely to behave responsibly in online environments and avoid engaging in harmful digital activities.

Scholars have suggested that awareness of cyberbullying can be examined from multiple dimensions. One important dimension is emotional awareness, which refers to an individual's understanding of the psychological and emotional harm that cyberbullying can cause to victims. Studies have shown that victims of cyberbullying often experience feelings of sadness, anger, helplessness, and anxiety (Livazović & Ham, 2019). When individuals are aware of these emotional consequences, they may be less likely to engage in cyberbullying behaviours.

Another important dimension is social awareness, which involves understanding how cyberbullying affects interpersonal relationships and social interactions within online communities. Cyberbullying can damage trust, weaken social relationships, and create negative online environments that discourage participation in digital communities. Individuals with higher levels of social awareness are more likely to recognize the broader social consequences of cyberbullying and promote respectful online communication.

The third dimension is legal awareness, which refers to individuals' understanding that cyberbullying behaviours may violate existing laws and regulations governing online conduct. In Malaysia, several legal provisions address inappropriate online behaviour, including the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and other related cyber laws. However, many young people may not fully understand the legal implications associated with harmful online behaviours. Increasing awareness of legal consequences may therefore play an important role in discouraging cyberbullying activities.

2.4 Cyberbullying in the Malaysian Context

Cyberbullying has become an increasingly important issue in Malaysia, particularly among young people who are highly active in digital environments. Studies have reported that a significant proportion of Malaysian youths have experienced some form of cyberbullying, either as victims or perpetrators (Samsudin *et al.*, 2023). The rapid expansion of social media usage among Malaysian youths has contributed to greater exposure to online interactions where cyberbullying behaviours may occur.

Despite the growing concern regarding cyberbullying in Malaysia, research examining cyberbullying awareness among university students remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on adolescents or school students rather than individuals in higher education institutions. University students represent an important group to study because they are transitioning into adulthood and are expected to demonstrate responsible digital behaviour. Examining their level of awareness regarding cyberbullying may provide valuable insights into how they perceive online harassment and how they respond to such behaviours.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Respondents

For the purpose of this study, a survey was conducted to collect the data. A sampling method known as random sampling was used; respondents were selected from three public universities near the state of Perlis: Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perlis, and Universiti Utara Malaysia. The required sample size for this study was calculated using G*power software version 3.1.9.7. For that purpose, the expected effect size (f^2), significant alpha (α) values, desired power, and the number of variables all play a role in determining the total sample size required for correlation. In addition, the effect sizes by Cohen (1992), small ($f^2 = 0.02$), moderate ($f^2 = 0.15$), and high ($f^2 = 0.35$), also served as a reference for choosing the right sample size. Thus, the suggested sample size is 115 participants. Based on these parameters, the recommended minimum sample size was 115 respondents. At the conclusion of the data collection period, 126 respondents had completed and submitted the survey, and their responses were subsequently used in this study's analysis.

3.2 Research Instruments

The instrument employed in this study was a structured questionnaire administered online via Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised only two main sections: Section A and Section B.

Section A consisted of demographic items to gather background information about the respondents, including age, gender, race, university, and year of study. These items were self-developed following standard demographic data collection practices.

Section B measured the level of cyberbullying awareness among university students. The section consisted of 17 items representing three dimensions of awareness: emotional, social, and legal aspects. Items 1-6 assessed the emotional dimension, items 7-12 measured the social dimension, and items 13-17 evaluated the legal dimension. The measurement items were adapted from previous studies by Lawler and Mulluzzo (2015) and Darawasheh (2023). Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis, and percentiles, were computed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.0. The normality of the variables was assessed by examining skewness and kurtosis values. These statistics provided an overview of the data distribution and supported a more rigorous examination of the study variables. The reliability results presented in Table 2 provide information regarding the internal consistency of the study constructs. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which measures the degree to which a set of items is interrelated and consistently represents the same construct. Cronbach's alpha is widely used in research to assess the reliability of measurement scales. The results indicate satisfactory reliability for all dimensions of the cyberbullying awareness construct. The Cronbach's alpha values were 0.832 for emotional awareness, 0.869 for social awareness, and 0.827 for legal awareness. These values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating that the measurement items demonstrate good reliability and internal consistency (Ahmad & Zainuddin, 2023).

Table 2 Reliability Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Emotional Awareness	0.832	6
Social Awareness	0.869	6
Legal Awareness	0.827	5

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Table 3 summarizes the demographic profile of the study participants and the distribution of respondents by age, gender, race, university, and level of study for a total of 126 respondents. The data show that of the 126 respondents, 48 (38.1%) are male and 78 (61.9%) are female. Most of the respondents, 85 out of 126 (67.5%) respondents are in a range age between 21-23 years old,

followed by 28 (22.2%) respondents are in age range between 24-26 years old and only 9 (7.1%) and 4 (3.2%) respondents from the age range of 18-20 years old and 27 years old and above respectively. According to the sample's race breakdown, 100 respondents (79.4%) are Malay. Only 14 (11.1%), 4 (3.2%), and 8 (6.3%) respondents are in the Chinese, Indian, and others category, respectively. The larger percentage of Malays raises the possibility of a racial gap in the population from which the sample was taken, or in participation rates. Given that race may affect cyberbullying awareness, this racial distribution should be taken into account when evaluating the study's conclusions. It may be necessary for the study to take into account how this race discrepancy affects the outcomes and whether it is representative of the cyberbullying awareness pattern in Malaysia.

With 126 respondents, the majority of participants, 63 (50%), are from Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), and 36 (28.6%) are Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) students, and lastly, 27 (21.4%) participants are from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) cawangan Perlis. In addition, the data also shows that most of the participants are degree-level students with 120 (95.2%) respondents, and only 5 (4%) and 1 (0.8%) respondents are diploma-level and PhD.

Table 3 Demographic Profile

Designation	Total	%
Respondents	126	100
Age		
18-20 years old	9	7.1
21-24 years old	85	67.5
24-26 years old	28	22.2
27 years old & above	2	4
Gender		
Male	48	38.1
Female	78	61.9
Race		
Malay	100	79.4
Chinese	14	11.1
Indian	4	3.2
Others	8	6.3
University		
UniMAP	63	50
UUM	36	28.6
UITM PERLIS	27	21.4
Level of Study		
Diploma	5	4.0
Degree	120	95.2
PhD	1	0.8

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of cyberbullying awareness across the emotional, social, and legal dimensions. These statistics provide an overview of the central tendencies and variability within the sample. Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the mean scores and standard deviations for each key construct measured in this study.

The results indicate that all constructs recorded relatively high mean values, suggesting that respondents generally demonstrate a high level of cyberbullying awareness. Among the three dimensions, legal awareness ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.98$) obtained the highest mean score. This indicates that respondents show strong awareness in recognising cyberbullying behaviours and understanding their potential legal consequences. This finding suggests that public university students in Perlis are capable of identifying cyberbullying acts and are aware that such behaviours may violate existing cyber laws and regulations.

In addition, emotional awareness ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.08$) showed a relatively high mean score, followed by social awareness ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.19$), although it was slightly lower than the other dimensions. These findings suggest that respondents are able to recognise the emotional harm experienced by victims of cyberbullying and understand the potential impact of such behaviour on social relationships and online interactions. Overall, the results indicate that students possess a relatively comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying, encompassing legal, emotional, and social perspectives.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that university students generally demonstrate moderate to high levels of cyberbullying awareness due to their frequent engagement with digital media and online communication platforms (Kowalski et al., 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). The high level of legal awareness observed in this study may also reflect the increasing public attention towards cybercrime laws and online harassment policies, which have been widely discussed in educational institutions and public discourse.

Furthermore, the relatively high emotional awareness among respondents suggests that students are able to recognise the psychological and emotional consequences associated with cyberbullying. Previous studies have highlighted that cyberbullying victimisation may lead to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem among victims (Tokunaga, 2010). When individuals are aware of these consequences, they may be more likely to engage in responsible online behaviour and avoid harmful digital interactions.

Although social awareness also recorded a relatively high mean score, it was slightly lower than the other dimensions. This may indicate that students are more familiar with the individual-level consequences of cyberbullying than its broader social implications, such as its impact on peer relationships, group dynamics, and community well-being. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies which suggest that young adults often recognise personal and legal consequences of cyberbullying more readily than its wider social effects (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

Overall, the findings highlight that cyberbullying awareness among university students encompasses multiple dimensions, including emotional sensitivity, social responsibility, and legal understanding. Strengthening these aspects of awareness is essential in promoting responsible digital communication and reducing harmful online behaviours among young adults.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics

Constructs	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Awareness	126	1	5	3.83	1.079
Social Awareness	126	1	5	3.78	1.199
Legal Awareness	126	1	5	3.97	0.975

The findings of this study provide several important implications for universities and policymakers. The relatively high level of cyberbullying awareness among university students suggests that current efforts in digital literacy and online safety education may be contributing positively to students' understanding of cyberbullying issues. However, the slightly lower level of social awareness indicates the need for more comprehensive educational initiatives that emphasise the broader social consequences of cyberbullying.

Universities can play an important role in addressing this issue by incorporating cyberbullying awareness, digital ethics, and responsible online communication into media literacy programmes, student development courses, and campus campaigns. Integrating these topics into academic curricula, particularly within communication and media-related courses, may further strengthen students' understanding of ethical behaviour in digital environments.

In addition, higher education institutions may collaborate with policymakers, technology platforms, and community organisations to develop clearer reporting mechanisms and preventive strategies to address cyberbullying incidents. Strengthening preventive education and institutional policies can foster responsible digital citizenship and help create safer online environments for university students.

5. LIMITATION & RECOMMENDATION

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected from students of a single public university in Perlis, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other universities or regions in Malaysia. Future studies should consider involving a larger and more diverse sample across multiple higher education institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying awareness among Malaysian university students.

Second, this study employed a cross-sectional survey design, which captures respondents' perceptions at a single point in time. Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital communication and social media platforms, longitudinal studies would be useful to examine how cyberbullying awareness and behaviours change over time.

In addition, the data were collected via self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to response or social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate mixed-method approaches, such as interviews or focus group discussions, to obtain deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions regarding cyberbullying in digital environments.

Further research may also explore other factors associated with cyberbullying awareness, including digital media literacy, empathy, personality traits, and patterns of online behaviour. Investigating these variables may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants that influence cyberbullying awareness and responsible online conduct among young adults.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the level of cyberbullying awareness among public university students in Perlis across emotional, social, and legal dimensions. The findings indicate that students generally demonstrate a high level of awareness, with legal awareness showing the highest mean score. This suggests that students are capable of recognising the legal implications associated with cyberbullying behaviour. The results highlight the importance of continuing cyberbullying education and digital ethics initiatives within universities. Strengthening awareness across multiple dimensions may contribute to promoting responsible digital behaviour and creating safer online environments among young adults.

REFERENCES

- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2018). Connecting adolescent suicide to the severity of bullying and cyberbullying. *Journal of School Violence*, 17(4), 1–13.
- Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2014). Bullying in the digital age: A critical review and meta-analysis of cyberbullying research among youth. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(4), 1073–1137.
- Kowalski, R. M., Giumetti, G. W., Schroeder, A. N., & Lattanner, M. R. (2013). Psychological, physical, and academic correlates of cyberbullying and traditional bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(1), S13–S20.
- Livazović, G., & Ham, E. (2019). Cyberbullying and emotional distress in adolescents. *Heliyon*, 5(11), e03020.
- Patchin, J. W., & Hinduja, S. (2015). Measuring cyberbullying: Implications for research. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 23, 69–74.
- Samsudin, E. Z., et al. (2023). Cyberbullying victimisation and its psychological impact among Malaysian youths. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20, 1–12.
- Smith, P. K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S., & Tippett, N. (2008). Cyberbullying: Its nature and impact in secondary school pupils. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(4), 376–385.
- Tokunaga, R. S. (2010). Following you home from school: A critical review and synthesis of cyberbullying victimization research. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(3), 277–287.