**Research Article**

# Lived Experiences of Cyber-bullying Victims in a Higher Educational Institution in Las Piñas City

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**ABSTRACT**

Technology has modernized our lives, but it has also led to the rise of cyber-bullying, a global issue that can lead to psychological distress, traumatic experiences, poor mental health, suicidal thoughts, and even self-harm. Research shows that college students often experience increased stress, depression, anger, and irritability due to cyber-bullying. Laws criminalizing cyber-bullying offenses include cyber-stalking, cybersex, identity theft, and online libel. At the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA-Las Piñas Campus, ninety students have reported experiencing cyber-bullying. This study aims to provide valuable information for tailoring cyber-safety prevention programs for college students and to raise awareness about the issue. The findings will help universities develop strategies to minimize or completely eradicate cyber-bullying, and the research will be pioneering in this institution. The study offers a deeper understanding of the emotional, psychological, and social impact of cyber-bullying on students. It also highlights the coping mechanisms victims use to navigate their experiences. Lastly, the study recommended the need for comprehensive intervention strategies and supportive policies within educational institutions. By fostering resilience and creating a safer environment for students, schools can help mitigate the harmful effects of cyber-bullying and promote a culture of respect and empathy.

*Keywords*: *College students, Cyber-bullying, Lived experiences, Higher educational institution*

## Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology, particularly the internet, has transformed many aspects of daily life. People now have easy access to information, seamless global communication, and more efficient digital interactions. However, these advancements also bring new challenges, including cyber-bullying. According to Vitto (2018) [28], cyber-bullying involves sending, uploading, or sharing

harmful, false, or hateful content about others. In severe cases, it can escalate into criminal or antisocial behavior [36].

In the Philippines, the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (Republic Act 10627) defines bullying as any serious or repeated written, verbal, electronic, or physical act directed at a student, causing fear, harm, or disruption of the educational process [5]. When these actions happen online, they are classified as cyber-bullying. Despite existing laws and growing awareness, cyber-bullying remains a serious issue, especially in higher education, where its effects are not yet fully understood.

Cyber-bullying takes many forms, including flaming (public insults), harassment (repeated offensive messages), denigration (spreading false information to damage someone's reputation), impersonation (pretending to be someone else to post harmful content), outing and trickery (exposing private information), and exclusion (deliberately isolating someone from online groups) [5]. Studies show that cyber-bullying is a global problem. In India, for example, 37% of parents reported in 2018 that their children had experienced cyber-bullying, a 5% increase from 2016 [35]. In the Philippines, school-related bullying cases rose by 21% in 2014, with an average of 31 incidents reported daily [5]. Organizations like UNESCO and WHO recognize cyber-bullying as a significant public health concern affecting people of all ages [34].

Most research on cyber-bullying focuses on primary and secondary education, leaving a gap in understanding its impact on college students. Unlike younger students, college students face different academic and social pressures [18]. The increased use of social media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has likely worsened cyber-bullying, yet its effects on college students remain underexplored. Many students engage in online activities without realizing they may be victims, perpetrators, or bystanders of cyber-bullying. Understanding its prevalence in higher education is crucial [8].

Reports of online harassment in universities, including racial, sexist, and homophobic threats, highlight the need for further research. Studies show that cyber-bullying can seriously impact mental health and academic performance, yet most research has focused on younger students [5][8]. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining the lived experiences of college students facing cyber-bullying at the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA – Las Piñas Campus.

Previous studies have found that cyber-bullying is prevalent among college students and is associated with various negative outcomes. For instance, research conducted among Chinese college students revealed a high prevalence of cyber-bullying, with significant correlations to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression [15]. Additionally, a study focusing on first-year university students found that experiences of cyber-bullying were linked to increased intentions to drop out, particularly when the bullying involved social exclusion, impersonation, or the non-consensual sharing of sexual images [4].

Furthermore, a bibliometric analysis of literature on cyber-bullying in higher education highlighted the significant impact and determinants of cyber-bullying on students' well-being, emphasizing the need for comprehensive interventions by higher education institutions [12]. Another study explored the relationship between cyber-bullying, social anxiety, and social comparison among college students, finding that social anxiety was associated with both cyber-bullying victimization and perpetration [17]. Research has also examined the concurrent relations of cyber-bullying to belief in a just world and empathy, providing insights into the psychological factors associated with cyber-bullying behaviors [10].

At the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA – Las Piñas Campus, data from the University Guidance Center show that 90 college students have reported being victims of cyber-bullying, emphasizing the urgency of addressing this issue.

This study aims to investigate the prevalence, forms, and effects of cyber-bullying on college students. The findings will help improve institutional policies and intervention strategies. By focusing on the specific experiences of college students, the research will contribute to a better understanding of cyber-bullying in higher education and support the development of effective prevention programs. The study will also guide campus-wide efforts

to raise awareness, support victims, and create a safer learning environment.

The research will be limited to victims of cyber-bullying who are willing to be interviewed. Since qualitative research involves researcher interpretation, personal biases may affect the findings [31]. Despite these limitations, this study aims to provide valuable insights into cyber-bullying in higher education and inform future research and policy-making.

Ultimately, this research seeks to fill a critical gap by examining cyber-bullying in higher education. The findings will help shape institutional policies and intervention programs, ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment for college students.

## Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically descriptive phenomenology, to explore the lived experiences of cyber-bullying victims at the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA – Las Piñas Campus. Unstructured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected students, allowing them to share in-depth narratives. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, was used to identify recurring patterns and themes from the data. The research locale, a higher educational institution in Las Piñas City, served as the setting for this pioneering study, aimed at fostering a safer learning envi-

ronment. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and compliance with institutional review protocols, were strictly observed to protect participants' rights and well-being.

Data collection involved face-to-face or virtual interviews, transcribed verbatim for accuracy. Labov's structural model of narrative analysis was employed to examine cyber-bullying experiences through elements such as abstract, orientation, complicating action, result, evaluation, and coda. The thematic coding approach by Braun and Clarke was applied to systematically categorize data into meaningful themes, integrating both deductive and inductive coding methods. Findings from the study are expected to contribute to institutional policies and intervention programs, addressing cyber-bullying and its impact on students' psychological and emotional well-being.

## Result and Discussion
### 1. What are the lived experiences of co-participants in cyber-bullying?

The lived experiences of co-participants in cyber-bullying, as explored in the study, reveal significant emotional, psychological, and social consequences of online harassment. Each participant's narrative highlights unique yet interconnected aspects of cyber-bullying, emphasizing the profound and lasting impact on their well-being, academic experiences, and social interactions.

*Table 1. Lived Experiences of Co-Participant 1 in Cyber-Bullying*

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 1's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| **Abstract** | They said all sorts of things to me... I was hurt by their words, and many people knew about what was being spread and said about me. |
| **Orientation** | I was in my second year of college. It started when I stopped letting them copy from me because I felt used, and this person was proud, selfish, and did not want to be outperformed. |
| **Complicating Action** | So, when I started ignoring them and not replying to their messages, and when I started getting higher grades than them, they posted on Facebook using the term 'pispis' (suck-up) implying I was sucking up to the professor. |
| **Result** | Someone sent me a screenshot where my name was mentioned, and people were commenting on the post calling me a crybaby, loser, and baby girl. |
| **Evaluation** | The most distressing part for me was when someone commented 'shoot her in the head' and other such comments. I was offended and scared. |

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 1's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| **Coda** | They left for the academy and have been gone for 2-3 years. When they left the school, I felt comforted and at ease because I no longer had to experience this again. |

*Table 2. Lived Experiences of Co-Participant 2 in Cyber-Bullying*

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 2's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| **Abstract** | They kept throwing accusations at me that I wasn't doing; it was so hard to accept what they were seeing, hearing, and saying on social media. |
| **Orientation** | This happened when I was pushing for a project to proceed, which they didn't want, but I pushed for it and in the end, the project proceeded because the Dean followed me since I was the president then. They started to hate me from that point. I was in my fourth year of college when this happened. |
| **Complicating Action** | They started hinting at things through the group chat, and eventually, I discovered they had their own group chat where they attacked me, sent my pictures, edited them to make fun of me, and body-shamed me, saying I was fat and it would be fun to butcher me. Everything was below the belt. Even the group chat where I wasn't included had my picture as the profile picture. |
| **Result** | When I graduated from education, they wondered why I didn't have friends, wasn't hanging out with anyone, and didn't go out of the house. That's when I told my parents, and they said to let it go, move on because that's how life is, and it's better to stay away from them. |
| **Evaluation** | There was so much cyber-bullying and physical bullying when we met, and I heard about it from others. Even now, when I visited the office, it was worse because of the Batch pin issue. They said I started the problem, couldn't solve it, and passed it to the lower class, which I had nothing to do with. |
| **Coda** | Now that I'm doing face-to-face reviews again, I don't make friends anymore because I don't want that to happen to me again. I used to be friendly and make friends immediately, but now I avoid even talking to people or asking how they are. I don't do it anymore because I don't want what happened before to happen again. It became a trauma for me. Now, I don't have any friends except Daniel, who is still in the PNPA academy. |

*Table 3. Lived Experiences of Co-Participant 3 in Cyber-Bullying*

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 3's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| **Abstract** | It started around elementary when they kept teasing me for having a flat nose, and as we grew up and discovered social media, their bullying leveled up, reaching the internet, sometimes on Facebook. I still experience it until now. |
| **Orientation** | Whenever I share a picture on Facebook, or even if they post my picture, they comment something bad, or put a caption. And of course, we are friends on Facebook and have mutual friends, so I feel ashamed because they can see it. |
| **Complicating Action** | Many times, on posts and in group chats.) <br> Insults are made against me in Facebook posts and in group chats on Messenger. |
| **Result** | Because of what happened, I wear a jacket with a hood to cover my face. My self-confidence to face other people was affected, and I find it hard to talk to or get to know other people. |
| **Evaluation** | No, because they are still my friends until now. It's like wherever they are happy, it's fine with me. |

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 3's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| Coda | I guess I just got used to it because no matter what they say, I can't do anything about it, and neither can they. This is who I really am. I just let them be. |

*Table 4. Lived Experiences of Co-Participant 4 in Cyber-Bullying*

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 4's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| Abstract | This first happened when I was in senior high school, and it continues now that I am in college. They take my pictures and make fun of them, create memes without my permission, and edit them in various ways. |
| Orientation | I'm not the type of person who talks a lot; because I'm always quiet, they like to pick on me, knowing that I won't fight back. |
| Complicating Action | They laugh at my pictures and make negative comments. I'm overweight, and they compare my picture to other overweight people, saying I look like the person next to me in the picture. |
| Result | There was a time when I couldn't eat because I was so offended by what they were saying about me. I was also very angry because they really picked on me. I was upset about it for quite some time, about two years. |
| Evaluation | As I get older, I think, what's the big deal about my physical characteristics? They can't do anything about it because this is how I am. I just ignore it because it would have a more significant impact on my life if I paid attention to it. |
| Coda | With the help of my friends, I am grateful that they are there because they give me the strength to rise above and avoid the bullies so I can fight back and not let them do it to me again. |

*Table 5. Lived Experiences of Co-Participant 5 in Cyber-Bullying*

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 5's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| Abstract | There was a basketball try-out, and mostly they were videoed during the game. Something funny happened to me, it was caught on video, recorded, and posted online. When I saw it posted with unpleasant comments, it affected my confidence. |
| Orientation | What happened was, there were drills before the game started. The ball was passed to me, but I didn't catch it. Out of nervousness, the ball hit my face, and my nose bled. |
| Complicating Action | They insulted me in that post, saying I was stupid for not catching the ball and didn't know how to play basketball but still wanted to join. |
| Result | It affected me emotionally because I thought of not going to school for two weeks. I lost the confidence to try out for basketball again, and even to play basketball. |
| Evaluation | Whenever I went to school, I always thought that something might happen again, and they would laugh at me and video me. It traumatized me. |
| Coda | I no longer play basketball with people I don't know; I only play with friends or classmates. |

*Table 6. Lived Experiences of Co-Participant 6 in Cyber-Bullying*

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 6's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| Abstract | Usually, it's teasing me online. During the pandemic, when I was in college, we had a video presentation in class about aikido rolling, and they laughed |

| Elements | Clauses from Co-Participant 6's Lived Experience |
|---|---|
| | when they saw me rolling. They also saw my physical appearance because of that video, and that's when my classmates started calling me fat. |
| **Orientation** | They tag or mention me when they see something fat on Facebook, like a pig video, saying that it's me. |
| **Complicating Action** | Insulting words because they call me a pig or fat on Messenger or Facebook. |
| **Result** | It makes me insecure about my physical appearance. Whenever they do or say those things to me, I feel embarrassed. I just try to laugh it off because their goal is to make people laugh, but they don't know that it hurts. I just think they don't mean it and just want to be funny. |
| **Evaluation** | I became insecure about myself. Sometimes, I just go along with it, pretend to laugh, even though I was hurt inside by what they said. |
| **Coda** | If I ever meet a new set of people and they start teasing me, it's better to show them from the start that I don't like it and not let it happen. Maybe if I had done that earlier and shown that I don't like it, they might have stopped. If you let it go, they will think it's okay to keep teasing you because you don't get mad. |

### Emotional and Psychological Impact

Co-Participants consistently reported emotional distress caused by cyber-bullying. Many experienced humiliation, anxiety, anger, fear, and self-doubt.

- Co-Participant 1 suffered from public defamation on social media, leading to severe psychological distress and fear for personal safety.
- Co-Participant 2 faced false accusations that resulted in prolonged emotional suffering.
- Co-Participant 3 endured persistent ridicule from childhood to university, leading to resignation and passive acceptance of bullying.

### Triggers and Escalation

The study found that cyber-bullying often stems from interpersonal conflicts, academic competition, or social differences.

- Co-Participant 1 was targeted after refusing to let a peer copy their work.
- Co-Participant 2, a leader in an academic project, faced online harassment due to resentment from peers.
- Co-Participant 4's quiet and non-confrontational nature made them an easy target.
- Co-Participant 6 experienced cyber-bullying in online learning environments, including body-shaming and public ridicule.

### Methods and Platforms of Cyber-Bullying

Co-Participants described various forms of cyber-bullying, including direct insults, public humiliation on social media, group chat harassment, and edited images used for mockery.

- Facebook and Messenger were the most commonly used platforms for bullying.
- Co-Participant 5 was humiliated when a video of a minor sports mishap went viral with demeaning comments.
- Co-Participant 6 was frequently tagged and mentioned in posts designed to shame them.

### Social Isolation and Coping Mechanisms

Many victims withdrew socially due to cyber-bullying.

- Co-Participant 2 avoided social activities to prevent further harassment.
- Co-Participant 3 wore a hooded jacket to escape attention.
- Co-Participant 5 stopped trying out for basketball due to fear of public ridicule.
- Several participants rationalized or accepted bullying rather than seeking help.

### Long-Term Consequences and Recovery

The study found that cyber-bullying had lasting psychological and behavioral effects.

- Co-Participant 4 regained confidence through supportive friendships.
- Co-Participant 3 accepted bullying as a social norm, highlighting the deep impact of long-term harassment.
- Co-Participant 6 continued to struggle with insecurity despite attempting to mask their distress.
- Some co-participants only found relief when their bullies left the academic environment.

### *Scholarly Corroboration*

Research supports the participants' experiences.

- Studies by Shaikh et al. (2021) [26] and Zaglodina & Pankratova (2021) [30] confirm that cyber-bullying leads to anxiety and depression.
- Myers & Cowie (2019) [19] highlight that cyber-bullying continues from high school to university, requiring comprehensive intervention strategies.
- Peled (2019) [21] and Bagasol et al. (2022) [3] emphasize the long-term effects on students' academic, social, and emotional well-being.

### 2. What significant themes emerged based on the testimonies of co-participants?

This study explored the significant themes emerging from the testimonies of co-participants regarding their lived experiences with cyber-bullying. The analysis of qualitative data revealed key psychosocial dynamics that highlight the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of cyber-bullying in an academic setting.

**a. Psychosocial Dynamics**

Co-Participant 1's experience shows the distress caused by public humiliation and academic jealousy. Relief only came when the bully was no longer present.

**b. Psychosocial Consequences**

Co-Participant 2's testimony highlights how cyber-bullying leads to withdrawal from social interactions due to fear of recurrence.

**c. Bullying Dynamics and Coping Mechanisms**

Co-Participant 3's experience demonstrates how in-person teasing can evolve into persistent online harassment. The victim eventually became resigned to the bullying due to a lack of institutional support.

**d. Cyber-Bullying Experiences and Resilience**

Co-Participant 4's testimony highlights the role of social support in overcoming body-shaming and public ridicule.

**e. Psychological Effects and Social Consequences**

Co-Participant 5's experience shows how cyber-bullying can severely impact self-confidence and cause anxiety in social settings.

**f. Psychosocial Responses to Cyber-Bullying**

Co-Participant 6 masked their pain while developing coping strategies, showing the need for institutional support.

### 3. Based on the findings of the study, what are the implications of the study on cyber-bullying?

The study on cyber-bullying within educational institutions reveals significant psychological, social, and emotional consequences for students, highlighting the need for proactive and multi-faceted intervention strategies. The findings from various co-participants underscore the following key implications:

**a. Psychological and Emotional Well-being**

Victims experience anxiety, depression, and humiliation, emphasizing the need for mental health support in schools. Long-term self-esteem issues call for resilience-building programs.

**b. Academic and Social Impact**

Cyber-bullying often stems from academic conflicts, highlighting the need for conflict resolution training. Victims withdraw from social interactions, reinforcing the importance of inclusive peer support networks.

**c. Parental and Institutional Involvement**

Parents should be involved in guiding children on coping mechanisms and supporting anti-bullying initiatives. Schools must enforce stricter cyber-bullying policies and provide digital ethics education.

### d. Long-Term Effects and Preventative Measures

The normalization of bullying behavior in schools needs to be addressed by promoting empathy and understanding. Long-term effects, such as trust issues and fear of recurrence, show the need for continuous counseling and support.

### e. Specific Forms of Cyber-Bullying and Their Implications

Body-shaming, public embarrassment, and online harassment highlight the need for body positivity programs. The misuse of personal images for bullying requires stricter regulations and digital ethics education.

### f. Empowering Students and Bystanders

Bystanders play a crucial role in either enabling or preventing cyber-bullying. Awareness campaigns can encourage students to intervene. Teaching students assertiveness and boundary-setting skills can help them prevent and respond to bullying.

Overall, the study of cyber-bullying at the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA Las Piñas Campus provides a profound understanding of the multifaceted impact of cyber-bullying on students. The findings reveal the deep emotional, psychological, and social scars left by cyber-bullying, as well as the coping mechanisms employed by victims to navigate their experiences. These insights underscore the urgent need for comprehensive intervention strategies and supportive policies within educational institutions. By fostering resilience and creating a safer environment for students, schools can help mitigate the devastating effects of cyber-bullying and promote a culture of respect and empathy.

## Conclusion

This study provides important insights into the wide-reaching impact of cyber-bullying at the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA Las Piñas Campus. It highlights the emotional, psychological, and social consequences students face. The findings confirm that cyber-bullying is not just an online issue but a serious threat that affects academic performance, mental health, and relationships.

Based on the findings, the following could be concluded:

1. The emotional distress and public humiliation caused by cyber-bullying show the urgent need for schools to prioritize mental health support, counseling services, and peer intervention programs. Since cyber-bullying is often linked to academic conflicts, schools should also integrate conflict resolution training, digital ethics education, and emotional intelligence development into their curriculum. Additionally, since cyber-bullying frequently occurs alongside offline bullying, a combined approach is necessary to address both forms.

2. Cyber-bullying continues from early education to higher education, making long-term intervention essential. Schools and universities should actively foster a culture of empathy, inclusivity, and digital responsibility. Steps like implementing body positivity programs, teaching ethical online behavior, and equipping parents with tools to support their children can help prevent bullying and support victims.

3. Encouraging bystanders to intervene and support victims is crucial in creating a safe academic environment. Schools must teach students positive coping strategies through assertiveness training, stress management workshops, and structured extracurricular activities that promote a sense of belonging and resilience.

4. Ultimately, this study highlights the need for collective action among educators, policymakers, parents, and students to combat cyber-bullying effectively. Strengthening institutional policies, promoting digital citizenship, and fostering a culture of respect and accountability will help create safer learning environments. These efforts will protect students from the long-term effects of online harassment and empower them to succeed both academically and socially.

## Acknowledgement

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