

Forms and Lived Realities of Bullying Among College Students: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Perlita R. Israel¹

¹ Aklan State University-Ibajay, Aklan, Philippines.

Email: perlitaIsrael21@gmail.com.

Abstract

Bullying in higher education remains an important but comparatively underexamined concern. While existing research has documented the prevalence and forms of bullying among university students, fewer studies have examined how students themselves experience and make meaning of bullying within their everyday university environments. This study explored the forms and lived realities of bullying among college students at Aklan State University (ASU), Ibajay Campus. Specifically, it examined the forms of bullying experienced by college students and the essence of their lived experiences. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed with eight purposively selected undergraduate students who had experienced bullying within the university context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from December 2025 to February 2026 and analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method, with QDA Miner used to support data organization and coding. The findings showed that participants experienced multiple and overlapping forms of bullying, including verbal bullying, cyberbullying, social or relational bullying, psychological or emotional bullying, public shaming, discrimination, and physical or indirect bullying. Their lived realities were characterized by social isolation, emotional and psychological distress, diminished dignity and self-worth, persistent feelings of insecurity, and reduced participation in university life. The findings suggest that bullying was experienced not simply as an isolated interpersonal event but as a disruption of students' sense of belonging, dignity, and psychological safety within the university environment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provided a contextual lens for situating these experiences within interconnected peer, academic, digital, and institutional environments. The study contributes context-specific phenomenological evidence on bullying in Philippine higher education.....

Keywords: bullying; college students; higher education; lived realities; phenomenology; qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is commonly associated with childhood and secondary education; however, research increasingly recognizes that bullying also occurs within higher education. University students may encounter verbal aggression, social exclusion, psychological harassment, discrimination, and digitally mediated forms of victimization. The higher education environment presents distinctive social and academic contexts in which peer relationships, group membership, academic performance, and digital communication may shape students' experiences of bullying.

Research involving university students demonstrates that bullying is multidimensional. Al-Darmaki et al. (2022), for example, examined bullying behaviors among 839 undergraduate students in a national university in the United Arab Emirates and documented associations between bullying experiences and psychological characteristics. More recent scholarship has also highlighted cyberbullying and cyberstalking as important concerns in higher education. Bussu et al. (2025), in a narrative systematic review of university students, found that cyberbullying and cyberstalking victimization are associated with negative emotions and psychological vulnerabilities and emphasized the need for stronger university-level prevention and support mechanisms.

Bullying in higher education may also occur through social exclusion and relational aggression. Brehmer and Meyer (2025) describe social exclusion as a form of relational bullying in higher education and note its implications for loneliness and student well-being. Similarly, Harrison, Hulme, and Fox (2022) found that bullying in higher education may be nuanced, embedded in social and institutional relationships, and minimized or justified within university settings. Their qualitative study also identified power, inequality, and social dynamics as important dimensions of students' perceptions and experiences.

The Philippine context provides an important setting for examining the phenomenon. Republic Act No. 10627, or the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, established measures requiring elementary and secondary schools to adopt policies

addressing bullying. The law explicitly recognizes verbal, physical, psychological, and electronic forms of bullying, but its statutory coverage is directed primarily toward elementary and secondary education. Consequently, the existence of bullying-related experiences within higher education warrants continued empirical attention, particularly from the perspectives of students themselves.

Despite the growing literature, much research on bullying emphasizes prevalence, frequency, predictors, or measurable psychological outcomes. Such evidence is important, but quantitative descriptions may not fully capture how students experience bullying in their everyday lives. A phenomenological inquiry can contribute a different form of understanding by examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to experiences that they have personally lived through. This is particularly relevant in higher education, where bullying may intersect with academic relationships, peer groups, social identity, and digital spaces.

The need for such inquiry is especially relevant in Philippine higher education, where context-specific qualitative evidence remains comparatively limited. Understanding bullying from the perspective of students who have directly experienced it can reveal not only what forms bullying takes but also what those experiences mean to the students involved.

This study therefore focuses on bullying as a lived phenomenon among college students at Aklan State University (ASU), Ibaday Campus. Rather than examining perpetrators, coping strategies, or demographic differences, the study concentrates on two dimensions: the forms of bullying experienced by students and the essence of their lived realities.

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological study explored the forms and lived realities of bullying among college students at Aklan State University (ASU), Ibaday Campus.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

What are the forms of bullying experienced by college students within the university context?

What is the essence of the lived experiences of college students who have experienced bullying?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which provides a contextual lens for understanding how individuals' experiences are situated within interconnected social and environmental systems.

Bronfenbrenner conceptualized human experience in relation to multiple environmental systems. The microsystem includes immediate interpersonal relationships; the mesosystem concerns interactions among settings; the exosystem includes contexts that indirectly influence the individual; and the macrosystem encompasses broader cultural values, beliefs, norms, and social structures.

Applied to the present study, the ecological perspective recognizes that bullying may occur within immediate peer relationships, classroom interactions, student organizations, online social spaces, and broader institutional environments. A student's experience may therefore extend across interconnected settings rather than remain confined to a single interpersonal encounter.

The theory is used only as a contextual lens. The phenomenological approach remains primary, and the themes were derived from participants' narratives rather than predetermined by the theoretical framework. The ecological perspective is used after the phenomenological analysis to situate the experiences within the university environment.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study contributes localized evidence concerning bullying in higher education and gives greater visibility to the experiences of students who have directly encountered it.

Students. The findings may promote awareness of the different manifestations of bullying and encourage empathy, respect, and supportive peer relationships.

Student Services and Guidance Office. The findings may inform student-centered prevention, reporting, counseling, and support mechanisms responsive to experiences of humiliation, isolation, insecurity, and diminished belonging.

Aklan State University. The study may provide context-specific evidence for strengthening institutional mechanisms addressing bullying and promoting dignity, inclusion, and psychological safety.

Parents and Families. The findings may help families recognize difficulties that college students may experience and encourage supportive communication.

Educational Authorities and Policymakers. The findings may contribute to discussions concerning institutional approaches to bullying in higher education, particularly digitally mediated forms.

Future Researchers. The study may serve as a qualitative reference for further phenomenological and higher education research on bullying and student well-being.

4. SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study focused specifically on the forms and lived realities of bullying among college students at Aklan State University–Ibajay Campus. It did not examine perpetrators' motivations, coping strategies, resilience, or demographic differences as separate research objectives.

Eight purposively selected undergraduate students who had personally experienced bullying within the university context participated in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from December 2025 to February 2026 and analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method, with QDA Miner used for data organization and coding.

The study is context-specific. Its small sample and single-campus setting mean that the findings are not intended for statistical generalization to other institutions. Rather, the study seeks to provide sufficiently rich descriptions that may allow readers and researchers to assess the **transferability** of the findings to comparable contexts. The findings also rely on participants' self-reported experiences and therefore reflect their personal perceptions and meanings.

5. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a **qualitative phenomenological research design**. Phenomenology is appropriate when the purpose is to understand how individuals experience and make meaning of a phenomenon that they have directly encountered (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The design was appropriate because the study did not seek to estimate the prevalence of bullying or establish causal relationships. Instead, it sought to describe the forms of bullying experienced by participants and understand the essence of their lived realities.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Aklan State University–Ibajay Campus, located in Ibajay, Aklan, Philippines. At the time of the study, the campus had six undergraduate programs and one graduate program, with a student population of approximately 2,937.

The campus provided an appropriate context for examining bullying because students interact across classrooms, peer groups, student organizations, academic activities, and digital communication spaces.

Participants and Sampling

Eight undergraduate students participated in the study. Purposive sampling was employed because participants needed to possess direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Participants were included when they were currently enrolled at ASU–Ibajay Campus, had personally experienced bullying within the university context, and voluntarily agreed to participate in an in-depth interview.

The sample was selected for the relevance and richness of participants' experiences rather than statistical representativeness.

Data Collection

Data were collected from December 2025 to February 2026 using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was aligned with the two research questions and was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness.

Participants were given the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words. Because the topic involved potentially distressing experiences, participation was voluntary and participants could decline to answer questions or discontinue the interview.

Participant identities were protected through the use of codes or pseudonyms in reporting the findings.

Data Analysis

The interview narratives were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) Seven-Step Method of Phenomenological Analysis.

The procedure involved:

reading the interview transcripts repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding;

identifying significant statements related to the phenomenon;

formulating meanings from the significant statements;

organizing formulated meanings into theme clusters;

developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon;

formulating the fundamental structure or essence of the experience; and

validating the interpretation through participant feedback/member checking.

QDA Miner was used as a data-management and coding support tool. It facilitated the organization, retrieval, and grouping of coded segments but did not replace the researchers' phenomenological interpretation.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility was supported through careful engagement with the interview narratives and participant validation where conducted. Transferability was addressed through contextual description of the research setting and participants. Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of the analytic process, while confirmability was supported through reflexive attention to the researchers' interpretive role.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through participant codes rather than real names. Participants were informed of their right to decline questions or discontinue participation. Particular attention was given to emotional sensitivity because the interviews involved personal experiences of bullying.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: Forms of Bullying Experienced by College Students

The analysis showed that participants experienced bullying in multiple and overlapping forms. Table 1 summarizes the forms identified in the participants' accounts.

Table 1. Forms of Bullying Experienced by Participants

Form of bullying	Description	Frequency
Verbal bullying	Insults, name-calling, mocking, degrading remarks	8
Cyberbullying	Harassment through social media, messages, posts, or digital content	7
Social/relational bullying	Exclusion, isolation, rumor-spreading, rejection	6
Psychological/emotional bullying	Threats, intimidation, manipulation, sustained humiliation	6
Public shaming	Embarrassment or exposure before peers or wider audiences	5
Discrimination	Appearance-, age-, gender-, identity-, or socioeconomic-based targeting	4
Physical/indirect bullying	Pranks, interference with belongings, or other non-direct physical acts	2

Note: Frequencies represent the number of participants whose narratives contained evidence of each form. Because participants could report more than one form, frequencies do not total eight.

Verbal Bullying

Verbal bullying was reported by all eight participants, making it the most frequently identified form. Participants described insults, degrading comments, ridicule, and remarks directed toward appearance, academic ability, identity, or personal circumstances.

The findings indicate that verbal bullying may become particularly significant when it is repeated or embedded in everyday peer interaction. Rather than being experienced simply as isolated offensive remarks, repeated verbal attacks could become part of the participant's perception of the university social environment.

This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that bullying in higher education may be expressed through nuanced interpersonal behaviors that can be minimized or normalized within university settings (Harrison et al., 2022).

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying was reported by seven participants. Participants described hostile messages, exclusion from online groups, damaging posts, edited photographs, false accusations, and other forms of digital exposure.

One participant described the experience as follows:

“My bully also posted my dance performance on social media and captioned it ‘salot sa lipunan’...”

The account illustrates how digital bullying can extend humiliation beyond the immediate physical setting. Bussu et al. (2025) found that cyberbullying and cyberstalking among university students may involve negative emotions and psychological vulnerabilities and emphasized that digital victimization requires active institutional attention. The digital environment also changed the perceived boundaries of the bullying experience. Unlike an incident occurring only within a classroom or campus space, online harassment could follow the student beyond the physical university environment.

Social and Relational Bullying

Six participants reported experiences involving exclusion, isolation, rumor-spreading, or rejection by peers. These experiences indicate that bullying may operate through the withdrawal or manipulation of social relationships rather than through direct verbal or physical aggression.

The importance of belonging is particularly relevant in higher education, where peer networks contribute to students' social and academic experiences. Brehmer and Meyer (2025) similarly identify social exclusion as a form of relational bullying in higher education and associate it with loneliness and threats to student well-being.

Psychological and Emotional Bullying

Six participants described experiences involving intimidation, manipulation, threats, sustained humiliation, or other behaviors that affected their emotional security.

These experiences frequently overlapped with verbal, relational, and digital bullying. The findings therefore suggest that the categories should not be understood as mutually exclusive. One incident could simultaneously involve verbal humiliation, social exclusion, and digital exposure.

Public Shaming

Public shaming was reported by five participants. Participants described being embarrassed before classmates, peers, or wider online audiences.

Viviana, for example, described an incident following a group presentation:

“Our group grades were very low because of me. After the incident my classmates got angry and they shamed me publicly; one of our groupmates said I was the weakest link in our group.”

Public exposure added another dimension to the experience because the humiliation was witnessed by others. The meaning of the event therefore extended beyond the original interaction to include concerns about reputation, dignity, and belonging.

Discrimination

Four participants described bullying associated with characteristics such as appearance, age, gender identity, socioeconomic circumstances, or other personal differences.

These accounts demonstrate that bullying may intersect with broader social judgments concerning who is perceived as different, inferior, or outside a desired peer norm. Harrison et al. (2022) similarly identified power and inequality as important dimensions of bullying in higher education.

Physical and Indirect Bullying

Physical or indirect bullying was reported by two participants and was the least frequently identified form. Participants described experiences involving pranks, interference with personal belongings, or other indirect physical behaviors.

Although less frequently reported, its presence demonstrates that bullying in the university setting is not exclusively verbal or digital.

Synthesis of Research Question 1

Overall, the findings demonstrate that bullying among the participants was **multiform and overlapping**. Verbal, digital, relational, psychological, public, discriminatory, and physical/indirect behaviors could occur within interconnected social contexts.

The findings should not be interpreted as establishing prevalence among the entire ASU student population. Rather, the frequencies describe the occurrence of forms within the narratives of the eight participants. This distinction is important because the study is phenomenological rather than epidemiological.

Research Question 2: Lived Realities of College Students Who Experienced Bullying

The second research question focused not on what forms bullying took but on **what it was like to experience bullying**.

Analysis of the participants' narratives revealed five interconnected dimensions:

social isolation and loss of belonging;

emotional and psychological distress;

diminished dignity and self-worth;

persistent vulnerability and insecurity; and

reduced academic and social participation.

Social Isolation and Loss of Belonging

Participants described exclusion, rejection, distancing from peers, and withdrawal from social relationships. Some experiences also involved exclusion from digital social spaces.

The experience of isolation was more than simply having fewer social interactions. Participants described feeling that they no longer belonged within groups or that relationships they had previously considered meaningful had become sources of insecurity.

This finding corresponds with research identifying social exclusion as an important form of relational bullying in higher education.

For participants, therefore, bullying altered their experience of university belonging. The university was not experienced solely as a place for learning but also as a social environment in which acceptance and rejection carried substantial emotional meaning.

Emotional and Psychological Distress

Emotional distress emerged strongly across the narratives. Participants described sadness, anxiety, fear, confusion, stress, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of being overwhelmed.

Angelo expressed this experience through the metaphor:

"I felt I was a cup that was broken... my entire future was broken."

The statement illustrates the depth of the participant's perceived disruption. The experience was not described simply as temporary unhappiness; it affected how the participant understood the self and the future.

Another participant described heightened fear associated with receiving messages or notifications, suggesting that previous experiences of harassment remained psychologically salient.

Research on university students similarly documents negative emotional and psychological experiences associated with bullying and cyberbullying. Al-Darmaki et al. (2022) examined bullying among university students and identified psychological characteristics associated with exposure to bullying. Bussu et al. (2025) likewise identified negative emotions and psychological vulnerabilities among university students exposed to cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

The present findings add a phenomenological dimension to these observations by showing how distress was experienced and expressed in participants' own narratives.

Diminished Dignity and Self-Worth

Participants also described experiences of humiliation, ridicule, negative labeling, and repeated accusations that influenced how they viewed themselves.

One participant described feeling:

“I felt tiny like a grain of salt.”

This metaphor conveys perceived smallness, inferiority, and diminished personal significance. Such narratives demonstrate how interpersonal treatment can become incorporated into a student’s understanding of the self.

The loss of dignity was particularly evident when humiliation occurred publicly. The participant was not merely subjected to an unpleasant interaction; the experience involved being seen by others in a devalued position.

Harrison et al. (2022) found that bullying in higher education may be embedded in power relations and broader inequalities, supporting the interpretation that students’ experiences may involve more than individual interpersonal conflict.

Persistent Vulnerability and Insecurity

Participants described continuing fear, vigilance, and anticipation of further negative experiences. One participant stated:

“Every time my phone chimes, my heart start racing.”

The statement illustrates how an ordinary event—a phone notification—could acquire a threatening meaning following experiences of digital harassment.

Similarly, some participants described waiting for another prank, another accusation, or another humiliating encounter. These narratives suggest that the lived experience of bullying could continue psychologically even when the immediate event had ended.

The significance of this finding is particularly apparent in digital contexts. Bussu et al. (2025) noted that cyberbullying and cyberstalking can extend beyond physical academic environments and may be difficult for students to escape.

Reduced Academic and Social Participation

Participants also described changes in their participation in university life. Some became more distant from peers, reduced participation in activities, or avoided situations associated with previous negative experiences.

Angelo explained:

“I stop joining dance contest. I became aloof to the troupe.”

The withdrawal illustrates how the meaning of bullying extended into activities that had previously contributed to the participant’s identity and social engagement.

Another account involved academic accusations. Angelo described being accused of using artificial intelligence to complete assignments, being reported to an instructor, and remaining stigmatized even after being cleared. He stated:

“Though I was innocent, I was still stressed which affected my academic performance.”

This narrative demonstrates how bullying may cross boundaries between peer relationships and academic environments. The experience was not limited to the original accusation; it affected the participant’s sense of trust, emotional security, and participation.

Emerging Interpretation of the Lived Realities

Table 2. Emerging Interpretation of Participants’ Lived Realities

Major dimension	Lived meaning
Social isolation and loss of belonging	Feeling excluded, rejected, or disconnected from peers and university life
Emotional and psychological distress	Experiencing sadness, anxiety, fear, stress, exhaustion, and emotional overwhelm
Diminished dignity and self-worth	Feeling humiliated, inferior, devalued, or uncertain about one’s social identity
Persistent vulnerability and insecurity	Anticipating further harassment and experiencing the university environment as socially or emotionally unsafe
Reduced participation	Withdrawing from relationships, activities, or academic engagement

These dimensions were interconnected rather than independent. Public humiliation could contribute to diminished self-worth; diminished self-worth could contribute to withdrawal; withdrawal could intensify isolation; and continuing digital exposure could sustain feelings of vulnerability.

The findings therefore indicate that the lived reality of bullying is not adequately represented by the name of the behavior alone. “Cyberbullying,” “verbal bullying,” or “social exclusion” describe what happened, whereas the phenomenological findings reveal what those experiences meant to the students who lived through them.

Essence of the Lived Reality

The participants’ narratives reveal that bullying was experienced as more than an interpersonal disagreement or isolated negative encounter. It involved rejection, humiliation, emotional pain, insecurity, disrupted belonging, and changes in how participants perceived themselves and their place within the university.

The essence of the lived reality may therefore be expressed as:

A struggle to preserve dignity, belonging, and a sense of security within a university environment experienced as socially and emotionally unsafe.

This essence captures the common meaning running across the participants’ narratives. Although the specific forms of bullying differed, participants repeatedly described experiences of being devalued, excluded, exposed, or made uncertain about their position among peers.

The findings can be contextually situated through Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Bullying occurred within immediate peer relationships and academic settings while, in several accounts, extending into digital environments. These interconnected contexts could intensify feelings of rejection and insecurity. The ecological framework therefore helps situate the participants’ experiences within the environments in which they occurred, while the phenomenological interpretation remains grounded in the participants’ own accounts.

7. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explored the forms and lived realities of bullying among eight college students at Aklan State University–Ibajay Campus.

The findings demonstrate that participants experienced bullying in multiple and overlapping forms, including verbal bullying, cyberbullying, social or relational bullying, psychological or emotional bullying, public shaming, discrimination, and physical or indirect bullying. Verbal bullying was reported by all participants, while cyberbullying and relational bullying were also prominent within the narratives.

More importantly, the phenomenological findings demonstrate that bullying was experienced as a deeply personal disruption of social belonging, emotional security, dignity, and self-perception. Participants described isolation, emotional and psychological distress, diminished self-worth, persistent vulnerability, and reduced participation in university life.

The essence of the lived reality was a struggle to preserve dignity, belonging, and a sense of security within a university environment experienced as socially and emotionally unsafe.

The findings reinforce the importance of understanding bullying in higher education not merely as a collection of behaviors but as a lived experience situated within interconnected peer, academic, digital, and institutional environments.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

For students: Universities should strengthen awareness of different forms of bullying and encourage respectful peer relationships and appropriate reporting of bullying experiences.

For Student Services and Guidance Offices: Confidential and accessible reporting and support mechanisms should be strengthened, particularly for experiences involving humiliation, isolation, discrimination, and digital harassment.

For Aklan State University: Institutional mechanisms addressing bullying should encompass both face-to-face and digitally mediated forms and should promote dignity, inclusion, psychological safety, and belonging.

For faculty and academic personnel: Faculty should remain attentive to signs of exclusion, humiliation, discrimination, and repeated peer harassment and should refer students to appropriate support services when necessary.

For educational authorities: Policy guidance for higher education institutions should recognize the distinctive forms of bullying that may occur among college students, including digitally mediated harassment.

For future researchers: Further phenomenological and qualitative studies should examine bullying across multiple Philippine higher education institutions and explore how institutional context, digital environments, and student experiences interact.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest is declared.

Funding: No external funding was reported for this study.

Data Availability: The qualitative interview data are not publicly available because the narratives contain sensitive personal experiences and are subject to confidentiality protections.

Generative AI Use: During manuscript preparation, generative artificial intelligence tools were used for language refinement, organization, and editorial assistance. The author retained responsibility for the study design, data, interpretation, accuracy of the findings, references, and final manuscript..

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