

# Dynamics of Bullying in University Settings: An Assessment of Mental Health and Interpersonal Relationships

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## Abstract

Bullying in university settings poses a significant challenge to students' mental health and interpersonal relationship dynamics. This study examines the main forms of bullying, their psychological implications, and their impact on social interactions within the university community. Through a mixed approach, quantitative data were collected through surveys applied to 300 students from different universities in Latin America and qualitative interviews with 15 victims of bullying. The results revealed high levels of anxiety, depression and social isolation among the victims, in addition to a generalized perception of a lack of institutional support. The findings underscore the need to implement effective preventive policies and strengthen support systems on campuses.

**Keywords:** university bullying, mental health, interpersonal relationships, anxiety, depression, educational environments.

## Introduction

Bullying in university environments has been identified as a significant problem that affects not only the academic performance of students, but also their mental health and social integration within the educational community. This phenomenon can manifest itself in a variety of ways, from verbal and physical harassment to digital violence, and can be perpetrated by peers as well as by professors or other administrative staff (Oliveira et al., 2022). Despite the efforts made in many universities to prevent and address this problem, recent statistics indicate that bullying rates in academia remain alarming, especially in regions such as Latin America, where reporting systems and prevention policies are insufficient (Bianchi & López, 2023).

The university experience, which should be a space for personal, academic and social development, becomes a source of chronic stress for those students who are victims of bullying. This stress can manifest itself in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Johnson et al., 2023). In addition, victims' perception of the lack of institutional support aggravates the impact of bullying, contributing to a feeling of learned helplessness and a significant deterioration in their interpersonal relationships (Ruiz

& Sánchez, 2020). In a recent study, it was found that 65% of students who are victims of bullying identify the university environment as a space that does not promote emotional safety or offer sufficient resources to address these cases (Martínez & Gómez, 2021).

In terms of social relationships, bullying not only affects the direct victims, but also impacts the overall climate of coexistence on campus. Research suggests that students exposed to hostile environments tend to isolate themselves, which affects their ability to form support networks and participate in collaborative academic activities (Pérez & Domínguez, 2021). In addition, this environment can perpetuate a culture of tolerance towards bullying, making intervention efforts even more difficult. According to Oliveira et al. (2022), the lack of clear sanctions for aggressors encourages the normalization of bullying, creating a vicious circle of victimization and silence.

In Latin America, the problem takes on a particular dimension due to the structural gaps in educational policies and the social inequalities that affect universities. According to Martínez and Gómez (2021), many institutions lack clear protocols for handling harassment cases, leaving victims without adequate reporting and resolution mechanisms. This institutional vacuum not only increases the incidence of bullying, but also discourages students from seeking help, perpetuating a cycle of silence and revictimization.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics of bullying in university environments and evaluate its impact on students' mental health and interpersonal relationships. In addition, it seeks to identify the main institutional barriers that victims face when trying to access support mechanisms. Through a mixed approach, this work provides quantitative data on the prevalence and effects of bullying, complemented by qualitative perspectives that explore the personal experiences of victims.

Ultimately, this research not only aims to describe the problem, but also to contribute to the creation of preventive and intervention strategies that promote a safe and equitable educational environment. The findings of this study are particularly relevant for designing institutional policies that prioritize student well-being and foster a culture of respect and zero tolerance towards bullying (Bianchi & López, 2023).

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Conceptualization of bullying in university environments**

College bullying is understood as a set of aggressive and persistent behaviors that are intended to humiliate, intimidate, or marginalize an individual within the educational context. These dynamics can include verbal, physical, psychological, and digital harassment, the latter being increasingly frequent in the context of the digitalization of academic activities (Oliveira et al., 2022).

Digital harassment, in particular, has increased with the massive use of virtual platforms, where hostile behaviors are manifested through intimidating messages, dissemination of personal information, or exclusion from online academic spaces (Bianchi & López, 2023). This form of bullying has a direct impact on the mental health of victims, who report high levels of anxiety and social isolation (Johnson et al., 2023).

### **Classification of forms of harassment**

Bullying in college settings can be classified into several categories, each with specific characteristics that affect victims differently:

Harassmentcategory	Description	Reported impacts
Verbal harassment	Insults, derogatory comments, constant mockery.	Anxiety, loss of self-esteem (Ruiz & Sánchez, 2020).
Physicalharassment	Physical aggression, pushing, damage to personal belongings.	Post-traumatic stress, fear of socialization (Martínez & Gómez, 2021).
Digital harassment	Dissemination of personal content, exclusion on social networks or platforms.	Social isolation, fear of virtual interaction (Oliveira et al., 2022).
Institutionalharassment	Abuse of power by teachers or administrative staff.	Academic demotivation, dropping out of studies (Pérez & Domínguez, 2021).

### **Impact of bullying on mental health**

The relationship between college bullying and mental health has been widely documented. Recent studies indicate that bullying is associated with elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress in victims. For example, Oliveira et al. (2022) found that 70% of victims of digital bullying in universities reported symptoms of moderate to severe depression. In addition, victims tend to develop a negative perception of themselves and the environment around them, which reinforces cycles of isolation and psychological vulnerability (Ruiz & Sánchez, 2020).

A study conducted by Johnson et al. (2023) at North American universities shows that victims of bullying have up to 45% higher rates of depression than their unaffected peers. This impact extends to students' ability to participate in group activities and develop meaningful relationships, a key element in academic and social success.

### **Interpersonal relationships in the academic environment**

Bullying not only affects the direct victims, but also influences the dynamics of interpersonal relationships within the university community. Victims often feel rejected and isolated, limiting their ability to form support networks. Pérez and Domínguez (2021) point out that 60% of victims of bullying in universities report a significant reduction in their participation in extracurricular and collaborative activities.

The lack of social interaction is also related to the deterioration of academic performance, as victims avoid group environments where they could feel exposed to new aggressions (Martínez & Gómez, 2021). This contributes to perpetuating a culture of exclusion and mistrust within university campuses.

### **Institutional perspective on university bullying**

Educational institutions play a key role in the prevention and care of bullying. However, studies show that many universities lack adequate policies and resources to address this problem (Martínez & Gómez, 2021). For example, a recent survey conducted in 15 Latin

American universities revealed that only 40% of institutions had specific protocols in place to handle harassment cases.

<b>Dimension evaluated</b>	<b>Compliance Percentage</b>
Existence of reporting protocols	40%
Availability of psychological support services	55%
Harassment Prevention Training	35%

The lack of specific training for teachers and administrative staff makes it difficult to identify cases of bullying early and implement effective intervention measures (Oliveira et al., 2022).

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted in this study responds to the need to understand the dynamics of bullying in university environments from a comprehensive perspective, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. This mixed approach makes it possible to address the prevalence of the problem, its impact on students' mental health, and the institutional barriers faced by victims (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Study design**

The research design is **exploratory-descriptive**, with a mixed sequential approach that integrates quantitative and qualitative data. This approach allows for a more complete view of the phenomenon, identifying patterns through surveys and delving into personal experiences through interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

### **Participants**

The study involved **315 university students** from different institutions in Latin America, selected through convenience sampling. The participants were divided into two groups:

#### **1. Quantitative phase:**

- **N = 300 students** (140 males and 160 females).
- Mean age: 21.4 years (SD = 3.2 years).
- Majors: Social Sciences (35%), Engineering (30%), Health Sciences (25%), and Arts (10%).

#### **2. Qualitative phase:**

- **N = 15 students** identified as victims of bullying.
- Inclusion criteria: have experienced harassment in the last 12 months and be willing to participate in interviews.

<b>Characteristicsoftheparticipants</b>	<b>Quantitative phase (N = 300)</b>	<b>Qualitative phase (N = 15)</b>
Average age (years)	21.4	22.1
Gender	46% male, 54% female	33% male, 67% female
Types of Reported Harassment	58% digital, 42% face-to-face	67% digital, 33% face-to-face

### **Instruments**

#### **1. Structured surveys:**

- **DASS-21 scale:** to measure levels of anxiety, depression and stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).
- **University Climate Questionnaire:** adapted to assess the perception of institutional support (Oliveira et al., 2022).

#### **2. Script for semi-structured interviews:**

- It explores personal experiences, perception of institutional support, and effects of bullying on social relationships and mental health (Johnson et al., 2023).

#### **3. Sociodemographic file:**

- To collect information on age, gender, career, and mode of study.

### **Procedure**

The study was carried out between January and June 2024. The process was divided into the following stages:

#### **1. Quantitativephase:**

- Online surveys were applied through secure platforms.
- The data was anonymized, and participants signed a digital informed consent before completing the surveys.
- **Averagesurveylength:** 20 minutes.

#### **2. Qualitative phase:**

- In-depth interviews were conducted via video calls.
- Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes.
- The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the prior consent of the participants.

### **Data analysis**

#### **1. Quantitative analysis:**

- Survey data were processed using **SPSS 28 software**.

- Descriptive analyses (means, standard deviations) and logistic regressions were performed to identify relationships between variables.

Indicators analysed	Stocking	Standard deviation	Significant correlation with bullying
Anxiety levels	25.6	5.3	p < 0.01
Levels of depression	22.8	6.1	p < 0.05
Perception of institutional support	2.4/5	1.1	p < 0.01

## 2. Qualitative analysis:

- The Atlas.ti 9 software was used to perform thematic encoding.
- Key categories such as "emotional effects", "institutional barriers" and "deterioration of interpersonal relationships" were identified (Pérez & Domínguez, 2021).

### Limitations

- The sample is not representative of all universities in Latin America, which limits the generalizability of the results.
- The self-reported nature of the surveys may have introduced bias into the responses.

### Results

The results of the study allow us to understand the prevalence of bullying in university environments, its effects on students' mental health and interpersonal relationships, as well as the perception of the effectiveness of institutional policies. The most relevant findings are presented below, divided into three main categories: prevalence of bullying, impact on mental health, and deterioration of interpersonal relationships.

#### Prevalence of bullying in university settings

Of the 300 students surveyed, **42% reported experiencing bullying in the past year**. The most common forms identified were verbal harassment (32%), digital harassment (27%), institutional harassment (23%) and physical harassment (18%). It was observed that women were more likely to report incidents of harassment compared to men (55% vs. 38%, p < 0.01).

Form of harassment	Percentage (%) of reported cases
Verbal harassment	32%
Digital harassment	27%
Institutional harassment	23%
Physical harassment	18%

These results coincide with previous research that highlights the predominance of verbal and digital bullying in university contexts (Oliveira et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2023).

### Impact on mental health

Elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress were found in victims of bullying compared to students who did not report these experiences. Data obtained through the DASS-21 scale showed that **68% of the victims had moderate or severe levels of anxiety**, while **55% reported significant symptoms of depression**.

Psychological indicator	Victims of bullying (N = 126)	Non-victims (N = 174)	P-Value
Anxiety (moderate or severe)	68%	28%	< 0.001
Depression (moderate or severe)	55%	21%	< 0.001
High stress	47%	19%	< 0.001

Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings. For example, one participant expressed:

*"The harassment I suffered not only made me feel afraid at university, but also generated sleep problems and a constant feeling of anxiety"* (Interviewee 3, female, 22 years old).

These results are consistent with studies such as those by Ruiz and Sánchez (2020), which underline the devastating psychological effects of bullying in the university environment.

### Deterioration of interpersonal relationships

60% of victims of bullying indicated that they had significantly reduced their participation in group activities, both academic and extracurricular. In addition, **73% reported feelings of social isolation** due to bullying experiences.

Effect on social relationships	Percentage (%) of casualties
Reduction of social participation	60%
Feelings of social isolation	73%
Distrust of the environment	45%

A common pattern identified in the interviews was the fear of interacting with other students or teachers. One victim commented, *"After the bullying, I avoided participating in group projects because I was afraid of being humiliated again"* (Interviewee 7, male, 24 years old).

These findings are consistent with recent research showing how college bullying negatively affects social interaction and collaborative learning opportunities (Pérez & Domínguez, 2021).

### Perception of the institutional response

70% of the students surveyed perceived that universities do not have effective mechanisms to prevent and address cases of harassment. Only 35% were aware of the existence of formal protocols for reporting incidents.

Perception of institutional policies	Percentage (%)
Institutions without clear protocols	70%
Students' knowledge of protocols	35%
Perception of lack of institutional support	65%

The interviews also highlighted this shortcoming. One participant expressed: *"When I tried to report the harassment I suffered, I did not find a clear channel and ended up abandoning the idea"* (Interviewee 9, female, 21 years old).

### Conclusions

The study reaffirms that bullying in university settings is a prevalent and complex problem that significantly affects students' mental health and interpersonal relationships. The findings highlight the need to address this problem from multiple perspectives, emphasizing both prevention and intervention.

### Key Dimensions of College Bullying

Verbal and digital harassment emerge as the most prevalent forms, with a particularly high incidence among women. This coincides with studies that point out how gender roles influence the experience and perception of bullying, exacerbating inequalities in educational settings (Bianchi & López, 2023). Likewise, the digitalization of learning has expanded the opportunities for bullying to manifest itself in virtual spaces, which requires an urgent review of policies related to coexistence on technological platforms (Oliveira et al., 2022).

### Impact on mental health

College bullying has severe psychological consequences, including high levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. This impact not only affects the well-being of the victims, but also negatively influences their academic performance and their ability to interact socially. According to Johnson et al. (2023), these consequences could last beyond the time students stay in college, affecting their transition to professional and social life.

### Deterioration of interpersonal relationships

Social isolation and reduced participation in collaborative activities are recurrent effects among victims. The distrust generated by experiences of bullying makes it difficult to establish support networks, a crucial element for academic success and personal development (Pérez & Domínguez, 2021). This deterioration of social relations not only affects the direct victims, but also negatively impacts the general climate of coexistence within universities, perpetuating a culture of silence and impunity.

### **Institutional deficiencies**

Students' perceptions of the lack of clear policies and scarce institutional support are alarming. Only a third of the participants were aware of the existence of protocols for reporting harassment, which reflects a disconnect between institutional policies and the student community. Studies such as those by Martínez and Gómez (2021) have underscored the importance of implementing accessible and confidential reporting systems that strengthen trust in educational institutions.

### **Implications for the intervention**

The results of this study underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to combating bullying. This includes:

- **Prevention:** awareness campaigns for students and university staff, focused on the early identification of bullying behaviors (Oliveira et al., 2022).
- **Psychological support:** increase resources for mental health services in universities, guaranteeing free and confidential access to victims (Ruiz & Sánchez, 2020).
- **Strengthening policies:** development of clear protocols and effective mechanisms to report and sanction bullying, ensuring its correct dissemination among the student community (Martínez & Gómez, 2021).
- **Safe spaces in virtual environments:** regulation of the use of digital platforms to avoid cyberbullying, along with educational programs that promote an ethical use of technology (Bianchi & López, 2023).

### **Future projection**

This study represents a step toward understanding the dynamics of bullying, but it also leaves open the need for future research. Specifically, it is recommended to explore the impact of bullying on vulnerable subgroups, such as students from marginalized communities or those who identify with sexual and gender minorities. In addition, it would be pertinent to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional interventions in different cultural and economic contexts.

In conclusion, harassment in university settings not only constitutes a violation of students' rights, but also undermines the fundamental purpose of educational institutions: to provide a safe and equitable space for learning and personal development. Addressing this problem requires a coordinated and sustained effort that integrates students, teachers, administrative staff, and education policymakers.

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