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## **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF HIGH SCHOOL BULLYING: SOCIAL ANXIETY AND COPING STRATEGIES IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examines the enduring impact of high school bullying experiences on social anxiety among university students. Utilizing online semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom, data was gathered from eight (N=8) university students who self-identified as victims of bullying during their high school years. The interview questions asked participants about the nature of bullying experienced, the dynamics of the bully-victim relationship, the psychological and emotional repercussions, and the coping mechanisms employed. The collected data underwent a rigorous thematic analysis employing Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-stage approach. The findings reveal a significant association between high school bullying and subsequent social anxiety. The analysis uncovers six prominent emergent themes: (1) Emotional and Verbal Bullying, (2) Physical Bullying, (3) the relationship between Bully and Victim, (4) the Psychological and Emotional Impact of High School Bullying, (5) Social Anxiety and Adjustment to University Life, and (6) Coping Strategies. These themes contribute to a deeper understanding of the participants' past experiences, illuminating the enduring effects of high school bullying on psychological well-being. The significance of this research is discussed concerning its implications for educational institutions, mental health services, professionals, interventions, and future research directions. The study advocates for further investigations in this area,

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given the long-term implications on the mental health of victims, and contributes to the growing body of literature positing bullying as a significant public health concern.

**Keywords:** High school bullying, social anxiety, university students, psychological and emotional impacts, thematic analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying among children and adolescents has emerged as a pervasive and critical social issue with overt and subtle long-term effects. Multiple factors contribute to bullying, including individual characteristics, family and peer interactions, and cultural context (Mishna, 2012, p. 3). The term "mobbing," introduced by Heinemann in 1973 and later defined by Olweus in 1978 as the physical and mental aggression directed by one or more children toward a peer, marks the early beginnings of systematic research on bullying (Smith et al., 2002; Mishna, 2012). Although this phenomenon was initially studied in Scandinavia by Olweus (1978), it gradually gained attention in other countries such as Japan, Britain, Spain, Canada, and the USA during the late 1980s and 1990s (Olweus, 1993).

In response to the negative outcomes associated with bullying, both for perpetrators and victims, extensive research has been undertaken to investigate its effects (Arseneault et al., 2010). Research has demonstrated that bullying can impact the brain in ways similar to experiencing physical pain. The dysregulation of the nerve endocrine response to stress and specific genetic sequences resulting from bullying can become physiologically embedded in the developing individual, potentially leading to lifelong mental and physical health problems (Vaillancourt et al., 2013). Victims of bullying are susceptible to various psychiatric disturbances, and emerging evidence suggests that the physiological impact of bullying, akin to other forms of trauma and chronic stress, poses additional health hazards. Additionally, the established link between early and chronic stress exposure and adverse health outcomes highlights the importance of bullying as a risk factor for later health morbidity (Zarate-Garza et al., 2017).

Research conducted by Wolke and Lereya (2015) has focused on exploring the long-term consequences of bullying across different age groups, ranging from childhood to adulthood. Their findings revealed that children who experienced bullying faced

a higher risk of somatic and psychosomatic issues and internalizing problems such as anxiety or depression disorders. Additionally, victims constantly bullied throughout their development showed an increased likelihood of being diagnosed with anxiety disorder and depression in young and middle adulthood. These victims also exhibited a higher risk of experiencing psychotic episodes at age 18 and displayed overall lower general psychological health and higher levels of social problems (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Similar findings have been reported by Rodríguez-Muñoz et al. (2015), who found that bullying demonstrated a robust and significant association with anxiety and depression, and that such mistreatment is linked to health issues and diminished overall well-being.

### High School Bullying

Numerous studies have been conducted to elucidate the multifaceted consequences of bullying among high school students and the outcomes associated with being bullied (Bryson et al., 2021; Halliday et al., 2021; Rigby, 2003). For instance, Bauman et al. (2013) investigated the association between depression, suicidal behaviors, and bullying or victimization experiences among high school students. Guided by the interpersonal theory of suicide (Van Orden et al., 2010) and Beck's cognitive theory of depression (1967), the study explored how suicide ideation and depression may result from victimization. This research is particularly significant as it examined depression as a mediator between bullying and cyberbullying experiences and suicidal behaviors. The researchers found a noteworthy connection between various bullying and cyberbullying experiences and suicide attempts, with gender differences being emphasized. Similar findings were reported by Hinduja and Patchin (2010).

Another study by Cornell et al. (2013) utilized data from 276 Virginia Public high schools to investigate the relationship between the prevalence of teasing and bullying and high school dropout rates. The researchers found that teasing and bullying accounted for 16.5% and 10.8% of the variance in dropouts, respectively. The study also considered other factors affecting dropout rates, such as school size, students' overall financial status, and performance on standardized achievement tests. Interestingly, students' and teachers' perceptions of teasing and bullying exhibited comparable predictive values to other factors linked to dropout rates, underscoring the strong relationship between peer victimization and academic performance in high schools.

Similarly, Arslan et al. (2012) investigated the prevalence of bullying and victimization among male and female students in Turkey, while examining the physical and psychological symptoms associated with being a bully, victim, or bully victim. Their study revealed that being a bully was linked to a higher incidence of health-related problems, encompassing physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and dizziness, and psychological symptoms like high irritation, nervousness, and loneliness. Notably, bullies exhibited higher levels of irritability but lower levels of other health-related issues.

### **Social Anxiety in University Students**

Social anxiety, defined as an intense fear of evaluation from others, particularly in social situations, becomes classified as social anxiety disorder when it impairs functioning (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013). In the context of university students, the transition to college is recognized as a distressing situation that may lead to an increase in experiences of social anxiety, particularly when individuals have negative past experiences (Holt et al., 2014). Brook and Willoughby (2015) highlighted that features of social anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation, distress, and avoidance of social situations, are perceived as unfavorable in the university setting, where engagement is vital for academic achievement. Their research investigated the relationship between social anxiety, academic achievement, and the formation of new social ties, revealing a significant negative and direct relationship between academic achievement and social anxiety through social ties.

### **High School Bullying and Social Anxiety in University Students**

Numerous studies have explored the effects of high school bullying, specifically on social anxiety in university students, directly or indirectly. For example, Portola et al. (2019) sought to establish the relationship between bullying experiences and anxiety in general learning situations. The findings showed significant differences in scores between students with bullying experiences and those without, with victims reporting higher levels of current anxiety diagnoses and context-specific anxiety in the university context. deLara (2019) found that young adults with bullying experiences faced ongoing mental health issues, physiological concerns, and relationship difficulties. Among the various consequences, social anxiety and depression were expected and prominent outcomes of bullying victimization, with 37% of children developing social anxiety and more than half continuing to experience it as adults.

Past bullying experiences appear to have enduring consequences. Smith and Caron (2022) conducted in-depth interviews with 12 college women who had previous bullying experiences, revealing the negative emotional responses and avoidance behavior they faced due to childhood peer victimization. The findings highlighted the impact of childhood bullying on these women, even during college, with social anxiety, negative emotional affect, feelings of isolation, and fear of making new friends being particularly prevalent in their first year. Similarly, previous findings suggest that bullying is predictive of social anxiety among victims, although this relationship has been found to be influenced by social support and gender of victim (Coyle et al., 2021).

Most research on childhood bullying and its long-term consequences points to associations with poor physical and mental health (Holt et al., 2014). Specifically, regarding the prevalence of social anxiety, it has been demonstrated that prior victimization and bullying can lead to difficulties in learning situations, particularly in university, which heavily relies on social interaction and integration. In a meta-analysis, Samara et al. (2021) provided an overview of the robust finding that bullying victimization is related with poorer academic performance, although the relationship is mediated by a range of factors, including, for example, the availability of social support and the type of bullying experienced.

### **Current Study and Rationale**

The present study aims to investigate the impact of high school bullying on social anxiety in university students. Social anxiety, its prevalence, associated costs, and comorbidity with other disorders have been extensively documented (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013). While previous research has established a significant relationship between childhood bullying and later social anxiety (Parhola et al., 2019; Smith & Caron, 2022; deLara, 2019; Meng et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2010), it is imperative that further investigation explores this complex association (deLara, 2019). The significance of this research lies in its specific focus on investigating social anxiety as a consequence of high school bullying and its long-term effects on university students. While studies have examined the short-term consequences of bullying, a dearth of research delves into the long-term psychological impact across various educational stages, from primary to college (Sesar et al., 2012). Addressing this gap is

crucial to understanding the developmental trajectory of social anxiety in individuals who have experienced high school bullying.

Furthermore, this study addresses a pressing public health issue: childhood bullying can significantly impede young adult development (Hong et al., 2019; Ledwell & King, 2015; Yoon et al., 2021). Findings from this research can inform the development of effective bullying intervention programs at all educational levels and provide valuable support to victims. Parents, teachers, schools, and healthcare professionals can benefit from evidence-based insights to implement targeted interventions and support mechanisms for individuals at risk of social anxiety due to high school bullying. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the long-term implications of childhood bullying on psychological well-being, shedding light on potential avenues for early intervention and prevention strategies.

In studying the impact of high school bullying on social anxiety among university students, it is crucial to consider a diverse range of participants and adopt a qualitative research approach. By incorporating diverse perspectives and lived experiences, qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of social anxiety resulting from high school bullying and its lasting effects on university students. Additionally, qualitative research facilitates the exploration of multiple identities and experiences, and how they intersect with experiences of victimization and the subsequent development of social anxiety. Moreover, qualitative research allows for a more in-depth examination of the long-term consequences of high school bullying on university students' mental health. This approach also enables researchers to capture participants' narratives and subjective experiences, shedding light on the lived reality of those impacted by bullying, and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

The participants were selected using snowball sampling from undergraduate courses during the Spring 2023 semester. A poster containing the study's aim, inclusion requirements, and researchers' contact information was shared with students in first-year courses by their professors. The study focused on first-year students due to the relatively recent nature of their high school experiences. Participants were required

to have faced bullying during their high school years and were expected to be English-speaking. Eight participants (N=8) participated in the study, including five Turkish nationals, one Pakistani national, one Jordanian national, and one Lithuanian national.

The use of a sample size of eight participants in this thematic analysis is justified due to the in-depth and detailed nature of the qualitative research method ( Fugard & Henry, 2015). The thematic analysis allows for a comprehensive exploration of individual experiences and perceptions, leading to rich insights into the research question. With a focused research question and limited resources, a smaller sample size is practical and manageable, enabling thorough analysis of each participant's responses. While not aiming for generalizability, the study prioritizes providing a detailed and contextual understanding of the long-term effects of high school bullying on social anxiety in university students. The smaller sample size is appropriate for the research objectives, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

### **Measures**

The research used two measures. The first measure involved a demographics form that asked for information about age, sex, nationality, English fluency, and experiences in high school. The second measure involved semi-structured interview questions administered to the eight participants who recalled their high school experiences related to bullying. The interview questions focused on their bullying experiences during high school, including the type of bullying, the bullies' identity, and the duration. Additionally, the interview addressed the social anxiety and other psychological implications experienced by the participants during their time at the university related to their high school bullying experience. Specific aspects probed included the number of friendships, discomfort with new people, and experiences in activities involving interaction with teachers and peers.

### **Procedure**

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom, as participants expressed a higher level of comfort with this mode of communication. Prior to data collection, university ethics approval was obtained. An informed consent form was sent to each participant before the interview, explaining the procedure, the content of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, and the participant's confidentiality. Participants were

informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. They were also informed that the interview content might cause discomfort, and the university's Psychological Counseling Unit was available for support in such cases. The interviews were conducted individually and scheduled in advance at a location convenient for each participant. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Recordings were accessible only to the researcher and thesis advisor. Each participant was assigned a number for identification purposes in order to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Data Analysis**

The study employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to explore the long-term effects of high school bullying on social anxiety in university students. Thematic analysis is a versatile and flexible method that enables the in-depth examination of data. It can be applied to data in various ways, including critical and experiential aspects, providing detailed descriptions of phenomena or aspects of phenomena, and conducting critical analyses to highlight underlying ideas in the data (Terry et al., 2017). The analysis followed a six-stage process, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013), the analysis followed a six-stage process. These stages encompassed transcribing the interviews, reading and familiarizing oneself with the transcriptions, coding the data, identifying emerging themes, reviewing these themes through a thematic map, naming and defining the themes, and finally, writing and finalizing the analysis.

## **RESULTS**

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the influence of high school bullying on social anxiety among university students. Eight participants were recruited for the study, and their responses were subject to manual thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was selected as the methodological approach to identify patterns and themes within the collected data. The audio interviews were transcribed using the Descript software program, and the researcher thoroughly reviewed the transcriptions multiple times to become acquainted with the content and to identify relevant excerpts related to the research question.

The data were then subjected to a complete coding process, where all information relevant to the research question was coded. The identified codes were then mapped



onto a thematic map to visualize emerging themes and subthemes for better analysis. The themes that aligned well with the data were refined, incongruent ones were adjusted or discarded, and new themes were developed to ensure comprehensive data representation. Finally, the themes underwent thorough revision to ensure their cohesiveness, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research question, and they were reviewed in the context of the entire dataset. The resulting analysis revealed four main themes that offer valuable insights into various aspects of the bullying experience, encompassing the nature of bullying, the dynamics between bullies and victims, and the lasting impacts of these encounters.

## **Bullying Experience in High School**

### **Theme 1: Emotional and Verbal Bullying**

Emotional and verbal bullying emerged as the most prevalent theme among the participants. Nearly all participants shared experiences related to emotional or verbal bullying when questioned about their past encounters. Emotional bullying is characterized by using verbal or nonverbal behavior to inflict harm or manipulate an individual's emotions, self-esteem, or relationships (Bulut, 2019). Specifically, verbal bullying, a subset of emotional bullying, involves using spoken or written words to harm, manipulate, or intimidate others. Instances of emotional and verbal bullying included name-calling, teasing, spreading rumors, exclusion, and manipulation. The data analysis indicated a direct relationship between the nature of bullying and its effects on the participants. Those who had experienced emotional bullying highlighted its impact on their ability to form social relationships.

In contrast, those who faced verbal bullying reported experiencing diminished self-esteem and self-worth. For instance, Participant 3 recalled hurtful comments like "Are you from Avatar?" directed at her because of her blue hair, which immediately affected her self-esteem and self-image. The findings underscore the significance of the type of bullying experienced and its repercussions on the participants' psychological well-being.

*"Uh, sure. Um, I have been bullied, um, once in my year in, uh, my life and it was from, uh, my closest friends. And, um, they have bullied me, uh, a whole year. Mm-hmm. And that changed my, um, health, and I had to, uh, start using some medicine for my stomach. Mm-hmm. Cause it was like, um, because of the stress that I've been going through. Yeah. Uh, some acids were made in my*

*stomach. That's why I had to, like, Use, um, um, what can I say? Like medicines and, yeah. Um, I was out of eating. Mm-hmm. Because I couldn't find someone to sit with. Uh, so yeah, it was hard, hard over time. And even though they knew I was going through a hard time, they kept doing the same thing for a year. It was more emotional. Like they, they tried to like lower my self-esteem and just like wanted me to, like, Feel bad in some way." (P1)*

*"Yeah. Like they were talking about, um, the things. That I said to them when we are friends. Like, I know they're talking about because I said it to them but they weren't giving my name" (P5)*

*"And then they just told me everything they knew about me because we were very close friends for a very long time. They, they told, they told my secrets to each other people. And I think that's bullying" (P4)*

*"It was a lot of the physical, like mm-hmm. Commenting on the physical attributes. Yeah. So that made me like, I was not comfortable in my own skin. Mm-hmm. Like till now. Mm-hmm. So, like I said, like when I meet new people, all I think about is. What do they think of me like physically? Will they like me? Mm-hmm. Will they like me enough? Mm-hmm. So those comments really come back to me" (P7)*

*"They used to call me a lot of names, and they used to make fun of the way I looked or make fun of my situation in my family where they used to make up rumors about me, and it was very difficult for me to like to cope." (P6)*

## **Theme 2: Physical Bullying**

Physical bullying emerged as another common type highlighted in the interviews, involving using physical cues or violence to harm others. Physical bullying involves engaging in acts such as hitting, kicking, beating, or pushing (Cook et al., 2010). Two participants shared their experiences of enduring verbal, emotional, and physical bullying during high school. The interviews shed light on the enduring impact of physical bullying, as participants recounted experiences of fear of attachment, low self-esteem, and boundary issues resulting from such victimization. The data underscores the profound and lasting repercussions of physical bullying, highlighting the importance of investigating its effects on individuals' psychological well-being.

*"They even tried to cut my hair when I sat in front of them, and teachers wanted to comb my hair tight. I obviously told the school principal that they tried to do that, and their explanation was like, um, they wanted to wash the part of my hair, see if the dye was gonna come out." (P3)*

*"like my hair was blue, and they told us you didn't have to attend in formal, but they didn't say the skirt has to be long, and since I don't care, I wore a dress and the teacher, their looks were very disturbing.... Sometimes they were trying to pull my skirt, uh, not at a graduation party, but they did that at school" (P3)*

*"It was, it used to get physical in school, like physical abuse and sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and it was very overwhelming in school. And the school didn't help me, and the students didn't help me as well. And like I used to be. Like they used to look down, down on me for being in a place like that with a person like that. And, um, my grades just declined. I started failing all of my work and the school" (P6)*

*"Yeah. We were in class. Mm-hmm. And there was always a group of boys. Mm-hmm. Uh, harassing me, like basically poking me with pens on my thighs. Mm-hmm. Or bringing like a ruler and slapping my butt with the ruler in front of everyone in class. Mm-hmm. So it was very, like, obviously they were crossing my boundaries a lot, but I was too young to, to like stand up for myself or I think it was, it looked bad or anything" (P6)*

### **Theme 3: Relationship between Bully and Victim**

#### **Sub-Theme: Peer Bullying**

This sub-theme sheds light on a crucial aspect of understanding the drivers behind bullying behavior. The analysis revealed that many individuals experienced peer bullying, which frequently entails an inherent power dynamic. In such cases, the bully leverages the victim's perception of their position or social influence to assert dominance and control. On the other hand, the victim often feels helpless and vulnerable in the face of the bully's tactics. This finding underscores the significance of examining the power dynamics in bullying situations, providing valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms of such behaviors.

*"Yani basically mm-hmm. Like, it's from, it's from when we were young and mm-hmm. Until we, like, grew up into being like juniors or seniors. Mm-hmm.*

*It just, it just kept like on an ongoing cycle. Mm-hmm. Like I was known to be the girl that's always targeted" (P6)*

*"Um, and eventually, I don't know how she did that, but um, she kinda has control over the rest of the class, like not just the rest of the girls, like the whole class. And she somehow managed them to like not talking to me like. At that point, no one was talking to me. And, uh, when I asked others, not her, like, um, if they can gimme a clue about what happened, that they didn't give me anything and I knew like they, they're no, but just they're not telling me." (P6)*

*"They, they started to like to do mobbing and bullying on me. Like they were talking about me. They were insulting me, but they didn't, they never like exactly, specifically gave me my uh, name. Mm-hmm. It never happened. If someone asks me, Hey, what's going on? Like, you can tell me. I couldn't give them proof. Yeah. Like they're talking about me. Yeah. Yeah. So it keeps, it kept continuing like that, and I never had a chance to prove it to someone." (P2)*

*"My overall experience in high school was not really great cause, um, most of the other students were Muslims, which, um, was a big problem cause, like, we had core Lessons about religion, and I didn't want to attend it at high school. I realized that I wouldn't recognize myself as Muslim, so I didn't. I got bullied by my classmates, friends, and teachers who said that I dye my hair and told me that I say I'm not Muslim for attention." (P3)*

*"Yeah. I won't call them friends, but, um, as you know, we, uh, in high school, like, like there's a big group of people and this, we are just sitting together. We're not actually friends. I won't call them friends, but more of batchmates." (P8)*

### **Sub-Theme: Girl-on-Girl Bullying**

The majority of participants who volunteered for the study identified as female. During the analysis, a significant and noteworthy aspect of bullying emerged, referred to as "girl-on-girl bullying." This form of bullying involves a female being victimized by another female. It is characterized by intricate power dynamics influenced by gender, perceived social status within the class, and cultural expectations. Girl-on-girl bullying may manifest through various means, such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, physical intimidation, or more covert actions like spreading rumors and manipulating

social relationships, also known as indirect aggression. The findings highlight the complexities and subtleties of this type of bullying and underscore its potential to elicit a range of emotional and psychological effects on the victims. The exploration of girl-on-girl bullying brings attention to the need for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in such interactions and their impact on the psychological well-being of those involved.

*" Uh, sure. Um, I have been bullied, um, once in my year in, uh, my life and it was from, uh, my closest friends. And, um, they have bullied me, uh, a whole year. Mm-hmm. And that changed my, um, health, and I had to, uh, start using some medicine for my stomach. Mm-hmm. Cause it was like, um, because of the stress that I've been going through." (P1)*

*"Then yesterday when I go to school again, I asked her like, Hey, What's the problem? Like you're my friend, I don't wanna lose you. I love you. Like you mean something to me. And, like, she didn't even answer. She didn't even turn around face to face with me. And like that frustrated me at the beginning, and I just, Hey, like I'm talking to you like you're my friend, but she never gave me an answer." (P2)*

*"And like, like my face gets like, like I was like a bit chubby, yeah. And some, some, some of my friends like making fun of, fun of it. Uh, it was. It was really sad for me." (P5)*

*"um, in, when I was in 12th grade, like in my senior year, um, we had a friend group of four, um, four, four girls.... And then they just, told everything they knew about me because we were very close friends for a very long time. They, they told, they told my secrets to each to other people." (P4)*

#### **Theme 4: Psychological and Emotional Impact of High School Bullying**

This theme sheds light on the diverse psychological and emotional impacts that high school bullying may engender. Existing research has consistently highlighted the link between past bullying experiences and negative emotional responses and avoidance in the present (Smith & Caron, 2022). The effects of high school bullying extend beyond immediate consequences and can lead to enduring personality changes, attachment issues, trust issues, and anxiety-related problems (deLara, 2019; Nikiforou et al., 2013; Porhola et al., 2019). By thoroughly exploring these implications, this

theme provides a deeper understanding of the multifaceted and far-reaching consequences of high school bullying on individuals' psychological well-being. The findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing these lasting effects to promote better mental health outcomes for those who have experienced bullying in their high school years.

### **Sub-Theme: Difficulty in Forming Friendships**

Experiencing bullying during high school can profoundly impact an individual's self-perception, social skills, social competence, and ability to comprehend social cues, ultimately affecting their capacity to initiate and sustain meaningful conversations, thereby presenting challenges in forming and maintaining new friendships. This theme delves into the repercussions of bullying on the participants' social interactions, highlighting how their negative experiences have shaped their abilities to establish and nurture new relationships. The findings underscore the significant role of high school bullying in shaping individuals' social dynamics and highlight the potential barriers it poses to developing fulfilling and supportive friendships in their university years. Understanding these implications offers valuable insights for intervention strategies and support mechanisms that can aid in fostering healthy social relationships among those who have faced bullying during high school.

*"Yeah. And it does, it did not affect me in high school after, but um, I am, I'm not as open to the, uh, people I am with now in university because of that."*

*"Um, I, I did not face any trouble making friends. Mm-hmm. But I think I am facing trouble, having close friends now. I'm meeting with someone, and being friends with them is not something that hard for me. Yeah. I think I'm. I'm moderately okay with doing that, but as, as I said, have been close with them and open to them, it takes time." (P1)*

*"Um, yeah. Yes. I would have in, I would have interacted with people more. Yeah. Yeah, I think because of the bullying experience I had, I have a change in my personality and my social abilities, which has directly affected the number of friends that I am able to have right now." (P8)*

*"Not really, I don't have that. I have some friendships, but not one that you can be personal in, Yeah. So, it's mostly like just university or you just work thing or exams, not like friends, friends, you know?" (P3)*

*"...this high school likely and become like making friends was very difficult. I did not succeed in making that many friends, like opening myself up to people was very difficult." (P7)*

### **Sub-Theme: The Emergence of Trust Issues**

Trust-related issues and challenges arise due to bullying, particularly when the victim experiences betrayal from someone they know or trust. Such experiences directly impact the victim's ability to trust others in the future, leading to difficulties in forming new relationships or engaging in social interactions fueled by the fear of being betrayed and humiliated again. Furthermore, victims may internalize negative beliefs about themselves, viewing themselves as unworthy of trust or expecting others to be harmful. This further hinders their capacity to forge positive and healthy connections. This theme elucidates the profound and lasting effects of bullying on an individual's ability to trust others, emphasizing the need for interventions that address these trust-related issues to foster more meaningful and secure interpersonal relationships in their university years and beyond.

*"I found trusting harder than usual and, um, maybe, yeah. When I try to meet someone in a friendly way Uh, first of all, uh, the instinct of trying to trust them in every way appears and, um, because I've been through a lot in the back of my mind, I try to like, uh, fully trust them, and other instinct says that it's not possible." (P1)*

*"Um, no, actually like, um, I find some people that I can, you know, talk to, but I just can't, you know, trust them, like mm-hmm. I can't, um, grow a healthy relationship with them." (P2)*

*"I actually stopped, uh, like trusting people a lot. Mm-hmm. Cause they were, they were really my best friends, and I saw that they're not, yeah, I can say that. Yeah. Uh, I, I don't trust people a lot." (P5)*

*"I would like to think so. Yeah. I know. How do you think being bullied has affected your personality? Like in detail? Um, like, because if the bullying, I don't want really, uh, show my personality as much, like in the first meeting. Mm-hmm. It takes me at least like six, seven meetings mm-hmm. To be me with someone. Okay. And I don't think people really like to reciprocate that. Mm-hmm. You know, like they don't, they don't respond well to that." (P3)*

*Q: So, it is hard for you to open up at first. Yeah, yeah. The experience that you have had. Furthermore, do you develop trust issues in your closer relationships?*

*“Ans: Yeah. All of that, right? Hmm. Yes.”*

*"Yeah. Yeah. I have to be very strong-headed, and I have to be kind of mean or rude so that I know they will never cross their boundaries with me because. It's something that I, I would never want to go through again. Okay. So, I'm like very, I'm very like, like honest in my, in my approach that doesn't mess with me. But at the same time, I hide who I am. Cause obviously that's not how I wanna be, but it's how life makes me choose to deal with people." (P7)*

### **Theme 5: Social Anxiety and Adjustment to University Life**

This theme delves into the participants' experiences of adjusting to university life and the profound influence of their past bullying experiences on this transitional process. Participants expressed heightened social anxiety, concerns about others' perceptions of them, and a noticeable change in their personality. Many participants revealed that they identified more as extroverts before experiencing bullying but perceived themselves as more introverted after the incidents. These findings underscore the lasting impact of high school bullying on the participants' self-perception, social behaviors, and adaptation to the university environment. Such insights highlight the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to facilitate a smoother adjustment to university life and address the enduring effects of past bullying experiences on their social and psychological well-being.

#### **Sub-Theme: Onset of Social Anxiety**

One of the primary objectives of this study is to investigate the association between high school bullying and social anxiety. The findings unequivocally demonstrate a strong correlation between past experiences of bullying during high school and the manifestation of social anxiety symptoms in university or after distressing encounters. Social anxiety is characterized by an intense fear of social situations, which can prove detrimental in a university setting where extensive interactions with peers and professors are commonplace (Holt et al., 2014). The implications of these results underscore the significance of addressing and mitigating the long-term impact of high school bullying on an individual's social and psychological well-being during their academic journey.



*"Well, um, it made me like feel hard to, uh, talking about anything like, um, lesson subjects, talking with, um, teachers. like it, it expanded from school and started to include, uh, other parts of my life. Mm-hmm. And. It, it feels like if I say something, um, eventually, people will make fun of me. Yeah. Like, uh, it's just, I'm not talking about the high school experience. I know like it came from there, but even in university, um, when I. If I wanted to say something in front of the class, they will eventually make fun of me. Like, even though I'm, I don't know, they don't show me, I'll know that deep down they're making fun of me, so I shouldn't say anything, or I shouldn't ask anything. Um, or, uh, giving a response to the lecture of professors when they ask something, even though I know the answer." (P2)*

*"Yeah. I would say social anxiety. Mm-hmm. Because every time I dress up and I go out, this thing is still in my mind." (P7)*

*"Uh, for a long time, I, um, had anxiety with really high anxiety. I had to take a lot of medications. Mm-hmm. Like, Um, I was; I hated all people for a long time in social places. I was just wearing my headphones all the time, and I didn't really look at them, especially those I thought of as Muslims, because of my experience in high school. I'm kinda; I don't feel comfortable with them. I'm kind of better now with social anxiety, but, um, When I see someone with a head scarf, I am not comfortable and prefer not to Communicate with them because I still think that they'll probably judge me, and yeah. I'm not doing that. But I used to, um, when I met with some people, I prefer not to talk cause like I know I'm different." (P3)*

*"but I sometimes say that don't go; they're not going to talk to you in some way. Mm-hmm. But, uh, I try to like break that, uh, wall. To like, uh, more people. Mm-hmm. But mostly, uh, I feel stressed and because of what, not knowing what to say first. Like when you go to someone, you say hi. Hi. How are you doing? Good. How are you? Good. What are you doing? Stuff. Then the conversation stops, and you have to say one more thing, and then you feel like, I'm on. I'm the only one who's talking. You have to like to say something back. Mm-hmm. So sometimes it's hard to, like, go to someone and make the first move." (P1)*

### **Sub-Theme: Fear of Judgment**

The findings further revealed a noteworthy relationship between past experiences of bullying and heightened levels of fear of judgment in individuals. This correlation can be attributed to the enduring impact of high school bullying on an individual's self-esteem and social self-perception, leading victims to internalize negative attitudes toward themselves and develop beliefs of unworthiness or unlikability (Darney et al., 2013). Consequently, individuals experiencing fear of judgment may exhibit hesitancy to express themselves openly, excessive rumination on others' opinions, and an aversion to disagreeing with others. These outcomes emphasize the lasting psychological consequences of bullying experiences, underscoring the importance of addressing and supporting individuals who have endured such adversity to facilitate their emotional and social well-being.

*"It makes me feel really anxious. And it's actually happening in the class when the lecture was f2f, yeah. And it just makes me feel like I just don't wanna do that. Like, it just, um, keeps me away from these kinds of activities." (P2)*

*"Yeah. Uh, because, like, these girls were, like, kind of had a dominant character. Mm-hmm. So, uh, it just. Like when that happens, it, it just reminds me of their characteristics, like mm-hmm. Um, this person is a, um, dominant person as well, and even though if I say the right thing, it, he or she will like eventually will come at me and I will feel uncomfortable. Yeah. So, we won't." (P2)*

*"So many times, in a day, like I feel like, um, I should change my appearance or I should wear clothes that might be more, um, accepted from other people so they will feel close to me. So, it will make me much easier to have friends." (P2)*

*"It, it does matter. It wouldn't change me, but it does matter a lot. So." (P4)*

*"I think like every time I, I meet new people, or if I'm about to meet a person, I would always be worried about if they're gonna judge me by the way I look, or if they're gonna think that, or if they're gonna think like, I don't know the exact word, but I feel like they might judge me. Mm-hmm. By the way, I look. Not that I think I look in any way, but it's because of like my past experiences. Mm-hmm. So basically, what I do is I always put up this front if I'm about to meet a person because I don't like to show people who I truly am." (P6)*

*"Yes. I still have that in. You can't make everyone happy, but. I still sometimes prefer to do that instead of a discussion and having, I guess.... I'm trying not to, but it does. It's still there, right? Yeah, it's always, uh, like when I'm going out, you know, I always try to look, um, I don't just go up, never even for a market or something else, which pajama I always go up get ready especially with my hair and then go." (P3)*

### **Sub-Theme: Shifts in Personality Characteristics**

Bullying directly and profoundly impacts an individual's mental and emotional well-being, leading to substantial changes in their behavior and personality over time. A notable personality change observed in the participants is the transformation from an extroverted disposition to becoming more introverted after experiencing bullying. Many participants recounted how they perceived themselves as extroverts before the bullying incident but now identify as introverts. This shift in personality may stem from a defensive mechanism aimed at self-protection or a consequence of diminished self-esteem resulting from the bullying experience. Such alterations in personality underscore the far-reaching consequences of bullying, as it affects an individual's psychological state and manifests in fundamental aspects of their identity and social interactions.

*"Maybe I'm more of a shy person after the, the, uh, the bullying, but there's nothing else that I can say." (P1)*

*"Um, NOT a huge one, but. Uh, I'm a very extroverted person normally, but after that about myself, about what I experience about my feelings, I became introverted. Mm-hmm. But as socially, but like with me and myself and I mm-hmm. We, we became introverted in ourselves." (P4)*

*"Yeah, on all levels, I would say I am an extrovert. Mm-hmm. But then, right now, I said like I was in the middle, so obviously, it affected me from being, going from an extrovert word to a middle, middle-like person. Yeah, yeah, of course. So, you could say that it did affect my social abilities negatively." (P7)*

*"Uh, after those years, yes. Like, uh, I've got a lot of problems. I, I was having, um, a lot of medical support also that year, starting from anxiety, from depression. Because I was people that time and was, I was also very social. Mm-hmm. But for a period of time, Yeah, I was, um, very, I was, I hated school and,*

*uh, I prefer not to talk to people, I just only, I didn't even want to see a therapist, yeah, because I thought that she would also judge me. I'm gonna tell her all this stuff that." (P3)*

### **Theme 6: Coping Strategies**

The theme of Coping Strategies sheds light on the diverse approaches adopted by the participants to cope with the aftermath of bullying. The analysis reveals a dichotomy between negative coping strategies, which entail self-protective measures and the internalization of negative self-perceptions, and positive strategies, involving seeking therapeutic assistance and fostering resilience to counteract the effects of bullying. Positive coping, also known as constructive coping strategies, emphasizes employing task-relevant and action-oriented strategies (Shiota, 2006). Individuals who employ such coping strategies rely on realistic assessments of stressors and available coping resources, such as identifying the effects the past bullying experience had and seeking therapy and counseling. On the other hand, negative coping strategies involve avoidant defense mechanisms and passive coping strategies, which can include repression and suppression.

#### **Sub-Theme: Negative Coping Strategies**

This research highlights three primary mechanisms in the negative coping strategies: concealing one's authentic self, actively avoiding social connections, and internalizing negative self-beliefs. These strategies may serve as self-preservation methods but can also perpetuate maladaptive behaviors unless individuals who have experienced bullying seek support to cultivate positive coping mechanisms. Identifying and understanding these coping strategies are essential for promoting healthy psychological adjustment and facilitating the development of constructive approaches to manage the consequences of bullying experiences (Lee & Lim, 2019).

*"Yeah. Yeah. I have to be very strong-headed, and I have to be kind of mean or rude so that I know they will never cross their boundaries with me because. It's something that I, I would never want to go through again. Mm-hmm. Okay. So, I'm like very, I'm very like, like honest in my, in my approach that I like mm-hmm. Don't mess with me. But at the same time, I hide who I am. Cause obviously, that's not how I wanna be, but its how life makes me choose to deal with people. Mm-hmm." (P6)*

*"I accept to be lonely like it is. Okay. And being lonely equals to like keeping away, like keep away from getting hurt or any kinda troubles. So, like that kind of way it changed." (P2)*

*"So, um, I just, you know, can't, can't go to a person and talk about, like, talk, talk about anything or, you know, ask them about something in class or anything. So, like, I wanted to ask them, like, I wanted to talk with the person who sits right. Like next to me. Yeah. You know, sentences are going on in my mind. I can just, like, I'm talking on my side, but I just can't ask them or talk with them." (P2)*

### **Sub-Theme: Positive Coping Strategies**

The Positive Coping Strategies sub-theme illuminates how specific individuals employ constructive approaches to navigate past negative experiences, which can include seeking support and assistance from their social circles or adopting a positive mindset to comprehend the underlying aspects of their bullying encounters. The findings indicate that some participants opt for therapeutic intervention, as exemplified by Participant 3, while others develop resilience, as demonstrated by Participant 5. Both instances showcase successful coping mechanisms that enable individuals to address their bullying experiences more positively. These positive coping strategies play a crucial role in promoting psychological well-being and facilitating the process of healing and growth following the adverse effects of bullying. Understanding and identifying such positive coping strategies are essential for interventions and support systems that can effectively assist individuals in overcoming the lingering impacts of past bullying encounters.

*"Yeah. At that time, I wouldn't have that boundaries as a child. I don't know how to stop people, or they also don't know because they were also children, but yes, therapy Really helped me. Yeah.... But, um, I think I did a great job about it with help from therapy. I'm very comfortable with new people and explain myself. I don't really care if they judge me because I've accepted myself, and I know where my boundaries are, and when someone crosses them, I can just, uh, cut them off. Mm-hmm. And that's, uh, make feel better." (P3)*

*"Uh, I told myself I'm not going to be a person like them because, because it was really disappointing and sad for me and it was also sad for my parents cause, they, they can see me and they can understand what's going on. Yeah.*

*And. And, sometimes, we can't do anything for them. Cause they're like that, we can't; we can't change them." (P5)*

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study investigated the association between high school bullying and social anxiety in university students to understand the long-term effects of bullying during high school. The results derived from this qualitative study strongly support the initial hypothesis that social anxiety emerges as a significant consequence of negative bullying experiences during high school. The thematic analysis employed in the study also revealed a broader array of implications, including personality shifts, trust issues, and other psychological and emotional challenges resulting from bullying encounters.

The research examined the impact of high school bullying on individuals and identified six major themes.

1. Emotional and Verbal Bullying
2. Physical Bullying
3. Relationship between Bully and Victim
4. Psychological and Emotional Impact of High School Bullying
5. Social Anxiety and Adjustment to University Life
6. Coping Strategies

The analysis method used in this research helps to shed light on diverse implications and yields findings consistent with prior research related to high school bullying and its consequences for university students. For example, Smith and Caron (2022) conducted a qualitative study on the impact of bullying during middle and high school on the college experience. Their findings showed that participants commonly experienced negative emotions such as anxiety, isolation, and fear of forming new friendships. Similar findings were reported by Holt et al. (2014), who found that childhood bullying victimization was linked to adverse effects on first-year college student's mental and physical well-being. Being a victim of bullying is associated with adverse outcomes, including physical health problems, behavioral and emotional issues, depression, psychotic symptoms, poor academic achievement, and an increased risk of suicide ideation and attempts (Copeland et al., 2013).

Regarding social anxiety and social adjustment issues in university, Boulton (2013) found that adults who reported being teased during childhood were more likely to experience social anxiety in adulthood. Wu et al. (2021) found a direct and positive link between bullying victimization and social anxiety. Moreover, this association was mediated by both shame and self-esteem, indicating that these psychological factors play significant roles in explaining the relationship between bullying victimization and social anxiety. Further, and also supporting the findings of the current study, research has identified that bullying victimization is associated with later mental health problems and lowered levels of well-being (Pabian et al., 2021).

The results of the current study also highlight the importance of coping approaches used by university students to deal with the challenges and trauma associated with previous bullying victimization. Previous research suggests that both victims and perpetrators of school bullying reported lower positive psychological orientations, reduced subjective well-being, and increased emotional and behavioral problems compared to their non-involved peers. Moreover, positive psychological orientations have been found to mediate the relationship between school bullying and mental health problems, as well as well-being, highlighting the potential significance of these factors in developing effective intervention strategies to prevent bullying and promote mental health and well-being among youth in educational settings (Arslan et al., 2021). Andreou et al. (2020) reported that higher levels of resilience were associated with greater positive well-being, particularly among boys and younger students, and resilience is related to positive coping approaches (Shing et al., 2016).

deLara (2019) explored the relationship between childhood bullying and various psychological issues in young adults, including self-esteem, body image, eating disorders, general anxiety, social anxiety, and depression. While deLara's (2019) research encompassed a more comprehensive array of psychological issues, the current study's findings align with this research, revealing how participants with past bullying experiences faced difficulties regarding self-esteem, social anxiety, and general anxiety. Similar findings that partly confirm the research findings of the current study are reported by Vanderbilt & Augustyn (2010), who found that bullying poses significant challenges for the victims, with identifiable individual and social risk factors, and that aside from the immediate trauma, victims face an increased risk of later physical and emotional disorders.

Moreover, Holt et al. (2014) examined the correlation between past bullying victimization and its impact on the transition to college, including mental and physical health effects that could affect students' social and academic experiences. Their research suggested that childhood victimization could impair the psychosocial functioning of college students due to the need for forming social connections and interactions. Consistent with Holt et al.'s (2014) research, the current study indicates that university students with past bullying experiences encountered challenges in forming social connections due to impaired social abilities acquired during high school. Similar findings were reported by Goodboy et al. (2016), who found that first-semester college students who experienced victimization in high school reported lower motivation to attend college and faced challenges in adjusting to their new environment during the first month of college. This suggests that past victimization experiences have a lasting impact on these students' academic and social transitions to college, even though college is often seen as a fresh beginning for many.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite the in-depth and rich data obtained, several limitations warrant consideration. The small sample size may hinder generalizability, stemming from the qualitative nature of the research and inclusion criteria for participation. Furthermore, the participants in the study were female, which, while presenting a limitation in terms of generalizability to a broader population, also offers distinct strengths. By focusing exclusively on female participants, the study provided a unique insight to explore gender-specific experiences and responses related to bullying victimization. However, caution should be exercised when extending the findings to settings with greater gender diversity. Future research should consider incorporating a more diverse sample to enhance the external validity and broaden the understanding of the studied relationship across different genders and contexts. Moreover, future studies could explore bullying experiences at different educational levels, including primary, middle school, and college. This comparative analysis would offer a deeper understanding of the complexity and urgency of the issue, potentially informing intervention programs tailored to different age levels.

### **Strengths and Contributions**

This study contributes to the literature by utilizing thematic analysis as an interpretative tool to explore the implications of high school bullying comprehensively. The



method facilitates the identification of contextual factors and social dynamics influencing the relationship between bullying and social anxiety. Through participants' narratives, specific situations, interactions, and environments contributing to their experiences were brought to light, such as the emergence of "girl-on-girl" bullying (Hellström & Beckman, 2020). These findings provide the groundwork for future research in understanding different factors contributing to bullying and its long-term psychological effects.

Furthermore, despite the small sample size of eight participants, the study encompasses diversity with individuals from different nationalities. This diversity enhances external validity, allowing the findings to be generalized to a broader population (Case & Smith, 2000). The study's qualitative nature and involvement of current university students add strength to the research, as the findings demonstrate the potential real-world applications of the identified themes and offer practical insights that can be effectively implemented in various contexts. The findings can be used by educational institutions, schools, colleges, and healthcare professionals to create awareness and intervention programs to reduce bullying and provide counseling opportunities for victims.

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