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THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RIYADH: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to identify the effects of cyberbullying on secondary school students in Riyadh and propose policy and practice interventions to address this phenomenon. A qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews with a sample (N=30) of public and private school students was conducted. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns emerging from the data participants' experiences. Methodological and ethical considerations were carefully considered throughout data collection and analysis. The findings revealed three main themes describing the psychological, social, and educational effects of cyberbullying on students and two themes related to recommendations and proposed interventions to counter cyberbullying. The results indicate that cyberbullying is prevalent among the study sample and that many victims struggle to respond effectively when targeted. The effects of cyberbullying were interconnected and significantly influenced students' well-being, behavior, and academic performance. Several promising practices implemented by schools and families were identified to support cyberbullying victims, although these efforts remain below expectations. The need to protect students from cyberbullying and provide them with safe environments in schools and when using apps and social media platforms has become essential and requires coordinated efforts. Practical recommendations for interventions designed to protect students from cyberbullying are presented to enhance schools' responses to this issue.

KEYWORDS: Cyberbullying, Effect Of Cyberbullying, Case Study, Qualitative Research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is a prevalent contemporary social issue that can have multifaceted and serious impacts on victims. Young people tend to make up the main proportion of cyberbullying victims, harming their mental health, experiences of the educational environment, and learning outcomes. Conducting research into this phenomenon helps researchers and education professionals to understand its causes, effects, and ways to mitigate this issue by raising awareness among the victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying, their families, educational institutions, and the wider community. Research efforts in this area also strengthen efforts to prevent and mitigate the harm of cyberbullying by helping to inform early intervention strategies. The literature on cyberbullying underscores its seriousness and calls for coordinated and collaborative efforts involving both individuals and institutions, as well as the development of anti-cyberbullying policies and initiatives that ensure social media platforms and apps provide their users with safe environments.

Within the context of Saudi Arabia, its notable digital transformation over recent years has brought new challenges to ensuring the safety of online interpersonal interactions; generally, the onus is placed on the parents of Saudi children to protect their children from the psychological and social consequences of issues like cyberbullying (Khedr, 2023). A meta-analysis of studies on parents of females in developing countries disclosed that a sizeable majority (65%) cited cyberbullying via social media platforms as one of their primary concerns (Saif & Purbasha, 2023). These results accord with those of the present study, which also highlights the many harmful effects of cyberbullying among male and female students. To counter the harms associated with this phenomenon, the current findings were used to inspire anti-cyberbullying interventions and provide recommendations to mitigate the harm caused by it.

1.1. Research Problem

The ever-increasing number of young people using social media platforms and the expanding functionalities of such platforms have led to a range of undesirable consequences (Morsi, 2021). Compared to other types of bullying, cyberbullying is now one of the most prevalent forms of bullying in school contexts (Al-Suwaidi, 2023). Among students, cyberbullying has been linked to deteriorating mental health, poor concentration, low academic performance, and reluctance to interact socially with peers (Al-Otaibi, 2023; Singh & Singh, 2020).

Cyberbullying's prevalence stems from the characteristics of web-based environments, e.g., openness, widespread access, and anonymity, thus enabling perpetrators to repeatedly bully victims and rapidly disseminate hurtful content (Ati, 2022; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Mohammed, 2019; Islam, 2017).

Globally, cyberbullying is causing exceptional harm. In the United States, one in five individuals, particularly adolescents, has been a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying. In Turkey, 19.7% of students reported engaging in cyberbullying behaviors at least once (Mohammed, 2019). In Egypt, Abdelrazek (2023) found that cyberbullying has spread rapidly among youth and adolescents. Allehyani (2018) reported on the growing prevalence of cyberbullying among Saudi youth and adolescents; others indicated that younger children are also victims (e.g., Alhur, 2022; Alshehri & Lally, 2019). Therefore, given the seriousness of this issue for young people's mental health, educational experiences, and learning outcomes, and the lack of qualitative research into this phenomenon, the present study sought to examine the effects of this phenomenon among male and female Saudi Arabian students using a qualitative research approach.

Based on the research problem the study attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of cyberbullying on male and female Saudi secondary school students?
2. What evidence-based recommendations and proposed interventions do participants suggest to address cyberbullying and mitigate its consequences?

1.2. Significance Of the Study

Cyberbullying is widely prevalent and can cause multifaceted harm to its victims. Therefore, to address the gap in the literature on cyberbullying in Saudi Arabia, gain a comprehensive understanding of its impacts, and interpret its dimensions and consequences on victims from their perspective, a qualitative research approach was considered the most appropriate. The findings inspired a set of pragmatic recommendations and interventions aimed at creating educational environments free from cyberbullying and supporting educational institutions and specialists in designing and implementing preventive and therapeutic programs that mitigate its effects and protect students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions

In Krešić and Kaštelan (2020) define

cyberbullying as the intentional and repeated infliction of harm on others using the internet. According to the Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries, cyberbullying refers to the use of the internet, social media, email, or text messages to intimidate or harass an individual (Boudbouza, 2021).

Cyberbullying can include any of the following, either individually or in combination: sending hostile messages; defamation; denigration; impersonation intended to cause harm; revealing secrets or personal information; excluding someone from applications or online groups, thereby turning the victim into an object of ridicule, shaming, and rumor-spreading; disseminating misleading information or disturbing images; harassment; repeated insults; cyberstalking; offensive language; and sending obscene or embarrassing messages. The main characteristics of cyberbullying are its ability to reach an unlimited number of people, its expanded scope of influence, and the persistence and mobility of harmful content across time and space, which limit the possibility of a safe environment for victims and facilitate constant tracking beyond the school setting – thus increasing the severity of its impact (Ibrahim, 2020; Atiyya, 2024; Mohammed, 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Wade & Beran, 2011; Zych et al., 2017 in Singh & Singh, 2020). Additionally, the ease with which anonymity can be achieved by cyberbullies makes identifying perpetrators difficult, thus reducing accountability and complicating efforts to bring such behavior to a stop (Islam, 2017; Mohammed, 2019). From the foregoing, in the current study, cyberbullying was defined as follows: Any behavior committed by one (or more) secondary school students toward a peer with the intention to harm them via digital apps and/or social media platforms.

2.2. Saudi Arabian Initiatives and Legislation to Address Cyberbullying

Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cybercrime Law (No. 79, 26/3/2007) provides several measures to combat and criminalize cyberbullying, and official announcements by the Public Prosecution Service specify the penalties for engaging in cyberbullying, as detailed below.

Article One of Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cybercrime Law defines the concept of information networks and data, including images, sounds, messages, letters, and symbols. Article Three stipulates penalties of up to one year's imprisonment, a fine of up to 500,000 SAR (133,690 US dollars), or both, for those perpetrating cybercrimes such as threats, blackmail, invasion of privacy using camera-enabled mobile

phones or similar devices, defamation, and causing harm through digital means. Article Nine states that instigating, assisting, or conspiring to commit any of the above-mentioned crimes under the Law is also punishable (Anti-Cybercrime Law, 2007).

In Saudi Arabia, Article 12 of the Child Protection Law (2014) and the Protection from Abuse Law (2013) prohibit the production, dissemination, or possession of any printed, visual, or audio material directed at children that could be harmful. Article 3 prohibits the use of abusive language that degrades a child's dignity or leads to humiliation or discrimination based on race, social, or economic background, and considers any act threatening a child's physical or psychological well-being as punishable under law. The Digital Giving Initiative, administered by the Saudi Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, raises awareness about cyberbullying (and distinguishes it from traditional bullying), educates children, and gives parents guidance on preventive measures (Digital Giving, 2020).

2.3. Academic Literature on Cyberbullying

The impacts of cyberbullying on victims' mental health occur frequently in research findings. Common emotional problems in young people associated with being cyberbullied include anger, sadness, anxiety, fear, and depression, as well as falls in academic performance, increased levels of absenteeism, the development of negative attitudes toward school, and a loss of interest in their studies (Singh & Singh, 2020; Ortega et al., 2012). In terms of the link between cyberbullying and mental health among secondary school students repeating academic years, Al-Otaibi (2020) found that a strong relationship exists. Ibrahim (2020) reported that deficits in emotional intelligence were positively associated with being cyberbullied, with stronger effects among females. Females in developing countries appear to be more vulnerable to cyberbullying than their counterparts from developed nations (Saif & Purbasha, 2023).

Interpersonal problems such as distrust, suspicion toward others, and aggressive behaviors have also been associated with being the victim of cyberbullying (Al-Anzi, 2019; Salem, 2020; Al-Wazzan, 2024; Al-Asali, 2023). Others (e.g., Al-Barashdia, 2020; Setiawan et al., 2020; Kowalski & Limber, 2013) have reported that cyberbullying can drive victims to suicidal behaviors; this also extends to the perpetrators of cyberbullying in some cases. Associations have been identified between cyberbullying and alcohol and drug abuse, assault,

and carrying weapons at school, often driven by a desire for revenge following cyberbullying (Ybarra et al., 2007; Singh & Singh, 2020). However, decreased motivation, academic performance, and, in severe cases, dropping out of school, are prevalent effects of cyberbullying among secondary school students, in addition to statistically significant effects of cyberbullying on academic achievement (Al-Jaser, 2024; El-Sayed et al., 2019; Saghir, 2022; Singh & Singh, 2020).

Atiyya (2024) and Saghir (2022) found that cyberbullying can be more psychologically harmful than face-to-face bullying and often involves comments intended to inflict emotional or material harm (Ben Khalifa, 2023; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Al-Otaibi (2023) identified a range of negative effects associated with cyberbullying's effects on interactions and relationships among middle school students, including a lack of respect for individuals' privacy. Another key finding was that cyberbullying tends to entail a degree of 'invisibility' of the harm on the victim from the perpetrator's perspective, which reduces empathy and remorse, and may even lead perpetrators to derive pleasure from the victim's suffering due to persistent episodes of cyberbullying. Kamel et al. (2023) highlighted psychological and social effects of cyberbullying, such as social stigma and psychological maladjustment among female students, especially when personal content is publicly shared or used as a threat.

2.4. Initiatives To Mitigate Cyberbullying

Numerous studies have proposed interventions and recommendations to address the issue of cyberbullying. Salem's (2020) study found that cyberbullying occurs most commonly on social media platforms (61.33%) and adopts multiple forms. In terms of preventing cyberbullying, Salem (2020) called for collaboration between institutions responsible for socializing children and community organizations. Abu-Elnaga (2025) found that most participants supported raising awareness of the risks children face in relation to cyberbullying and creating Arabic-language applications to address the issue in Middle Eastern contexts.

In addition to the community-based anti-cyberbullying awareness initiatives suggested by Al-Ghamdi (2021), Al-Otaibi (2020), and Mohammed (2019), Al-Otaibi (2019) recommended reporting incidents of cyberbullying to relevant authorities. Going further, Al-Jaser (2024) and Al-Anzi (2019) called for initiatives to integrate digital citizenship values such as respect and responsibility into curricula, instruct students on the safe use of social

media, and support preventive and therapeutic anti-cyberbullying initiatives. Extending this narrative, Setiawan et al. (2020), Abu Al-Hasan et al. (2021), and Al-Nasser (2024) recommended that parents and teachers should be trained to identify suspected instances of cyberbullying, provide support, and monitor children's social media use. Thus, high levels of social support are negatively associated with cyberbullying behavior among young people (Calvete et al., 2010, in Handono et al., 2019). Providing psychological support can significantly reduce the effects of cyberbullying on victims (Hellfeldt et al., 2019). Agatston et al. (2012) found that although some victims informed someone after experiencing cyberbullying (9% told their parents or guardians, and 36% told their friends) 50% preferred not to tell anyone. This may account for victims' avoidance of peers and reduced participation in school activities, which weaken their social ties and serve to exacerbate their distress.

Setiawan et al. (2020) and Al-Wazzan (2024) emphasized that cyberbullying can be mitigated by educating students on how to use social media platform safety features, such as blocking and reporting abusive users, and training them on legal procedures related to privacy violations and cybercrimes. They made a call for platforms to strengthen their anti-cyberbullying policies and highlighted the importance of early detection of warning signs in victims, including anxiety, absenteeism, declining academic performance, and withdrawal from technology use. In terms of the broader implications of cyberbullying, Al-Amro and Al-Habshi (2024) determined that cyberbullying represents an obstacle to students' talent development and creativity. To mitigate these effects, their recommendations include conducting further research on the prevalence, forms, and causes of cyberbullying, adopting guidance-based curricula promoting positive digital engagement, and monitoring adolescents' use of online media (Al-Nasser, 2024; Salem, 2020; Abdelrazek, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The current study adopted a qualitative, case study-based approach to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the effects of cyberbullying among Saudi secondary school students from their point of view (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Given the diversity of the sample, multiple viewpoints were integrated, producing varied dimensions that describe and interpret the effects of cyberbullying through iterative processes to identify the core

themes (Stake, 2005b in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

3.2. Sampling And Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify the total number of 30 students who participated in individual interview and focus group discussion.

The sample (N=30) consisted of male and female secondary school students, distributed as follows:

- 14 semi-structured individual interviews (males: $n=5$; females: $n=9$).
- 3 semi-structured *focus group* interviews with 16 students (males: $n=5$; females: $n=11$).
 1. Focus group 1: female students ($n=6$).
 2. Focus group 2: female students ($n=5$).
 3. Focus group 3: male students ($n=5$).

The male participants in focus group 3 all attended the same school, whereas the female participants in focus groups 1 and 2 attended different schools. In total, students from seven schools were sampled. School selection and student recruitment were performed in line with the required ethical considerations (detailed below) and with the cooperation of the representatives of the participating schools. Demographically, the sample was varied as it included students from both public and private schools located across the five administrative sectors of Riyadh (Central, Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern). This feature was deemed to enhance the diversity and variation of the sample. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to obtain a sample providing multiple perspectives on cyberbullying (Creswell, 2007). The sample included participants who had been victims of cyberbullying and those who had witnessed cyberbullying directed at their peers. The sample also included typical and atypical cases, sometimes referred to as ordinary and outlier cases, which allowed the study to capture nuances in relation to the studied phenomena (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2007).

For further elaboration on the sampling strategy and participant selection criteria: A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the selection of participants who could provide rich and relevant insights aligned with the research objectives. The (30) participants selected according to specific inclusion criteria related to the phenomenon under investigation.

The participants were secondary school students, both male and female, enrolled in either public or

private schools in Riyadh city. The sample represented students from most the three secondary school grade levels and reflected the geographical distribution of schools across Riyadh. The diversity was intentionally considered to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences related to cyberbullying among adolescents.

The most important selection criterion was that participants had either personally experienced cyberbullying through social media platforms, applications, or other digital devices and communication channels, or had directly witnessed another student being subjected to cyberbullying perpetrated by fellow students. Accordingly, purposive sampling, as mentioned above, was considered the most appropriate approach for identifying participants who met the study objectives and possessed relevant experiences.

To facilitate participant recruitment, school coordinators in each participant school were consulted to identify, when possible, potential cases that matched the study criteria. In addition, data collectors made every effort to verify participants' eligibility as accurately as possible. This process required careful handling due to the sensitivity of the topic and varying levels of willingness among some schools and students to discuss such experiences.

The data collection process carefully maintained diversity within the sample while ensuring that only participants who met the study criteria were included. Prior to conducting the interviews, the purpose of the study, its objectives, and the rationale behind the participant selection process were clearly explained to all participants. This was done to ensure that participants fully understood the nature of the study, the reasons for their inclusion, and the relevance of their experiences to the research objectives before taking part in the interviews (Creswell, 2007; Gilbert, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

During interviews, all concepts related to cyberbullying, including definitions, examples, names of applications and social media platforms, and the potential consequences of cyberbullying, were clearly explained to participants, when needed, to ensure consistency in understanding and accurate responses.

Table 1 and 2 present the demographic characteristics of the participants in individual and focus group discussions.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Individual Interview (N = 14).

Data Collectors*	Interview Duration	Interview Method	City Location	Type of School	Grade	Age	Gender	Participants
No. 1	45	Telephone	East	Public	10	16	F	Participant 1

PI**	60	Zoom	East	Public	11	17	F	Participant 2
PI	90	Face-to-face	East	Private	11	17	F	Participant 3
PI	70	Face-to-face	East	Private	10	16	F	Participant 4
No. 2	50	Face-to-face	West	Public	10	16	F	Participant 5
No. 4	100	Telephone	West	Public	12	18	F	Participant 6
No. 6	75	Telephone	North	Public	11	17	F	Participant 7
No. 5	65	Zoom	North	Public	10	16	F	Participant 8
No. 1	60	Face-to-face	South	Public	12	18	F	Participant 9
No. 2	60	Telephone	South	Public	12	18	M	Participant 10
No. 3	55	Face-to-face	Central	Private	12	18	M	Participant 11
No. 4	40	Face-to-face	Central	Private	10	16	M	Participant 12
PI	90	Face-to-face	East	Public	11	17	M	Participant 13
No. 3	60	Face-to-face	East	Public	11	17	M	Participant 14

* Included The Researcher Of The Study, In Addition To The Data Collectors Who Were Engaged During Data Collection Phase. ** PI = Principal Investigator Means (Main Researcher).

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Focus Groups Interview (N = 16).

Data Collectors	Interview Duration	Interview Method	Location	Type of School	Grade	Age	Gender	Participants	
Focus Group 1									
Investigators No. 3 & 5	95 min	Zoom	East	Private	11	17	F	FG	1
			East	Public	10	16	F	FG	2
			West	Public	11	18	F	FG	3
			West	Private	11	17	F	FG	4
			North	Private	10	16	F	FG	5
			North	Public	12	18	F	FG	6
Focus Group 2									
Investigators No. 2 & 4	90 min	Zoom	West	Public	10	16	F	FG	7
			East	Public	11	17	F	FG	8
			South	Public	10	16	F	FG	9
			West	Public	12	18	F	FG	10
			Central	Private	11	17	F	FG	11
Focus Group 3									
Investigator No. 6	60 min	Face-to-face	North	Private	10	16	M	FG	12
					10	16	M	FG	13
					12	18	M	FG	14
					12	18	M	FG	15
					11	17	M	FG	16

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through an individual semi-structured interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and a focus group discussion (FGD) (Creswell, 2009). The interview guide was developed according to already available literature on cyberbullying, digital youth culture, and sociocultural norms in the Saudi context. The interview guide addressed critical domains, including the effects of cyberbullying related to mental health, social, cultural and academic performance issues. The interview guides were reviewed by three experts in qualitative research and adolescent to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and relevance of the questions to Saudi young people. Minor adjustments to the language were also made to enhance the fact flow of Arabic translations before being used in the field.

The data collection began with the individual interview, then three focus groups were conducted with male and female students separately, each comprising five to six participants. Moderators of the

same gender facilitated all the focus groups. The participants of the individual interview were coded with participant 1- 16. As for the FGD participants were coded FG-1 to 16. All the interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes and were conducted by the researcher along with trained postgraduate data collectors recruited for this purpose. However, all individual and group interviews were recorded by hand. In line with standard research procedures for this type of study (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Gilbert, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), all personal identifiers were removed, and written notes were securely destroyed when no longer required. The researcher reviewed all collected data, clarified any ambiguities, and sought additional details when required.

Trustworthiness and credibility were achieved using two data collection tools, namely, individual interviews and focus group interviews. To ensure dependability, standardized data collection procedures were established using a tailor-made interview guide for the individual interviews and

another for the focus groups. To standardize the data collection procedures, two pilot interviews were first carried out and transcribed to provide training material for the field research team. As well as the use of multiple data collectors and direct quotations from the participant interviews, confirmability of the data was achieved by identifying recurring patterns (themes) in the data, acknowledging the methodological strengths and limitations of the data collection processes, and the use of procedures that enhanced objectivity, in line with established procedures (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Alomairi, 2019; Yin, 2009; Al-Zahrani, 2020).

3.4. Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process was guided by thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), which included identifying initial codes where they created, categorized, reviewed and interrelated to produces meaning. Thus, the researcher ensured that the interview topics and questions were adequately addressed by the participants, and their responses were coherent and meaningful. This was achieved by performing multiple readings of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the raw data. This facilitated the creation of initial codes that were later merged and refined into a set of main themes and subthemes. By adopting an inductive analysis process, some codes were generated in vivo from participants' own interview transcripts; other codes were researcher-generated. Other codes were created using deductive analysis, i.e., derived from pre-existing concepts in the social and health sciences (Creswell, 2007). Units of analysis comprised participants from both the individual interviews and the focus group interviews. Proceeding iteratively throughout multiple phases of the study, data analysis began with an initial analysis, including recording handwritten memos during and after interviews. These memos supported the formation of probing, follow-up questions to encourage participants to elaborate and reflect on their narratives (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

As mentioned, thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The major topics were specified by the interview guide, which allowed flexibility to explore any emergent issues related to cyberbullying. As recommended by Naeem et al. (2023), the researcher ensured he was open to new ideas and interpretations of the data. Following a full and

thorough reading of all the transcribed interviews, any potentially significant portions were identified, key terms highlighted, and relevant quotations were selected to give the diverse participants a "voice" on the effects of cyberbullying. Significant data that aligned with the research questions and met confidentiality standards were then selected for inclusion into the themes. Repeated reading of the data was employed to identify the most meaningful excerpts in relation to the research questions. Relevant quotations (concise and extended) from the individual and focus group interviews were then incorporated to provide a comprehensive overview of the effects of and responses to cyberbullying among the participants.

Concerning, the ethical consideration, ethical approval was granted by the General Directorate of Education in Riyadh on 20 March 2025 with approval number 4600891824. Informed consent was then obtained from participants and their school representatives. Data collectors received training on how to conduct interviews, from initial greetings and rapport building to explaining the study's purpose, selection rationale, and potential benefits of participation. The researcher emphasized that participants' involvement in the study is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The participants' understanding of the interview topics and questions was also ensured. The training for the assistant investigators included being open to relevant emergent topics, for interview recording procedures, and recording observations and field notes throughout the data collection process. In line with standard research procedures for this type of study (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Gilbert, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), all personal identifiers were removed, and written notes were securely destroyed when no longer required.

4. RESULTS

The findings highlighted several negative effects of cyberbullying among the participants. These effects were then categorized into major themes facilitated by their overlap and mutual influence. This interrelatedness meant that the themes are presented according to their logical sequence rather than according to the predefined thematic structure. Table 3 and 4 shows the summary of themes and subthemes generated from the data obtained.

Table 3: Themes And Subthemes (RQ 1).

Themes	Subthemes
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Mental Health Problems	Feelings of inferiority, anger, distress, low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, heightened sensitivity to others, sadness, depression, frustration, crying, and fear.
Social Adjustment Difficulties	Social withdrawal and isolation, avoidance of conversations, withdrawal from school activities, and tension in peer relationships
Decline in Academic Performance	Poor participation in class, distraction and difficulty concentrating, repeated absenteeism, school transfer or desire to transfer, apathy, lack of motivation, low grades, and overall decline in academic performance

Across these three themes, additional issues such as sleep disturbances, physical symptoms, aggression, and irritability were also observed. Overall, problems related to social adjustment and

relationships—alongside mental health problems—were reflected in academic performance (Naeem et al., 2023; Creswell, 2007).

Table 4: Themes And Subthemes (RQ 2).

Themes
Preventive measures designed to reduce the instances and spread of cyberbullying
Intervention measures designed to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying on students.

Table 4 presented the recommendations for addressing the effects of cyberbullying on students. The recommendations led to the development of several classifications, subthemes, and codes that targeted key stakeholders with the ability to influence cyberbullying, namely, students, families, schools, and social media platforms.

4.1. Mental Health Problems

Several participants in the individual interviews cited that cyberbullying can be more harmful than face-to-face bullying due to its persistence and the multiple formats available to perpetuate it. The findings consistently indicated that cyberbullying affects several key aspects of the participants' lives. Psychologically, victims of cyberbullying admitted becoming highly sensitive in their interactions with others, which led them to avoid engaging with peers, withdrawing from social discourse, and experiencing a decline in self-confidence and trust in others, as the following interview extracts illustrate.

"My mental state deteriorated when they posted that comment about me. I felt like I couldn't face anyone." (Participant 8)

"I started overthinking a lot, dreaming about what happened. Even my sleep was affected." (Participant 3)

"I felt breakdowns and cried in ways that showed in my behavior; like posting less, interacting less on social media, sometimes even believing what they said about me, and isolating myself." (Participant 11)

In the focus groups, female students explained that cyberbullying caused psychological, social, and educational harm.

"My friend started wearing a mask to hide her face at school after being bullied about her

appearance when her photo was shared on social media." (FG2)

"It depends on the personality of the person being bullied. If she's weak, the impact will be huge... but it affects many areas: psychological, academic, and social." (FG4)

"Usually, the girl who gets bullied loses some confidence in herself and becomes hesitant and anxious all the time." (FG11)

"It gets to the point where she hates school and thinks about leaving because of something that happened on social media." (FG7)

"A classmate of mine was cyberbullied; after that, she became withdrawn. She had posted a Snapchat video showing her style, and when she came to school, they kept commenting on her appearance and bullying her." (FG1)

In the focus group consisting of male students, a participant explained that the hurtful comments he had received online had affected him so much that he decided to delete his account. He explained that he only felt better after speaking to family and receiving guidance from his father on how to manage cyberbullying.

This narrative was reflected in other interview extracts from male participants:

"It affects them emotionally and psychologically. I was bullied, and it affected me [...] my GPA dropped by 15 points." (FG13)

"It affects them mentally and academically and makes them skip school [...] because bullying breaks you down, you lose motivation to go, so you skip thinking it will give you relief." (FG14)

"It leads to lower academic performance... and like my classmate said, it makes them miss school." (FG16)

One female participant (FG10) explained in detail the suffering she experienced due to an episode of cyberbullying, demonstrating its severity:

"When I was bullied online, I felt huge discouragement, and my self-esteem dropped. I felt like I wasn't enough or that something was wrong with me. I started doubting myself even though I used to be confident. Sometimes I avoided people and didn't want to talk. I kept thinking about what they said to the point where it affected my sleep and mood all day. Even my social-media activity decreased because I was afraid of receiving another negative comment."

The foregoing analysis reveals that mental health problems related to feelings of inferiority, anger, distress, and low self-esteem are among the major effects of cyberbullying among young secondary school students. The results from the participants indicate a significant concern regarding mental health issues. These consequences can, however, lead to other issues such as drug addiction, isolation, and suicide.

4.2. Social Adjustment Difficulties

Other participants mentioned avoiding peers or changing schools and cutting ties with former friends due to cyberbullying.

"I stopped wanting to go to school [...] I kept thinking about what was said about me." (Participant 12)

"I became isolated and stopped participating in activities with my friends." (Participant 6)

"I ended my friendships with the girls because they were laughing at me behind my back." (Participant 4)

Social withdrawal and avoiding communication were also common effects of cyberbullying:

"I became more sensitive and isolated. I talked less with others [...] my self-confidence decreased." (Participant 2)

Longer episodes of cyberbullying tended to have greater negative effects on the participants, especially instances of cyberbullying taking place on platforms that provide anonymity (e.g., Tellonym), as illustrated in the following interview extract:

"My friend was bullied on Tellonym. They sent comments about her looks, clothes, and the way she talked. When she ignored them, the bullying increased. She felt embarrassed, unwanted at school, and she started skipping a lot. She avoided break time, assemblies, and stayed in the classroom. Because of that, she cut ties with many friends and became more withdrawn. It affected her grades too:

she couldn't focus in class or study for exams, and her grades dropped noticeably... her suffering continued until the administration got involved." (Participant 6)

Some negative effects of cyberbullying persisted, causing long-lasting changes in participants' personality and behaviors:

"It affected my social life [...] I couldn't talk to people confidently anymore. I became shy about speaking and hesitant all the time." (Participant 13)

The overall analysis on these social adjustment and relationship problems revealed that cyberbullying can have negative consequences, which can lead to social withdrawal and isolation, avoidance of conversations, withdrawal from school activities, and tension in peer relationships. These effects not only hinder a young student's ability to engage with their peers but also contribute to long-term emotional and psychological issues.

4.3. Decline In Academic Performance

The majority of female participants admitted that cyberbullying harmed their academic performance due to a loss of concentration, reluctance to participate in class, and diminished motivation.

"I stopped participating in class even when I knew the answer." (Participant 6)

"I hated the whole subject because someone made fun of my drawing." (Participant 1)

"My grades dropped because I kept thinking about what was said about me." (Participant 8)

Cyberbullying also caused distracted thinking, anxiety, and reduced participation:

"Someone I know was cyberbullied. He became mentally scattered, and his academic achievement and participation declined." (Participant 10)

Another participant described the negative effects of cyberbullying on his academic performance in depth:

"No matter how hard I tried to raise my grades, they wouldn't go up. I think I believed what they said... besides losing confidence in myself, I felt like I didn't deserve good things, not even good grades." (Participant 11)

Another participant described the psychological and physical tolls of cyberbullying:

"Honestly, bullying doesn't just affect someone's mental health or academic level: it affects their appearance too. They get acne from stress and negative comments. Even if they thought they looked good, once people mock something about them, they start seeing themselves as 'ugly' and stop taking care of themselves because they think others see them that way anyway." (Participant 9)

The effects of cyberbullying on peers were described by another participant:

"It didn't affect me, thankfully, but I had classmates who were repeatedly called 'stupid' until they believed it, and it affected both their academic performance and personality." (Participant 14)

Another participant described the severity of their cyberbullying experience and the difficulties involved in recovering from it:

"I was a victim of [cyber] bullying. My average used to be 94, and it never dropped. Because of bullying, it fell to 54. Things only improved after I left that harmful environment. There were insults and false accusations. At first, I thought they were joking, but they went too far. They posted things about me on Tellonym [...]. These were people I thought were my friends. I transferred to another school, started fresh, cut all ties, deleted them everywhere, and blocked them." (Participant 9)

The analysis indicates that cyberbullying can negatively impact students by leading to poor participation in class, distraction, difficulty concentrating, repeated absenteeism, and a desire to transfer schools. It can also result in apathy, lack of motivation, low grades, and an overall decline in academic performance. Moreover, most participants expressed serious concern about their academic performance and school attendance as a result of cyberbullying. These results demonstrate the urgent need for effective anti-bullying policies and support systems.

4.4. Effects On Those Witnessing Cyberbullying

The findings also illustrated how cyberbullying affected those who witnessed it:

"I feel sadness and deep emotional pain, but I can't stop the bullying. I withdraw to my room and stop talking for a week until the pain fades." (Participant 3)

"I saw my friend get bullied on TikTok, and then they continued in class. When I saw it, I got upset and left the group. I talked to him, but he didn't want to defend himself. He stopped coming to school regularly and stayed in the classroom during breaks to avoid the bullies." (FG16)

Another participant described the verbal and cyberbullying he witnessed a classmate suffer:

"They bullied a girl I knew, calling her unhygienic. I felt anger toward the bullies and stayed close to her. They tried to push me away from her, but I refused. She suffered from excessive sweating and was bullied and excluded because of it. They made disgusted expressions, said things like 'Don't sit with us,' and mocked her smell in the WhatsApp

group" (Participant 6)

When asked about the effects of this cyberbullying on the victim, participant 6 added:

"It affected her psychologically. She avoided social activities and even began seeing mental-health professionals. Her academic performance declined. She used to be one of the top students and very active in class, but after the bullying, she stopped raising her hand altogether."

The results reveal how other students observed or witnessed cyberbullying among their colleagues at school. Many of these students have witnessed, attested to, and reported negative behavior from the bullies, which, to some extent, makes the victims feel emotionally down. This cycle of observation and inaction highlights the importance of fostering a supportive environment where students feel empowered to speak out.

4.5. Recommendations For Addressing Cyberbullying

Several recommendations to counter cyberbullying that could be translated into policies and interventions were suggested by the participants, many of which concur with those given in previous studies on cyberbullying. At the policy and institutional level, the need for effective reporting mechanisms to counter cyberbullying on social-media platforms was expressed. Most participants agreed on the importance of anti-cyberbullying awareness campaigns that explain the forms, dangers, and consequences of cyberbullying. This finding is especially relevant as many families, educators, and even students appear not to fully understand its impact.

Despite existing anti-cyberbullying measures in place in schools, the participants claimed that more efforts are needed:

"I don't think what schools do is enough because many bullying cases still happen without the administration knowing." (Participant 4)

Some schools implement more robust anti-cyberbullying measures, like advising cyberbullies on the harm their actions can cause and reporting repeat offenders to parents. However, other schools appear to overlook cyberbullying, dismissing it as simply harmless banter among students.

Families can also play a preventive and therapeutic role in preventing cyberbullying by monitoring their children's online behavior more effectively, supervising their children's online communications, and strengthening their self-confidence to speak out against cyberbullying:

"If the child is young, the parents must supervise

what he watches, boost his confidence, and teach him what to do, even if someone 'jokes' with him in a harmful way. If he is older, parents should ask if he faces problems like bullying and support him emotionally." (Participant 7)

The importance of developing students' social and personal skills to help them manage the realities of cyberbullying was also expressed by the participants:

"My advice is: anyone who opens accounts and posts content must have skills: knowing how to respond, talk, and deal with people. Bullying will happen, but you have to work on your personality." (Participant 14)

"Everyone needs to protect themselves, learn how to face bullies and stop them, and learn methods of responding when bullying happens." (Participant 2)

Another participant suggested:

"I wish schools offered a course on self-defense, not just physically, but emotionally and verbally, so we learn how to respond confidently and protect our mental health from bullying." (Participant 1)

The three focus groups provided additional recommendations to counter cyberbullying:

"Take students' complaints seriously [...] offer workshops to reduce [cyber] bullying, and schools should enforce disciplinary measures and deduct points from bullies in behavior and attendance." (FG11)

"Raise awareness among students and teachers about the dangers of cyberbullying and its psychological impact. If they know how to deal with it, prevention becomes easier. Students should also learn how to protect themselves online and how to report bullying." (FG5)

"Ban offensive words and suspend accounts reported for bullying." (FG16)

"Parents must communicate with their children, encourage them to speak about anything that bothers them. School leaders need clear anti-cyberbullying policies, easy reporting systems, and psychological support for students." (FG8)

The belief that social-media companies should adopt more robust anti-cyberbullying policies was also prevalent, such as revealing cyberbullies' identities when necessary, and promoting positive values for online behavior.

For example, as one participant suggested:

"There should be protection. Anyone who posts an inappropriate comment should have it deleted or their account shut down." (FG12)

Another participant added:

"Platforms should provide options to report bullies, delete their accounts, and run awareness

campaigns about cyberbullying, its harms, causes, and consequences." (FG6)

One participant highlighted that although reporting mechanisms for cyberbullying exist, victims often choose to remain silent due to fear of repercussions:

"It depends on the application. We cannot control global platforms. The real issue is people hiding what happened and not reporting it, either out of fear or because the bully threatened them. Our government already provides prevention measures; people just don't report." (FG7)

The participants have expressed diverse views on the potential approaches to addressing or implementing policies on cyberbullying. Most of the participants recommend school administration and family action when it comes to cyberbullying. They believe that fostering open communication between students, parents, and educators is crucial in creating a supportive environment.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings highlight that most male and female participants were active Internet users and subscribed to various social media platforms, which raises the risk of them being exposed to cyberbullying (Abdelrazek, 2023; Allehyani, 2018). The findings underlined that social media platforms, as well as several applications widely used by students in Saudi Arabia, were the most common online spaces in which cyberbullying took place, which concurs with the results of Salem (2020). In addition, the findings of the current study revealed that both male and female students engaged in face-to-face bullying as well as cyberbullying. This finding runs contrary to that of Sobkin and Fedotova (2021), which suggests that females tend to engage in cyberbullying in private, whereas males usually engage in face-to-face bullying.

The findings highlighted that most incidences of cyberbullying occur in the presence of other students, suggesting that it can sometimes be characterized as *group bullying*, which appears to contribute to the spread and continuation of such bullying. This relates to a core characteristic of cyberbullying, its repetitive nature and the imbalance of power it entails, leaving victims typically unable to defend themselves (Attia, 2024). Furthermore, most perpetrators of cyberbullying attended the same school as the victims. The findings also suggested that some incidents of cyberbullying were perpetrated individually, whereas others involved group cyberbullying characterized by support for such behaviors by others. This endorsement and

approval of cyberbullying align with the findings of Sobkin and Fedotova (2021). One interesting aspect of this social nature of cyberbullying is explained by Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that the favorable evaluation of cyberbullying tends to encourage perpetrators to engage in it. Additionally, it is interesting to note that poor self-esteem may increase the tendency to become involved in cyberbullying, either as a perpetrator or a victim (Handono et al., 2019).

Allowing unregulated Internet access to young users without adequate supervision has been identified as a contributing factor to the prevalence of cyberbullying among students (Al-Otaibi, 2013; Al-Wazzan, 2024). Despite global and local efforts (e.g., Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cybercrime Law, 2007 and the Child Protection Law, 2014), cyberbullying instances continue to rise (Setiawan et al., 2020; Sobkin & Fedotova, 2021). Aggressive behavior among adolescents appears to be more widespread on social media platforms than in real-life contexts (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004, in Singh & Singh, 2020). Other studies indicate that victims of cyberbullying are more likely to become perpetrators themselves (Sobkin & Fedotova, 2021). Cyberbullying behavior also appears to be encouraged by excessive, impulsive, and risky Internet use (Navarro et al., 2013, in Handono et al., 2019). The findings of the present study emphasize the importance of parental supervision of students' internet use to counter cyberbullying, parental monitoring of students' social media accounts, discussing cyberbullying problems as and when they arise, and emphasizing the shared responsibility educational institutions and families have in raising awareness of the risks of Internet use (Al-Nasser, 2024; Abdelrazek, 2023; Setiawan et al., 2020; Singh & Singh, 2020). Therefore, the findings of the present study reinforce the importance of partnership between teachers and parents in combating cyberbullying, which accords with other findings in the extant literature (e.g., Abu Al-Hassan et al., 2021; Abu Al-Naga, 2025; Al-Jasser, 2024; Al-Otaibi, 2020; Al-Otaibi, 2019; Al-Enazi, 2019; Al-Ghamdi, 2021; Salem, 2020; Mohamed, 2019).

Despite the many benefits of Internet and social media use (Henderson & Gilding, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 1999 in Singh & Singh, 2020), the current study focused on the negative effects of cyberbullying among Saudi Arabian secondary school students, many of whom misuse digital platforms by committing cyberbullying and often benefit from the anonymity such platforms provide (Kowalski & Limber, 2007 in Singh & Singh, 2020).

The findings highlighted several negative

psychological, behavioral, social, and educational effects of cyberbullying on the participants. While some believe that the impact of cyberbullying may be exaggerated or that victims can simply prevent the behavior by not engaging with it, the reality is that having strong social skills and positive personality traits are needed to cope effectively with the stress caused by cyberbullying. Considering this, the researcher recommends deploying initiatives designed to enhance students' abilities to cope with cyberbullying by educating them on ways to reduce their exposure to cyberbullies and better protect them from the harmful consequences.

The findings inspired several recommendations reflecting the needs articulated by participants in relation to cyberbullying. First, participants requested the provision of training on social and personal skills to help them seek the appropriate help if they experience cyberbullying, including understanding how to respond correctly to protect themselves from harm. Second, participants called for the development of anti-cyberbullying programs targeting parents and school staff to equip them to recognize instances of cyberbullying, carry out early intervention, and appreciate its impacts. Such initiatives are needed as secondary school students appear to have a poor awareness of cyberbullying (Setiawan et al., 2020; Elkonaisi et al., 2025).

Third, participants emphasized the need for appropriate support and legal protections for victims of cyberbullying, which aligns with the findings of other studies (e.g., Abu Al-Hassan et al., 2021; Al-Amro & Al-Habshi, 2024; Al-Wazzan, 2024; Abdelrazek, 2023; Setiawan et al., 2020). Protecting students from cyberbullying and designing comprehensive educational and therapeutic anti-cyberbullying interventions are essential. This can be achieved by investigating the underlying causes of cyberbullying (Attia, 2024), identifying the personality traits of cyberbullies and victims, evaluating the effectiveness of existing anti-cyberbullying school programs, and strengthening parental roles in supervising and protecting students from cyberbullying (Abu Al-Hassan et al., 2021; Al-Wazzan, 2014; Khidr, 2023; Abdelrazek, 2023).

The findings point to the effectiveness of existing preventive and remedial interventions to counter cyberbullying implemented at some schools and by some parents, especially when students actively seek help, which aligns with the findings of Elkonaisi et al. (2025). Factors such as family cohesion, social support (including school and peer support), and strengthening students' resilience have shown positive effects among adolescent girls facing

cyberbullying (Kamel et al., 2023). Moreover, self-compassion and enhanced psychological and social skills appear to reduce the negative effects of cyberbullying (Saghir, 2022).

The findings appear to confirm that social support, especially family support and emotional containment, helps to mitigate cyberbullying's negative consequences. Listening to adolescents experiencing cyberbullying and maintaining close relationships with the victims of cyberbullying appear to enhance victims' willingness to disclose instances of cyberbullying and reduce perpetrators' inclination to participate in such behaviors (Handono et al., 2019). This is especially important as remaining silent when suffering cyberbullying tends to cause isolation and significant harm to victims' psychological well-being, behavior, and academic performance (Agatston et al., 2012; Setiawan et al., 2020). In one study, 73% of students did not disclose their cyberbullying experiences to anyone (Elkonaisi et al., 2025). Reasons for victims remaining silent about cyberbullying include a lack of family/school support, fear of repercussions, especially in cases where family members might escalate such issues following legal routes. The findings also highlighted that cyberbullying victims also lack knowledge of how to report it, with several calling for cyberbullying reporting processes to be simplified.

Finally, the findings underline that the effects of cyberbullying appear to be interconnected, mutually reinforcing, and have long-lasting consequences due to the ease with which cyberbullying can be repeated and the permanence of harmful online content. Cyberbullying causes psychological distress and diminished self-esteem in victims, which consequently harms their social lives and academic performance (Beran & Li, 2007, in Singh & Singh, 2020). The findings emphasize cyberbullying's numerous harmful impacts and the need for collective efforts to overcome it, a finding echoed in the literature (Field, 2018, as cited in Attia, 2024; Saif & Purbasha, 2023). Schools and families have a critical role to play in improving digital safety, integrating anti-cyberbullying education into curricula, and providing opportunities for students to share their experiences of cyberbullying (Setiawan et al., 2020). Therapeutically, it is essential to strengthen students' sense of psychological safety (Saghir, 2022) and social safety at school and protect students at higher risk of harm, including through cyberbullying (Al-Jasser, 2024; Al-Amro & Al-Habshi, 2024).

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications were derived from the participants' narratives of cyberbullying and align with the previous research cited above, which enhances the findings' credibility and depth. Based on the results, the study has valuable practical implications for policymakers, students, school management in addressing cyberbullying at school.

These implications are highlighted below:

1. Educating students on using social media safely and raising awareness of the potential risks and threats of cyberbullying.
2. Offering students training in life and digital skills to enhance their confidence and ability to handle various difficult situations, including cyberbullying. Many student victims of cyberbullying have poor abilities to seek help effectively and may endure the stress of cyberbullying silently (Setiawan et al., 2020), thus compounding the harm it causes.
3. Encouraging parents to develop skills to assist adolescents who are either experiencing or perpetrating cyberbullying, particularly in relation to technical and educational skills, to allow effective involvement without violating students' privacy. Parenting characterized by acceptance, tolerance, and consistency tends to foster secure relationships; bullying behaviors are more common among children who experience rejection, neglect, and inconsistent parenting, and such children often replicate harshness in their online interactions (Attia, 2024).
4. Strengthening the role of schools in early detection and rapid intervention in cases of cyberbullying, protecting students, keeping them informed of their rights, legal solutions, types of cyberbullying, personality traits of bullies and victims, and the consequences of cyberbullying, and providing psychological and social support to enhance student wellbeing.
5. Implementing safe, confidential reporting mechanisms for cyberbullying to encourage students to report instances without fear of reprisal. Also, making referrals to specialized support agencies where needed should be prioritized by school policy and intervention practices to ensure that students receive the appropriate help and resources to address the effects of cyberbullying effectively.
6. Ensuring social media platforms take responsibility for reducing cyberbullying by linking account registration to verifiable user data to reduce the potential for anonymous

online abuse (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Mohamed, 2019; Islam, 2017; Al-Wazzan, 2024; Salem, 2020). Social media platforms should also support cyberbullying victims by deleting harmful posts, tweets, or comments. Some social media platforms have actively removed millions of instances of inappropriate content (Saif & Purbasha, 2023).

7. CONCLUSION

The results indicate that cyberbullying is prevalent among the participants and that many struggle to respond effectively when targeted by cyberbullies. The findings revealed three main interconnected effects of cyberbullying on the participants: (i) *mental health problems*, (ii) *social adjustment difficulties*, and (iii) *decline in academic performance*. In relation to countering cyberbullying, two themes emerged: (i) preventive measures designed to reduce the instances and spread of cyberbullying, and (ii) intervention measures designed to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying on students. In addition, the findings contributed to the formulation of 6 recommendations to counter cyberbullying, as mentioned in the previous section. Although the findings identified several promising anti-cyberbullying practices currently implemented by the schools attended by the participants, as well as the fact that families supported cyberbullying victims, these efforts appear to remain largely

ineffective.

Despite its strengths, including employing a qualitative research approach combined with thematic analysis and a relatively diverse sample to produce coherent and consistent findings, this study has four main limitations that must be acknowledged. First, as it focused solely on the experiences of students in relation to cyberbullying, the input of parents and teachers was not included. Future studies could adopt a wider sample of participants to produce more rounded results by taking these stakeholders into account. Second, as the current study was limited to secondary school students in Riyadh, the findings cannot be usefully generalized to other educational contexts in Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, the researcher recommends that future studies target victims of cyberbullying across different educational stages in Saudi Arabia. Third, the current study did not investigate cyberbullies themselves or their online behaviors in terms of their characteristics and the factors that drive them to engage in cyberbullying. Therefore, future studies could include cyberbullies and school personnel, such as teachers, school counselors, and parents, to gain a better understanding of those perpetrating cyberbullying. Finally, the researcher believes that future studies could benefit from incorporating a complementary secondary research instrument that analyses instances of cyberbullying experienced by participants.

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