

The Enigma of Bullying and Unhealthy Atmosphere in Higher Education

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Abstract

The motivation behind this paper is to give an outline of university bullying among pupils and indicate the soft targets for the bully and the impact of unhealthy class environment on students' education and behavior. This study employed an explanatory and quantitative approach. Following a non-probability sampling technique, this research resorted to using convenience sampling by disseminating a structured questionnaire among 200 students enrolled in public and private universities in Karachi. The outcomes revealed that health behavior significantly influences the quality education of students. While, direct or indirect bullying may not only affect the health but the quality education of students as well. In addition, results showed that Education on bullying and socio demographic influence may increase the quality of education but in our case, the relationship is not significant. The authors suggest that examining students' experiences and their practice, outcome of training programs with the help of a group of professors will assist in suggesting procedures and tactics to promote the quality of education. This study conceives bullying at educational institutes as a critical quality issue and paves the way for further developments intended to enhance university educational services' effectiveness.

Keywords: Quality education, Health behavior, Socio-demographic influence, Direct and indirect bullying, Education on bullying.

Introduction

Bullying is known to be generally happening issue now days. Till date, this issue is remained annoying in educational institutes. Many students came across the bullying now concern to psychiatrist and mental health professionals for examining the issues they face for instance, anxiety, stress, depression and so forth. According to PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, the extensive information accumulated by the government and higher educational agencies which expressed that one out of every five (20.2%) students report being bullied.

Bullying is characterized as a set of forceful conduct that is deliberate, intended to cause hurt, occurred frequently, and imbalance of power between bullies and the student they target (Bajaj et al., 2023). Bullying is of varying types. Physical bullying happens every now and again and is a kind of oppression, which includes the victim's physical mistreatment i.e. punches, kicks, and hits, intentional damage, physical jokes, and blackmailing of financial resources (Mohzana et al., 2021; Khalique et al., 2018). On the other side, verbal bullying involves physical oppression which comprises of intentional use of verbal interactions to hurt the victim's feelings. Verbal bullying for the most part is endeavored through provoking and insults which are usually based on gender discrimination, family status, and the color of an individual (Sprague & Nishioka, 2012), which leads to terrible consequences like melancholy, anxiety, drug abuse, and so on.

At educational institutes, bullying comes from peers, seniors, and teachers. The unhealthy environment brings restlessness and an itchy environment that is non-conducive to learning. These results may be catastrophic in several aspects of a person's life, including their relationships with others (Ahmed et al., 2022). Peer victimization is a major problem in the world, and it's a difficult aspect of growing up. It's predictable, common, and sometimes unsaid. Bullying has been proved to be dangerous, happens in a variety of settings, is more common in early childhood, and has semi-permanent repercussions. An unhealthy environment is subject to student's educational activities (Şirin, 2023). Moreover, bullied students are hesitant to return to high schools assuming they are hazardous; so, they are unable to concentrate on adversely re-electing their academic fulfillment.

The impact of bullying leads to a stressful situation for school going students and their parents. Similarly, university bullying also impairs the educational climate which is underexplored (Chen & Huang, 2015). Bullying is one of the main considerations that influence the general environment of an educational institute. Bullying has a direct harmful influence on all the students of an institute whether the bully, victim and the witnesses around them. Bullying comprises of several actions including criticizing, commenting on color/dressing style, insulting gestures, physical or verbal assaults, jokes, threats, etc. (Hughes & Laffier 2016). The most elevated effect of this is on the academic achievement of any student (Chen & Huang, 2015).

Past studies have explored the direct or indirect influence of bullying on quality of education, bullying in schools and colleges, and at workplaces with various determinants. However, a very little is known about the areas that cover quality

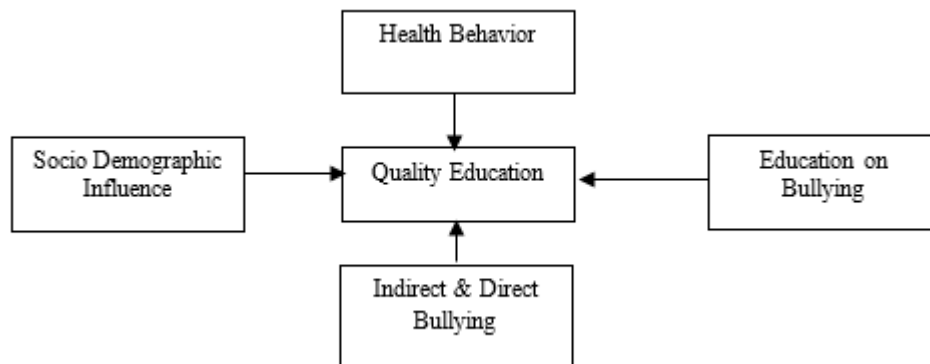
education with the studied variables in the Pakistani setting. Thus, this study is to understand and examine the triggers of victimization among pupils and behavior on educational performances at the higher education level i.e. university. This research also helps to determine the relationship among higher education bullying, victims' socio-demographic attributes, higher institutes behaviors and university student's performances in Pakistan.

The interesting thing to note is workplace environment could be pleasant if the impact of bullying would be identified at educational institutes. Lastly, this will also help the victim or the witnesses to see how to manage the issues of harassing, and what precisely will be the result or impact on the academic achievement. This research contributes to comprehend the critical needs and shedding light on bullying and unhealthy psychological atmosphere. Also, its impact on the quality of education of students in the public and private universities of Pakistan.

Theoretical Background and Development of Hypotheses

Bullying is a forceful conduct based on power imbalance (Nadeak et al., 2021). Bullying can be of many kinds including verbal abuse, physical abuse or indirect mental abuse. All types of tormenting are unfortunately common in educational institutes. Bullying has a direct impact on students' education, the quality of education in the institute, behavior of students towards their peers and adversely influences their wellbeing too. It delivers dependable effect on tormented as well as on witnesses and menace himself. The quality education is compromised due to hostile environment in the class which is non-conducive for learning due to the fact that bullied students feel shy and face difficulties in concentrating towards their studies (Sprague & Nishioka, 2012). Based on the above discussion, we have developed the framework as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1.
Conceptual Framework



Education on Bullying and Quality Education

Implementing school and teacher intervention programs is a widely employed approach to combat bullying. Such interventions serve the purpose of preventing or addressing bullying and can be implemented at various levels, including the individual, classroom, or school-wide level. In general, these programmes aim to teach members of a school community the ways to spot bullying and the actions to perform it if occurs (Block, 2014). Due to the lack of understanding of the significance of bullying, both adults and students may respond ineffectively, contributing to increased tolerance of bullying and lower empathy for students who are bullied (Neto, 2005). In June of 2012, the Accepting Schools Act was enacted, mandating that all school boards implement preventive measures to combat bullying, enforce stricter consequences for bullying incidents, and provide support to students who aim to foster understanding and respect for all (Block, 2014). Bullying is associated with physical forms of aggressiveness by both adults and students, but many fail to grasp those relational forms of hostility and can be just as detrimental. Teachers should be aware of specific behaviours that may influence disabled pupils towards victimization or perpetration (Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). Subsequently, instructors should address harassing in their classrooms in a systematic manner to avoid future incidents, reduce current occurrences, and confront persistent bullies and victims in the classroom or school. Aggression beliefs tend to impact our drive to change and predict our behaviour (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Swearer & Cary, 2007). Some teachers and students believe that verbal hostility, interpersonal problems, and social exclusion are natural, and that pupils should learn to manage on their own (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Most students agree that hitting, saying hurtful things, pushing or shoving people, getting into physical conflicts, or insulting others is not tolerable. Retaliation, on the

other hand, is acceptable as long as someone else “starts it,” and pupils should be prepared to fight for themselves, according to students (Nishioka et al., 2011; Vernberg et al., 1999). Many students also believed that the targeted students had done something wrong and would have been at least partially to fault for the bullying. Perhaps most depressing, pupils claimed that bullying works: bullies obtain what they want and are admired by their peers (Neto, 2005). Thus, following hypothesis has been established:

H1: Education on Bullying positively impacts Quality Education.

Health Behaviour and Quality Education

Mental health is important and key factor of wellbeing for any human being. Consequences of bullying could not only effect individual’s mental health but it also leads to post traumatic emotional stress. It is necessary to talk and highlight mental issues caused by experiencing social, emotional or academic purposes (Plexousakis et al., 2019). Most of the authentic proofs and studies stated the effect of bullying causes physical consequences i.e. somatic symptoms specifically observed on students who are bullied. The changes in emotional feelings observed somatic disturbances that arose from emotional situation. People who are bullied are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, sleeping disorders, loss of interest in activities etc. There are many other symptoms observed., in the students that refer to the disturbance in the mental health. These include insomnia, gastrointestinal disturbances, headache and palpitations. The relationship between bullying and mental health disturbances has been well documented and discussed in many researches (Ford et al., 2017). In general, therefore, it seems that:

H2: Health Behavior positively impacts Quality Education.

Indirect & Direct Bullying and Quality Education

Direct and indirect bullying are the means or methods of bullying that are equally negative attributes impacting the students. Direct bullying includes direct contact between bully and the victim and the source of bullying is known. It may include pushing, punching, name-calling, taunting, destroying the possessions of victim, direct bullying has evidence and the identity is known. On the contrary, indirect bullying involves indirect contact between the bully and the victim and the identity of the bully is not known or the evidence is not there (Manna et al., 2019). It is a form of psychological torture for the victim. The intention of bully is to tarnish the victim’s self-esteem, reputation and isolate him from his peers. It is difficult to be distinguished and forestalled; additionally, it is an unobtrusive sort of bullying, which creeps in various interactions between peers at school. Bullying plays a crucial role as a determining factor in the educational production process, impacting the motivation, concentration, and self-confidence of students who experience bullying (Nadeak et al., 2021). Thus, following hypothesis has been developed:

H3: Indirect & Direct Bullying positively impacts Quality Education.

Socio Demographic Influence and Quality Education

Socio demographic attributes like gender, looks and religious differences are the soft targets. Students with such different backgrounds face difficulty in being accepted by their peers. Physical aggression is more common among boys. Obvious, difficult, and intimidating occasions of this nature are more attribute of young men than girls. Whereas indirect form of bullying is common in females (Sprague & Nishioka, 2012). Younger students tend to participate in more elevated levels of physical aggression, however, as students’ progress to senior years, they start to participate in more verbal and social types of aggression. Since youth are harassed with regards to external attributions related to how they “look, talk, or dress”, racial and ethnic minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender youth; and youth with incapacities are particularly helpless and continuous focuses of tormenting conduct (Bradshaw et al., 2010). We have focused on three characteristics of socio demographics: Gender biased, Skin tone or physical appearance and religious differences. Hence, based on the related literature, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H4: Socio Demographic Influence in bullying positively impacts Quality Education.

Method

Sample and Procedures

An explanatory and quantitative study was conducted among students from public and private sector institutes that are operational in the metropolitan cities of Pakistan. Following a non-probability sampling approach, this research resorted to using convenience sampling because of time and access limitation and due to the ease it provides to researchers with sampling population. Moreover, this technique is most commonly used for collecting data from a conveniently available

pool of respondents. The survey questionnaire was also validated by two domain specialists. Thus, over 200 survey forms were disseminated to the respondents after taking their verbal consent, out of which, a total of 184 forms were received and recorded with a response rate of 92%. These surveys were dispersed via email and social platforms and the respondents were informed of the purpose behind the review.

Data Availability

The datasets utilized and/or analyzed during the current study can be obtained from the corresponding author upon a reasonable request.

Measures

The study used a total of 5 variables which were measured on a five-point Likert scale anchoring from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For measuring the variables, a total of 4 demographic and 19 questionnaire items were adapted from the previous studies (Pörhölä et al., 2020; Chatters, 2012; Johnson, 2011). All participants provided self-reported responses in a natural field-study setting, without any contrived conditions. Face and content validity was directed to ensure that all items of the construct were completely appropriate and relevant to measure the construct with adequate means. For this reason, two subject specialists were counseled to approve the instrument.

Data Analysis

In the present research, we analyzed the data using SPSS version 22 and later SmartPLS in order to test the proposed hypotheses. This technique is appropriate over others because of the small sample size (N<200). Firstly, the data was screened for the missing and out of the range values since there were no outliers in the dataset. The useable sample (n=184) comprised of 49.5% male and 50.5% females, whereas the majority were between 18-34 years of age. In addition, 63.6% of the respondents had at least 16 years of education belonging mostly to private sector institutes. Table 1 depicts a detail profile of the useable responses for this study.

Table 1.
Respondents' Profile

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	91	49.5
	Female	93	50.5
Age	18-24	90	48.9
	25-34	90	48.9
	35-44	04	2.20
Education	Undergraduate	17	9.2
	Graduate	117	63.6
	Post-Graduate	50	27.2
Institute	Private sector	114	62.2
	Public sector	70	38.0

No. of responses (n=184)

Before testing the hypothesis, we ensure the measurement testing of the proposed model by assessing the construct validity and reliability.

Construct Reliability

In the measurement testing, we first assess the internal consistency of the research instrument (i.e. questionnaire). Table 2 reports the results of construct reliability, results show that the scale of all the variables are reliable because the values of composite reliability are meeting the criteria (Hair et al., 2011).

Table 2.
Construct Reliability and Validity

Variables	CR	AVE
EB	0.835	0.718
HB	0.825	0.703
IDB	0.856	0.665
QE	0.864	0.680
SDI	0.848	0.650

Construct Validity

Construct validity is comprised of convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent

***CR denotes as composite reliability and AVE is average variance extracted*

***EB: Education on Bullying; HB: Health Behavior; IDB: Indirect & Direct Bullying; QE: Quality Education and SDI: Socio Demographic Influence*

validity defines the correlation between the items of a same construct. Average variance extracted (AVE) is an indicator through which we can assess the convergent validity of a construct. Table 2 illustrates the results of convergent validity; all the values of AVE are greater than 0.5 as suggested by Hair et al. (2010). This concludes that convergent validity of each variable is established.

On the other side, discriminant validity depicts as the items of one construct should be distinct with the items of the other construct. It primarily explains the uniqueness of the construct. There are three ways through which discriminant validity can be assessed, they are: Fornell & Larcker criteria, Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criteria, and cross loadings. Table 3 reports the results of Fornell and Larcker (1981) criteria. Results ensure the discriminant validity of the constructs because all the diagonal values are exceeding the values of off-diagonal.

Table 3.
Fornell-Larcker Criterion (1981)

	EB	HB	IDB	QE	SDI
EB	0.848				
HB	0.110	0.838			
IDB	0.014	0.419	0.816		
QE	0.056	0.509	0.465	0.824	
SDI	0.074	0.283	0.299	0.263	0.806

***refer table 2 for full abbreviation of variables*

The second method of discriminant validity is cross loadings. Table 4 shows the factor loadings and cross loadings of each factor. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that each item is loaded in its own construct, indicating the uniqueness of the variable.

Table 4.
Cross Loadings

	EB	HB	IDB	QE	SDI
EB1	0.917	0.064	0.012	0.057	0.076
EB3	0.772	0.144	0.011	0.036	0.045
HB1	0.126	0.872	0.347	0.465	0.172
HB2	0.052	0.804	0.359	0.383	0.317
IDB1	0.032	0.355	0.860	0.429	0.189
IDB2	-0.003	0.331	0.723	0.278	0.275
IDB3	-0.001	0.345	0.857	0.407	0.288
QE1	0.067	0.360	0.323	0.801	0.182
QE2	0.025	0.427	0.326	0.820	0.153

QE4	0.048	0.460	0.474	0.852	0.293
SDI1	0.036	0.137	0.303	0.237	0.776
SDI2	0.109	0.278	0.248	0.187	0.816
SDI3	0.043	0.285	0.163	0.206	0.825

**refer table 2 for full abbreviation of variables

Table 5 illustrates the results of Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios. According to the Henseler (2015) criteria, all the ratios should be lesser than 0.85. Results of HTMT criteria shows that all the values are lesser than 0.85, it means discriminant validity has been established.

Table 5.
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	EB	HB	IDB	QE	SDI
EB					
HB	0.195				
IDB	0.041	0.641			
QE	0.078	0.747	0.582		
SDI	0.110	0.457	0.408	0.334	

**refer table 2 for full abbreviation of variables

Predictive Relevancy and Accuracy of the Model

The fitness of the inner measurement model can be assessed by checking the predictive relevancy and accuracy. To examine the predictive relevancy and accuracy, we used Q-square and R-square. Q-square checks the relevancy and R-square checks the accuracy of the model. Based on the criteria suggested by Hair et al. (2014), the value of R-square is meeting the criteria i.e. greater than 20%. Similarly, the value of Q-square is also greater than 0.1, meeting the suggested criteria (Hair et al., 2011). According to the results presented in Table 6, it can be concluded that the studied model is fit and all the values are also relevant.

Table 6.
Predictive Relevance & Accuracy

	R Square	Adj. R Square	Q Square
Quality Education	0.340	0.326	0.204

Hypothesis Testing

After ensuring the measurement of the studied model, the proposed hypothesis is tested using PLS-SEM. Table 7 illustrates the results of PLS-SEM, it indicates that education on bullying has a positive but insignificant impact on the quality of education ($\beta = 0.007 p > 0.05$). Similarly, socio demographics influence also insignificantly but positively influence the quality of education of the students ($\beta = 0.073 p > 0.05$). On the contrary, results show that the health behavior has a positive and significant impact on the quality education ($\beta = 0.366 p < 0.05$). Indirect and direct bullying has an inverse and significant influence on quality education ($\beta = -0.290 p < 0.05$).

Table 7.
Hypothesis testing using PLS-SEM

	Estimates	SD	T Stats	P Values
Education on Bullying -> Quality Education	0.007	0.081	0.081	0.935
Health Behavior -> Quality Education	0.366	0.079	4.652	0.000
Indirect & Direct Bullying -> Quality Education	-0.290	0.074	3.908	0.000
Socio Demographic Influence -> Quality Education	0.073	0.063	1.153	0.249

Discussion

The relationships between education, health behavior, bullying, and socio-demographic factors are composite and multifaceted and have been the focus of research in recent years. The present research extends the earlier research by investigating the factors that influence the quality of education in Pakistan. Previous research has focused on several factors that affect the quality of education. However, in the present study, we have particularly focused on bullying in education. By reviewing the contemporary literature, a few elements have been obtained, they are education on bullying, health behavior, indirect & direct bullying, and socio-demographic influence.

The findings of the current study revealed that health behavior significantly influences the quality of education of students with a path coefficient estimate of 0.366, a standard deviation of 0.079, a t-statistic of 4.652, and a p-value of 0.000, while education on bullying and socio-demographic factors are not significantly related to quality education. Whereas, direct or indirect bullying may not only affect the health but the quality of education of students as well. The positive and significant relationship is consistent with the literature that has proved the significance of healthy behavior in ensuring academic success (Singh et al., 2017). The study is also in line with the existing literature that supports that pupils subject to bullying at educational institutions are most likely to develop feelings of sadness and distress due to constant rejection and suffering. If appropriate measures are not taken to combat this behavior, apart from a challenged mental state may result in suicidal thoughts (Bajaj et al., 2023). Moreover, the results indicate that for well cognitive functioning and promoting the academic success of students' physical activity, adequate sleep, a challenging yet safe school environment, and healthy eating habits play a pivotal role (Story et al., 2009).

On the other hand, the hypothesis that indirect/direct bullying is negatively related to quality education has a path coefficient estimate of -0.290, a standard deviation of 0.074, a t-statistic of 3.908, and a p-value of 0.000. This result suggests that bullying behavior has a significant negative impact on quality education. The present findings are consistent with the literature in establishing that bullying may lead to a lack of focus, meager academic performance, avoidance of classes, and overall decreased motivation to learn and outgrow (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). It is also found that the sufferers of bullying are more likely to develop serious depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and other mental health issues that eventually lead to poor academic performance (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Overall bullying generally creates a non-conducive learning environment for the students which leads to a negative impact on the quality of education (Espelage et al., 2014).

The hypothesis that education on bullying is positively related to quality education has a path coefficient estimate of 0.007, a standard deviation of 0.081, a t-statistic of 0.081, and a p-value of 0.935. The result suggests that bullying is not significantly related to quality education at the university level in Pakistan. The previous researches indicate that educating students on the adverse impacts of bullying can promote social and emotional learning that ensures academic success (Durlak et al., 2011). However, the study contrary to most of the previous studies concludes that education on bullying has a positive but insignificant impact on the quality of education. The possible reasons for the limited impact observed in this study could be that only a small number of institutions carried out the interventions with proper adherence and due to the pressure from home, students are bound to perform well no matter what they face at their educational institutions (Borgen et al., 2020).

Lastly, the hypothesis that socio-demographic factors are positively related to quality education has a path coefficient estimate of 0.073, a standard deviation of 0.063, a t-statistic of 1.153, and a p-value of 0.249. The current study shows that socio-demographic factors do not significantly impact the quality of education. Such results are maybe supported by the claim that educational interventions have been successful in limiting instances of traditional bullying at educational institutions (Cantone et al., 2015; Gaffney et al., 2019; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). However, the present study like the previous literature on the subject suggests that the relationship is complex and multi-layered and thus requires further detailed and thorough investigation pertaining to customs, race, gender, and socioeconomic status of the particular society (Reardon, 2011; Sirin, 2005).

Overall, the relationships between education, health behavior, bullying, and socio-demographic factors are complex and influenced by a variety of factors. The present study provides evidence that the healthy behavior of students is an inevitable factor that leads the quality education. However, further research is needed to better understand the complex relationships between these variables and to identify effective strategies for promoting positive outcomes in education.

Research Implications

The contribution of this paper to quality education is multifold. Firstly, this paper is directed towards an important perspective of the students as it highlights the root cause and effects of bullying being done in the public and private universities of Pakistan. Secondly, the study marks an essential contribution in highlighting the underpinning cause and physiological impact of bullying on students of universities both public and private in Pakistan. The results in the study concludes that the change in physiological behavior of the students is crucial.

In addition, the research has also contributed that bullying in educational sectors deteriorates the quality of education. The study has suggested measures that can accord both victims and witness in understanding the dynamics of bullying and its impact on the educational quality and achievements. The underpinning research is essential in understanding how the victims can actively avoid being bullied and contribute towards the critical need to understand and put light on bullying and unhealthy psychological atmosphere. It also impacts the quality of education of students in the public and private universities of Pakistan, as it is highly observed in the universities nowadays.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study catered various dimensions of bullying and unhealthy psychological atmosphere in the class and its impact on the quality of education. However, the study has limitations in-terms of employing non-representative sampling that may have a higher risk of social desirability bias, memory recall and others. Using convenience-sampling technique, the present study's data pertains to the students of the universities based in Karachi. Limited literature is available on the subject of bullying in universities in the context of Pakistan that leaves a wide room for the researchers to explore. Students' engagement in bullying activities, their attitudes and aggressive behavior, and, ways of bullying can be other dimensions that can be assessed further to reach root cause of the problem. These factors of bullying can be explored by utilizing quantitative and qualitative econometrical models.

Further, the researchers can explore the existing variables tested in the present study by utilizing different approach such as of awareness regarding bullying, investigating training programs that are conducted at educational institutes regarding bullying. Examining students' experiences and their practice, outcome of training programs with the help of a group of professors will assist in suggesting procedures, approaches, tactics, and advanced knowledge that can be informative and useful for future trainings to students, teaching staff, and university management.

The present study finds that both the bully and the victim have past experiences regarding bullying, but none of them was found to have adequate information, knowledge, training, or awareness regarding bullying. As future research, a comparative investigation can be conducted with participants with prior training experience and with no training experience to gauge the behavioral differences. This would assist to adequate whether it is beneficial to provide trainings to students at an early age regarding this issue, and if it helps to combat the number of cases of bullying at educational institutes. It can also be pertinent in determining the students' academic performance and its impact on their education.

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