

Prevalence of Bullying Behaviour Among College Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the prevalence of bullying behaviour among college students. The study also aimed at exploring the role of gender differences and nature of college system i.e. private or public on bullying. Sample of 400 students were selected through convenient sampling from public and private colleges of the Gujrat city. Translated version of Illinois Bullying Scale (IBS; Atta & Shujja, 2011) was utilized to find out the prevalence of bullying. Results of the prevalence of bullying were reported as (i.e., never, mild, moderate, moderate to severe and severe). The findings suggested that majority of participants fall in the moderate category of victim, bullying and fight. The findings also revealed that boys showed significantly higher level of bullying as compared to girls. These outcomes will be supportive in creating awareness regarding mental health related problems of students and making policies regarding precautionary measures for bullying.

Key Words: Bullying, College, Boys, Girls

INTRODUCTION

Bullying has become so prevalent and one of the top tier issue around the globe. It is not the concern of single individual or a specific area but it is known as a wide-reaching problem (Ariani et al., 2025). Before bullying is consider as something happens among school students (NCES, 2019). Bullying is intentional, form of aggression that repeats and it involves power imbalance it is expressed by physical, relational, verbal or digital means that lead physical or psychological harm (Tay, 2023, Shahzadi, Arooj, & Shirazi, 2025). However, bullying is often confused with fighting but the difference of balance of power should be noted. Students, when engaged in fighting hold equal positions but balance of power is absent when students are indulged in bullying behavior (Shahzadi, Arshad, & Shirazi, 2025). Bullying behaviour rises from the need of dominating others by the use of power. There is unequal distribution of power between bullies and victims. (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Sharp, 1994; Ttofi et al., 2008).

The defining characteristics of bullying are: ongoing, on purpose, an abuse of power and very harmful. It usually involves cruelty toward a victim. A bully perceives himself as holding a position of power over the victim either because of dominant social status or due to his/her physical size. Bullies have positive perception towards violence, bullying and aggression-related behaviour as they consider it to be helpful in resolving the interpersonal conflicts (Hoover, 1992; Wolke, 2004). There are different factors like economic, physical, psychological, and social of power imbalance, which bullies use to harass their targets (Spadafora et al., 2022). According to Olweus (2013) prevalence of bullying in the public school is 48.9% physical appearance and 19.1% was imbalance of power on the other hand causes in private school was physical status 45.0%, power imbalance 25.0% and low socioeconomic status was 22.5% common

(Salman et al., 2021, Shahzadi, Arooj, & Shirazi, 2025). Intention is the feature that differentiate the bullying and accidental behaviour which cause harm. For example, Individual behave in a rude manner or cause harm to the other person without intention (e.g., eating loudly during class) (Spadafora & Volk, 2021).

Various studies explore the effects of the bullying such as mental health problems like depression, suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts and self-harm (Zhu et al., 2024). Perpetrators of bullying majorly affected by different factors like peer pressure, family dynamics and the culture related factors (Burger, 2022; Torchyan et al., 2024). The victims commonly experience social isolation, different uncommon characteristics, perceive as vulnerable these make them easier targets (Kennedy, 2020). Bullying behaviour have different types, for example physical harm like pushing, hitting, or slapping; social exclusion online or in person; nonverbal aggression like giving nasty looks or rude gestures; verbal abuse including mocking, name-calling, and spreading rumors; and cyber aggression, such as sharing embarrassing photos or posting humiliating content on social media. Although several forms of bullying exist, research generally identifies four main types: physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying (Olweus & Limber, 2018; Barlett et al., 2021). Bullying can take place in two different ways directly or indirectly. The direct bullying involves hitting, threatening, teasing, and indirect involves as social exclusion or rumors (Shahzadi et al., 2019).

The social dominance theory explain people have the desire of powerful and dominant. The desire to rule and dominate is a primary factor that motivates individuals to get indulged in bullying behavior and bullies obtain power by humiliating and intimidating victims (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The studies showed social dominance goals are positively related with the bullying (Pan et al., 2020). The link among the bullying and the social status different for boys and girls, as the boys are more motivated for bullying by popularity than girls (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012, Shahzadi, Arooj, & Shirazi, 2025).

Khawar and Malik (2016) conducted research to study the prevalence of bullying, its different types and peer victimization. Result indicated no significant difference in bullying roles across gender and revealed significant differences across participants' demographic characteristics and for certain types of victimization (Shahzadi, Arshad, & Shirazi, 2025). Organizational Culture Theory explain College climate and atmosphere greatly influences chances of students' participation in bullying perpetration in the college settings. The climate of institution predicts the different risky behaviors (Lunetti et al., 2022). The study show that high level of bullying was reported in the public school (54%) as compared to the private (46%) (Salman et al., 2021).

Gap in research

Researches on bullying behavior among children have been carried out in Pakistan but still developing and under developed areas were not the target. Bullying has become one of the top tier issues in Pakistan and colleges are the most frequent place where bullying is reported but not a single study has been done in the colleges of Gujrat city. College level is supposed to be the last chance for teachers to engage with students for building the character, personality, and self-responsibility. So in such case, this can be the last chance for some students to alter attitudes toward bullying perpetration and victimization. This paper will be addressing bullying behavior in general but college bullying will be its main focus. The current study will also identify risk factors involved in peer victimization among adolescents studying in colleges. It will yield data about the prevalence of bullying behaviour amongst college students of public and private schools of Gujrat city. It will also create the awareness regarding efficient intervention strategies for colleges as college staff plays quite an important role in supporting, intervening and educating students regarding bullying behaviors.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Boys show significantly higher level of bullying behaviour as compared to girls.

Hypothesis 2: Students studying in public schools shows higher level of bullying than students from private sectors.

Methods

The current study is cross-sectional survey research design and was aimed to determine the prevalence of bullying behaviour among college students.

Population

The target population in the current study included students of 1st year and 2nd year from public and private colleges of Gujrat city.

Sampling and Participants of the Study

Data was collected from students attending public and private colleges in Gujrat through a convenience sampling approach. Convenience sampling is a subtype of non-probability sampling, and it was selected due to its feasibility and accessibility because students were available and willing to contribute. This sampling process was appropriate given that this study was of an exploratory nature and the logistical considerations. The ultimate sample included 400 students, aged 12-19 ($M = 17.5$), and there was a good mix of male and female students from different educational settings.

Instrument

- **Demographic sheet.** A demographic sheet was prepared which consisted of demographic variables which were related to the bullying behavior. This sheet included variables like age, gender, family system, urban/rural residence, and private/public college.
- **Illinois Bullying scale.** Illinois Bullying Scale (IBS) was used to explore the prevalence of bullying among intermediate students. Illinois bullying scale was developed by Dorothy L. Espelage, (2001) which can be used valid for the age of 8 to 18 years old. It consists of 18 items divided into three subscales: bully, the victim, the victim and fighting scale. Victim subscale comprises of item no. 4, 5, 6 and 7. Fighting subscale comprises of item no. 3, 10, 11, 12 and 13. Bully subscale comprises of item no. 1, 2, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18. A five-point rating scale was used to rate each item. Urdu translated version (Shujja and Atta, 2011) of bullying scale was used for this study. It is highly reliable for the adolescents of Pakistan.

Procedure

First of all, permission was obtained from the heads of private and public colleges after discussing the intimidating effects of bullying, fighting and its victimization on students' mental health, academic performance and college setting. The consent of participants to participate in survey was ensured by through informed consent. Students were ensured about the confidentiality of the information shared by them. They were told that data was collected for research purpose only. Demographic sheets were distributed and Illinois Bullying Scale was administered among students according to the sampling plan. Instructions regarding completing the questionnaires were complete read out to students. Participants were also provided with written instructions. The data was analyzed by using SPSS 21.

Results

Table-1: Reliability of IBS

Scale	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
IBS	18	.87

Table 1 presents the reliability analysis of the Illinois Bullying Scale, which formed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87 that is reflecting a high level of internal consistency and construct reliability within the current study.

Table-2:
Frequency and Percentage of the Demographic Variables

Variable	<i>F</i>	%
Gender		
Male	200	50
Female	200	50
College category		
Public	200	50
Private	200	50
Family system		
Joint	185	53.8
Nuclear	215	46.3

Table 2 reported the frequency and percentage distribution of demographic variable such as including gender, type of college, and family system. The total sample comprised of 400 intermediate students with a like representation of males and females 50%. A majority of participants such as 53.8% belonged to joint family systems, whereas 46.3% were from nuclear families. Moreover, half of the respondents 50% were enrolled in public colleges and the residual 50% appeared private colleges in Gujrat.

Table – 3:
Response Percentages on the Illinois Bullying Scale

Variable	Never %	One or two times %	Three or four times	Five or six times %	seven or more times %
Upset other students for fun of it	40.3	30.0	7.0	3.8	19.0
In a group I teased other student	45.5	25.0	9.3	4.5	15.8
Fought students I could easily beat.	67.5	17.3	7.8	1.5	6.0
Other students picked on me	38.8	25.0	12.8	6.8	16.8
Students made fun of me.	32.8	28.7	12.0	6.3	20.3
Students called name of me	36.8	19.8	12.5	6.0	25.0
Got hit and pushed by other students.	56.5	18.5	10.0	5.0	10.0
Helped harass other students.	64.8	20.3	5.8	2.5	6.8
Teased other students	26.0	33.5	15.5	6.5	18.5
I indulged in fighting	47.0	27.0	12.5	4.5	9.0

Threatened to hurt or hit another student	54.8	20.0	9.3	5.8	10.3
Got into physical fight because I was angry	30.8	32.8	17.0	5.8	13.8
Hit back when someone hit me first.	30.8	29.0	13.0	6.5	20.8
I treated students badly when I was angry	33.5	35.8	15.0	4.8	11.0
Spread rumours about others.	67.0	18.5	5.5	3.5	5.5
Started (instigated) arguments or conflicts.	58.5	18.3	11.0	2.3	9.8
Encouraged people to fight	51.5	19.0	9.0	2.0	18.5
I excluded other students from my clique of friend	65.5	19.0	5.8	3.5	6.3

Table 3 reported the percentage distribution of responses on the Illinois Bullying Scale by Atta & Shujja, (2011) over the past 30 days. The highest response for “one or two times” 35.8% was observed for the statement “*I treated students badly when I was angry.*” For “three or four times” 17% and the most frequent response was “*Got into a physical fight because I was angry.*” The maximum response for “five or six times” 6.8% was “*Other students picked on me,*” while for “seven or more times” 25.0% that was “*Students called me names.*”

Table – 4:
Percentage of Participants across Bullying, Victim, and Fight Categories on the Illinois Bullying Scale

Variable	No fight, victim, bullying%	Mild %	Moderate%	Moderate to severe%	Severe%
Victim level	14.6	17.1	43.2	17.3	7.8
Fight Level	12.5	16.5	47.8	19.5	3.7
bullying level	14	26.1	45.5	11	3.4

Table 4 showed the distribution of victimization, fighting, and bullying levels among students during the past 30 days. About 14 to 15% of students reported no participation in bullying, fighting, or victimization during period. The majority clear-cut within the moderate category for all three-bullying level. Mild levels were informed by a smaller proportion of members. Only a few students reported severe levels of victimization such as 7.8%, fighting 3.7 and bullying 3.4% only.

Table-5:
Gender Differences on the Illinois Bullying Scale (IBS)

Gender Differences on the Attitudes Bullying Scale (ABS)								
Scale	Variables	Gender of respondent				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
		Boys (n=200)		Girls (n=200)				
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
IBS	Victim	6.72	4.51	4.21	4.30	5.69	0.00	0.57
	Fighting	6.26	4.58	4.86	5.41	2.86	0.00	0.28
	Bullying	9.93	6.30	8.73	7.81	1.69	0.00	0.17
	Total	22.91	15.39	17.8	17.25	10.24	0.00	1.54

Note. "Small, $d = 0.2$," "medium, $d = 0.5$," and "large, $d = 0.8$ " $p < .05$

Table 5 presents the gender-based comparison on the Illinois Bullying Scale, revealing a significant difference in total scores between boys and girls. Boys reported notably higher levels of victimization, bullying, and fighting behaviors than girls.

Table-6:
Comparison of Public and Private Schools Students on IBS

Scale	Variables	Schools				<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	Cohen's d
		Private (n=200)		Public (n=200)				
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
IBS	Victim	5.52	4.53	5.41	3.56	.240	.81	0.03
	Fighting	5.39	4.64	5.72	6.08	-.672	.50	0.06
	Bully	8.97	6.62	9.68	3.61	-.999	.32	0.13
	Total	19.88	15.79	20.81	13.25	-1.43	1.63	0.22

Note. "Small, $d = .2$," "medium, $d = .5$," and "large, $d = .8$ " $p < .05$

Table 6 reported that the results of the independent samples *t*-test comparing students from public and private colleges on victimization, bullying, and fighting bullying levels. The analysis exposed that no significant differences in overall Illinois Bullying Scale (IBS) scores was reported between the two groups.

DISCUSSION

The current study was aimed to explore the prevalence of bullying behaviour among college students. Results of the prevalence of bullying were reported in terms of never, mild, moderate, moderate to severe and severe category and the result of maximum sample fall in the moderate category of victim, bullying and fight. Results of independent sample *t*-test revealed that boys showed significantly higher level of bullying as compared to girls. Difference in rates of bullying in public and private schools were almost same.

Panayiotis et al. (2011) indicate in their study that 5.4% of the children studied were identified as bullies, 7.4% as victims, and 4.2% as bully-victims, where bullies and victims often occupy overlapping statuses. Similarly, Owuamanam and Makinwa (2015) found that 28% of the students surveyed had experienced bullying behaviour as victims while 42% acknowledged bullying classmates. The findings in the current study are aligned with these studies and support our first hypothesis, which states that boys engage in more bullying behaviour than girls (Shahzadi, Arshad, & Shirazi, 2025). Studies have found that boys are more likely than girls to engage in traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Cosma et al., 2022; Kowalski et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Barlett & Coyne, 2014) and this may be due to socialization processes, greater acceptance of aggression in boys, and differences in emotional expression standards between the genders. The results also revealed that there was no significant difference in the rate of bullying in relation to institutes.

The empirical evidences also supported the notion that there is no statistically significant difference among private and public schools (Machimbarrena & Garaigordobil, 2017). The reason of current findings of the

study may be attributed to cross-cultural factors and the opinion that students studying in public or private colleges may not differ in background they come from; children from different areas come to either public or private colleges. The reason may also be attributed to other factors playing role in bullying behaviours such as age, family system or social class.

In the Pakistani context, where collective cultural values and hierarchical social edifices often shape student communications the perseverance of bullying in colleges highlights an urgent need for institutional and societal intervention (Shahzadi, Arooj, & Shirazi, 2025). Notwithstanding growing awareness of mental health issues, bullying leftovers underreported due to stigma, regularisation of aggressive behavior, and imperfect guidance resources in educational organizations. These conclusions call for the incorporation of anti-bullying policies, counseling services and awareness programs within colleges to foster empathy, respect and psychological security among students. Addressing bullying at this stage is indispensable for encouraging emotional well-being, academic engagement and the development of socially answerable youth in Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

The present study discovered the prevalence of bullying behaviour among college students and examined gender and institutional differences. Results revealed that a majority of students fell within the moderate category of bullying, victimization and fighting, indicating that bullying leftovers a notable concern in college situations. Male students reported significantly higher levels of bullying and victim behaviours than female students, brilliant gender-based differences in aggressive appearance and peer relations. However, no noteworthy differences were found between students from public and private colleges that suggesting bullying is a prevalent issue across educational systems unrelatedly of established type. These conclusions underscore the need for awareness movements, preventive policies and mental-health-focused interventions within college environments. Teachers, counsellors and managers should work collaboratively to recognize at-risk students and endorse a culture of empathy and deference. Future studies may extend this work by investigative psychological, familial and social forecasters of bullying, as well as by including broader and more varied samples across multiple regions of Pakistan to improve generalizability.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In present study prevalence of bullying and its relationship with gender and nature of college were measured only. So, future researchers can study relationship of bullying with other variables too to address the issue on vast scale. There exists relationship between bullying and self-esteem, aggression, academic achievement, suicidal ideation peer pressure etc. so research can be carried out on these. The current study was conducted in colleges only, but future researchers can conduct research on university level or other setting too to deal with the issue on bigger scale. This study comprised limitations such as This research comprised only sample of 11th and 12th graders students with age range of 12 to 19 years. Sample was only collected from public and private school. The data were not taken from parents and teacher. Sample size of the current study was limited. Research was done in Gujrat city only. It should be out of Gujrat city in wide areas of Pakistan.

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