The Experience of Overcoming School Bullying Among Young Adults in Malaysia

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Abstract

Past research has supported the notion that school bullying can have a negative and enduring impact, persisting into adulthood. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of young adults in Malaysia who have successfully overcome school bullying. A basic interpretive qualitative research design was employed to understand the experiences of 13 young adults, all Malaysians except for 1 of them, aged between 19 and 28, who had gone through school bullying and overcome adversity. Through purposive sampling, selected participants were interviewed via online meeting platforms, with the guidance of semi-structured questions. They were selected if they had experienced school any form of bullying during their schooling period in Malaysia and that the bullying was repetitive. The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's 6-step thematic analysis method. The analysis revealed seven themes: 'Turning point,' 'After-effect,' 'Catalyst,' 'Cognitive reappraisal,' 'Realization of control,' 'Adaptive coping,' and 'Letting Go and Moving On'. The study's key finding explains that immediate coping strategies during bullying may be maladaptive, emphasising the importance of effective post-bullying cognitive strategies. Furthermore, cognitive reappraisal emerges as critical, with suppressing emotions potentially leading to detrimental consequences. The significance of a catalyst role in addressing cognitive limitations in young adolescents was also discussed. Finally, emphasising the significance of letting go and moving on as adaptive forms of control. In summary, these findings contribute to the existing knowledge, offering a nuanced perspective on overcoming school bullying. The study's implications for mental health care providers and educational institutions were highlighted. Future recommendations and limitations were also addressed.

Keywords: Malaysian, overcoming, process, school bullying, young adults

INTRODUCTION

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023), one in three young people is affected by bullying. School bullying is a negative action—whether physical, verbal, relational, indirect, or through electronic forms of contact—committed by a single student or a group of students against another student. To be considered school bullying, four elements should be present: (i) an imbalance of power, (ii) repeated action over time, (iii) intention to harm, and (iv) an unequal display of emotion (Gladden et al., 2014; Olweus & Limber, 2010). In Malaysia, an average of 3,000 school bullying cases were reported per year over the past half-decade, affecting 84% of Malaysian youths (NHRSM, 2018). Cyberbullying is also on the rise, affecting 33% of students (NHRSM, 2018). The concern intensifies as school bullying has long-lasting effects, including adverse impacts on mental health and psychosocial functioning—often more severe than other forms of childhood maltreatment (Lereya et al., 2015; Sigurdson et al., 2015).

Despite prevention efforts, bullying continues, with the overall efficacy of prevention initiatives having a modest effect size. These preventive initiatives were found to be effective in reducing bullying perpetration by about 18-19% and bullying victimisation by roughly 15-16% (Gaffney, Ttofi & Farrington, 2021). Therefore, Scott and colleagues (2013) suggested that complete dependence on anti-bullying programmes to eradicate school bullying is unrealistic.

While supporting prevention initiatives is crucial, the fact remains that addressing the long-term impact on survivors is essential, as spontaneous coping strategies often prove to be insufficient (Hunter, Mora-Merchan & Ortega, 2014; Ramirez, 2013). School bullying elevates the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide during school, but these effects can endure even after bullying ceases (Lereya et al., 2015; Takizawa, Maughan & Arseneault, 2014). In early adulthood, bullying has also been linked to job dismissals, frequent job changes, poor social functioning, poverty, and financial difficulties (Brimblecombe et al., 2018; Wolke et al., 2013). Without proper support, the impact of school bullying could last until old age, as those who experienced school bullying exhibited more severe depressive symptoms and were more likely to be dissatisfied with their lives (Hu, 2019). Therefore, strategies to counterbalance such negative effects are vital. This highlights the significance of this study's focus on those who experienced school bullying in the past, namely the young adults in Malaysia, and how they overcame the adversities of their trauma. As we delve into the heart of this inquiry, our central research question emerges with clarity: What is the process of overcoming school bullying among young adults in Malaysia?

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Bullying, especially in school settings is a prevalent form of youth violence and is known to have long-lasting harmful effects. Bullies are much more likely to develop a criminal record than their peers while the victims suffer psychological harm long after the bullying stops. Table 1 provides an overview of various types of school bullying, offering concise definitions and illustrative examples for each category. This categorisation serves as a reference point for exploring the nuanced overcoming processes of school bullying among young adults.

Table 1: Types of School Bullying and its Effect

Types of School Bullying	Definition	Examples
Physical	A form of aggressive behaviour that uses physical force or actions to intentionally cause harm, injury, or discomfort to another person (Olweus, 1993)	Hazing, headlocks, inappropriate touching, kicking, punching, etc.
Relational	The use of non-physical means to deliberately manipulate, control, or harm someone emotionally (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995)	Spreading rumors, silent treatment, social exclusion, belittling, sexual harassment, etc.
Verbal	The use of spoken or written words to intentionally harm, threaten, or manipulate someone (Salmivalli et al., 1996)	Profanity, using derogatory terms, mocking, belittling, threatening, taunting, teasing, inappropriate sexual comments, etc.
Cyberbullying	The use of digital communication technologies to intentionally harass, threaten, or harm individuals or groups (Tokunaga, 2010)	Spreading rumors, posting hurtful messages, sharing private information, creating fake profiles to impersonate or ridicule others, etc.

A case example of how bullying can greatly affect someone is from a popular Malaysian YouTuber, Arvind Kumar's personal experiences. Known for his popular videos featuring original comic characters, especially as *Mak Cik* Rosmah and Aunty Chai Ling, he shared how he was severely bullied in his third year of high school. During that time, he faced derogatory taunts, estrangement from both peers and educators and constant physical abuse. Arvind shared with Low (2021) the instant effect he experienced as a victim, saying,

> *"I was terrified of walking along the corridors, terrified of going to the toilet. Because I was scared for my life, I would constantly pray, so that I wouldn't be ambushed by the bullies".*

Even after the bullying stopped, he developed social anxiety which affected him greatly. His condition led him to create online personas as coping strategies to handle his social anxiety. His story is an unfortunate instance of how a school bullying experience could tremendously affect the victims. Nevertheless, it serves as an inspirational example of one's overcoming journey, ultimately leading him to become one of the biggest Malaysian influencers with a righteous passion for philanthropic causes.

> *"I've forgiven the bullies long time ago, and I've healed from the wounds of the past. I wouldn't be able to talk about this today if I hadn't". - Arvind Kumar (Low, 2021)*

Past Research on Overcoming Bullying Processes
Overcoming is a deliberate and thoughtful process of changing or conquering self-perceived problematic adversity due to past challenges or trauma, aiming for a healthier and happier future existence. The key attributes of the concept are when victims: (i) understand and acknowledge that any form of long-term adversity resulting from school bullying is undesirable, impeding, or unhealthy, (ii) have a plan of action demonstrating readiness and determination to change or surmount the school bullying trauma, and (iii) believe that the actions taken will improve their life (Walker & Avant, 2005).

Past studies tended to use the term overcoming interchangeably with 'adaptation,' 'resilience,' and 'survival' but were not able to capture the three components of the overcoming process. For example, Hoisko, Uusiautti, and Maatta (2012) conducted a study to understand how bullying victims survived and coped. While the study identified six different coping methods for bully victims, such as cognitive, emotional, social, creative, physiological, and spiritual coping methods, it did not delve into the process in-depth. Boedeker (2018) focused on resilience and emotional support to understand how to overcome school bullying. The study found two components, resilience, and emotional support, can reduce or eliminate some of the adverse effects of bullying. Similarly, Zackius-Shittu's (2014) grounded-theory study focused on how working women overcame workplace bullying, highlighting the importance of social support and developing resilience. However, it lacked detailed steps or specific actions taken by participants during the process of overcoming (Zackius-Shittu, 2014).

While the studies mentioned touched upon certain components of overcoming, they lacked a comprehensive sequence of activities that constitute a process. Therefore, the current study explores the series of actions encompassing both victims' cognition and behaviour to fully understand the process of overcoming school bullying, addressing gaps in previous research.

Overview of the Bullying Experience
Drawing upon findings from previous studies, it is understood that victims undergo a specific process when experiencing bullying. The initial response encapsulates a victim's immediate emotional reaction to the mistreatment, including emotions like shock or confusion (Laskowski, 2016; Thornberg et al., 2013; Zackius-Shitttu, 2014). Following this, they might go through a cognitive reaction where victims begin to process that the bullying is not a one-time incident, eliciting emotions such as shame, pain, humiliation, and sadness (Laskowski, 2016; Zackius-Shitttu, 2014). This often leads to a 'double victimization' phase mentioned in Thornberg and colleagues' (2013) study, encompassing external victimization (repeated harassment by bullies in their school's social environment) and internal victimization (victims embodying the victim-image created by their perpetrator). This often results in self-protective or isolating behaviours as attempts to save themselves, which paradoxically often helps the bullies' purpose and validates the socially built victim image (Thornberg et al., 2013).

Two distinct pathways emerge afterward. As victims progress, some might assess their situation and make choices to either confront (fight) or withdraw (flight). Coping strategies may involve avoidance or disclosing their experiences to a trusted individual (Laskowski, 2016; Zackius-Shitttu, 2014). If coping strategies succeed, bullying may cease. Unfortunately, in most cases, victims tend to normalise and accept their situation until they graduate, transfer schools, or if the bully relocates (Laskowski, 2016; Thornberg et al., 2013; Zackius-Shitttu, 2014). These varying experiences ultimately lead to negative long-term adversity in later life and are compounded by individual differences that shape the impact of bullying experiences (Byjos & Dusing, 2016; Laskowski, 2016; Thornberg et al., 2013). Moving forward, some victims do try to take action to overcome their trauma, but others may cycle back into bullying situations elsewhere (Thornberg et al., 2013). While previous studies have simply listed strategies bullying victims have used, this study delves into the complex processes involved in how people who have overcome their past adversity succeed in doing so. It offers a detailed experience that highlights important elements, potentially reducing the likelihood of victims perpetually staying in the cycle of bullying.

METHOD

A basic interpretive qualitative research approach, as defined by Merriam (2009), was chosen for this study. Merriam (2002, 2009) explained that qualitative research aims to perceive the world from the participant's viewpoint, observing the world through their perspective, and subsequently organizing and analysing data based on its revelations. This is often accomplished using a structured or coded format. Given the limited understanding of the process of overcoming school bullying among adult survivors, a qualitative design that allows participants to share their interpretations and attributions of their overcoming experience was chosen. The study utilised semi-structured interviews for data collection. Through purposive sampling, the study focused on individuals within the age range of 18 - 30 to ensure more accurate details in data collection. Rivers (2001) found that emotionally significant memories (during the actual bullying) were more likely to be accurate compared to other peripheral factors that could have occurred during that time period. Therefore, to lessen the inaccuracy of data collection, an age range closer to the bullying incidence occurrence was selected while still adhering to the definition of young adults adopted by the Malaysian Youth Policy ("Khairy: New definition of youth age," 2015).

A total of 13 participants who had overcome their bullying experience participated in this study. Twelve were Malaysians, while one participant was an Iraqi who had spent his entire high school period in Malaysia. In terms of ethnicity, there were 6 Chinese, 2 Malay, 3 Indian, 1 Iban, and 1 Arabian. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 28 years old. Each participant's demographic background and experience can be found in Appendix A. All names used are pseudonyms. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

1. Between the ages of 18 to 30
2. Experienced school bullying in the past during their schooling period in Malaysia (physical/ verbal/ cyber/ relational)
3. The bullying was repetitive - more than one-time occurrence (Cambridge, 2021)
4. Fulfilled the criteria of overcoming the past bullying experience: (a) have thought of and taken action(s)/strategies to overcome the school bullying experience, (b) perceived the current self as happier and healthier compared to previous self before (a) (Walker & Avant, 2005)
5. Able to communicate in English or Malay language matching the researcher's fluency in the language for better data analysis.

Participant selection involved a pre-interview process to assess whether potential participants met the predefined inclusion criteria, with a specific emphasis on confirming their criteria of overcoming past bullying experiences (fulfilling criteria 4(b) above) to ensure the exclusion of individuals who, despite asserting recovery, might still harbour lingering negative emotions, ensuring a more nuanced and accurate representation of the study.

Data Collection Process

Ethical approval was obtained from the International Medical University – Joint Committee to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines. Participants were recruited through online platforms, including social media, online groups related to school bullying, and email outreach to university students. Before the interviews, participants received verbal and written information about the study's purpose and consent procedures. An online eligibility form was used to collect demographic information and assess eligibility.

Data were collected via online semi-structured interviews conducted on platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or WhatsApp based on participant preference and familiarity of use. Turning on the camera was encouraged but not compulsory for participants; however, the interviewer's camera remained on to show non-verbal feedback during interviews. Each interview typically averaged 30 minutes and included criteria checks, a summary of past bullying incidents, experiences post-bullying, and detailed accounts of how participants overcame the repercussions of school bullying.

Additionally, the interviewer would spend about 5-8 minutes at the beginning of each call with the participant discussing casual topics to establish rapport. This increased connection building and eased the sharing process regarding their bullying experience since it could be a triggering or sensitive topic for participants. Throughout the interview, the main researcher provided facial feedback like smiling and nodding while listening, providing non-verbal support and acknowledgment to participants during their storytelling.

After the transcription process, translation was done, as some interviews were conducted in Malay and English, whereas one interview was conducted in full Malay. During translation, emphasis was placed on maintaining the intended meaning of non-English phrases rather than pursuing literal translations for words lacking direct equivalents in English. Audio recordings of the interview sessions were made not only for transcription purposes but were also utilised by the main researcher during playback to pick up on subtle nuances in the emotions

expressed by each participant. Tokens of appreciation, in the form of food vouchers, were provided to participants upon completion of each interview session.

Data Analysis
Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. Steps included transcribing interview recordings, coding data by creating shorthand labels or 'hunches' for text sections, collating codes into groups, identifying patterns among codes, and forming themes. Vague or irrelevant codes were discarded. Themes were compared with the dataset to ensure accuracy and named and defined according to recurring keywords from participants or the most representative descriptors.

To establish data trustworthiness, member checking was conducted which involves presenting participants with the researcher's interpretations, findings, or themes in the study to verify data accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, any highlighted interpretation of the emotions of the participants during the interview was cross-checked to ensure accuracy and consistency with the researcher's notes. Additionally, any inaudible words or sentences in the audio recording were checked and clarified with participants. Triangulation was employed by continuously comparing the experiences and perspectives of participants (Merriam, 2009) who were from varying backgrounds of age, ethnicity, and experienced different forms of bullying in school.

Lastly, bracketing involved constant reflection with the co-researcher to "bracket" or suspend personal biases or beliefs from affecting data validity (Husserl, 1970). Extra precaution was taken by identifying each researcher's biases and beliefs on the topic of school bullying. This step grounded the researchers to be aware of any personal biases that emerged during data analysis and discussion. Breaks from emotionally intense or confusing discussions were taken to keep biases in check. The researchers then revisited the data and compared it to other pieces of data through the lens of viewing the emerging themes as part of a process. This required the agreement of both researchers and was an important step to ensure the objective of the analysis could be achieved.

RESULTS
The exploration of participants' narratives in this qualitative study has unveiled a rich tapestry of experiences, yielding seven distinct themes that intricately capture the nuanced dynamics of overcoming school bullying among young adults. The seven themes illustrated in Figure 1 are (i) Turning-point with 3 subthemes, (ii) After-effect with 2 subthemes, (iii) Catalyst with 4 subthemes, (iv) Cognitive reappraisal with 4 subthemes, (v) Realisation of control, (vi) Adaptive coping and (vii) Letting Go and Moving On.
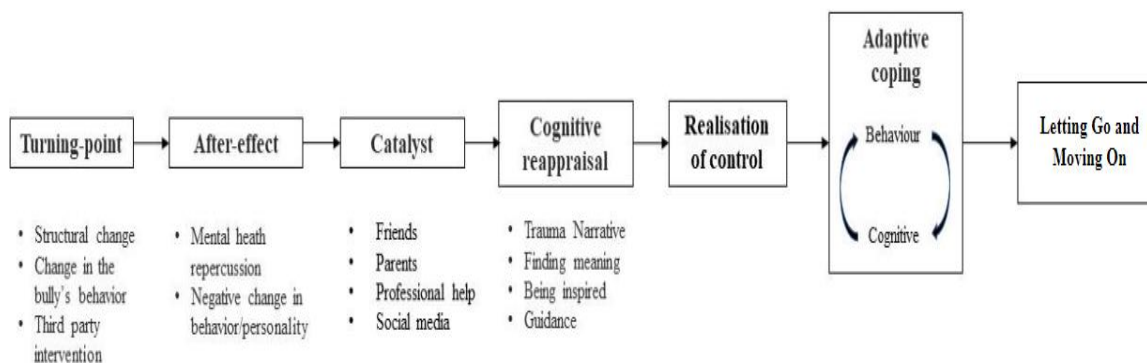

Figure 1: Themes' of the Study Findings

Theme 1: Turning Point
The turning point is the ending point of bullying which involves three subthemes: structural change, bully behaviour change, and third-party intervention. Structural change refers to shifts in school operations, such as important exam periods or graduation. This was the most common exit pathway among participants. For example, one of the participants, Cher, noted during the exam period that the bullies were no longer around her at all:

> "There was a period where we were sitting for exams so nobody could be bothered about your existence." (Cher, line 120-121)

The second subtheme involved a change in the bully's behaviour. Participants who excelled academically, like RJ, sometimes helped the bullies with lessons, leading to mutual benefit and cessation of bullying. Alternatively, some

bullies realised their wrongdoing and apologised which is exactly what happened to Lin where some of her bullies expressed that they were pressured by their peers to act meanly to her. Finally, third-party intervention occurred when parents or friends stepped in to stop the bullying. For instance, Dev begged and half-threatened her father to interject:

> *"It's either you come to school today or I'm not going!"* (Dev, line 15)

Theme 2: After-effects
After-effects refer to the consequences experienced by participants once they were no longer bullied, with some participants facing more severe repercussions which included depression, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, Lena shared her heartbreaking struggle with binge eating:

> *"I used to binge eat my food. (It was a) psychological issue that if I eat a lot, I need to go (and) put my finger (in my throat) and vomit it out, sometimes without me knowing (subconsciously doing it)."* (Lena, line 280-281)

On top of that, her experience led her to multiple self-harm and suicide attempts but she always decided against it each time.

> *"Cutting up, I tried that before. I have the scar marks and everything. I tried that. It's a kind of form (in which) you turn your pain into cut(s)."* (Lena, line 373-374)

Another common after-effect was a negative change in behaviour and personality. Many participants struggled to trust others due to their past bullying experiences, fearing that even close relationships could turn hurtful. Additionally, several participants felt uncomfortable in social settings, hindering their ability to make new friends. Some became more timid and anxious, while others became hot-tempered and defensive, struggling to express their emotions openly.

> *"I just don't know how to cry nowadays; they've killed the emotions."* (Lena, line 217-218)

These after-effects highlight the lasting impact of bullying on individuals' mental health and behaviour, which aligns with past studies.

Theme 3: Catalyst
A catalyst is an agent that triggers significant change or action. In this context, catalysts are the factors or individuals that prompt participants to undergo cognitive reappraisal, leading to their realisation of control and aiding the process of overcoming bullying. Among the participants, four distinct catalysts emerged: parents, friends, professional help, and social media. Some of the participants would have supporting parent(s) that helped to give a sense of security for them to overcome their situation. For example, Dev found the courage to go back to school with the help of her father's encouragement:

> *"My father said, "Just go (to school), don't worry. (If) anything (happened), (you) immediately call me. I'll be there". So, because of his support, I became strong. (I thought), Okay, there is my father beside me."* (Dev, line 69-71)

Others had peer(s) to aid them in their journey, and the sense of support they received acted as a powerful catalyst for them to begin healing.

> *"My friends, they were the only thing that got me through."* (Ari, line 165-166)

> *"My degree friends were the best. I would say they are the best therapists that I have."* (Lena, line 249-250)

Ayla built up trust with her counsellor, and allowed herself to benefit from the sessions:

> *"I was seeing a counsellor and in the first few sessions, we discussed about self-love. So, it had came to a point where I noticed I was damaging myself deeper everyday by constantly living in the past and keep feeling the guilt that was left from the relationship."* (Ayla, line 270-272)

Interestingly, the catalyst could even be a person the participant did not have a direct conversation with, such as Chris who found encouragement from a person on the internet.

> "*I often found myself watching YouTube videos. It was amazing that these people, they come onto YouTube and talk about their personal experiences in school or how they were picked on because they were different.*" (Chris, line 206-209)

These catalysts played a vital role in motivating the participants to move forward and leave their painful memories behind.

Theme 4: Cognitive Reappraisal
Cognitive reappraisal involves participants' mental processes of reflection, understanding, and reinterpretation of their bullying experiences to achieve a sense of control. Given that individuals process their thoughts differently (Mueller et al., 2013), four subthemes were identified: trauma narrative, finding meaning, inspiration, and guidance.

Trauma narrative: Participants engage with their traumatic memories, often through discussion or writing, to connect fragmented cognitive and emotional aspects and achieve catharsis. For example, Nik would use a diary to note down her trauma narrative. She described how she would write her frustration in her diary as she felt others might not understand her emotions and situation.

Finding meaning: Some participants discover a sense of purpose that guides their lives beyond the bullying experience. Jean found a new life goal related to dietetics and nutrition, which she attributed in part to her bullying experience.

> "*Honestly, looking back at the experience, I'm quite grateful that it (the bullying) happened because it led me on this path that I never thought I would go on.*" (Jean, line 144-146)

Inspiration: Participants drew inspiration from stories or advice that helped them realise their capacity for self-control. Chris, for instance, was motivated by a friend's advice about haters and success, recognising that adversity often accompanies achievement.

> "*I have a friend who told me, "When you have haters, that's when you know you're successful". When people try to bring you down, that's when you know you're hitting the mark because you're making other people salty.*" (Chris, line 119-120)

Guidance: Not everyone finds it easy to process their thoughts independently, so some participants sought guidance to navigate their cognitive processes and achieve a sense of control. Ayla, for example, sought guidance from a counsellor:

> "*Time has helped me to seek professional help, it has helped me realise what I need. Who am I again, how can I improve and be a better person, how can I help others, how to forgive myself, and how to believe in myself.*" (Ayla, line 261-262)

Theme 5: Realisation of Control
Realisation of control marks a crucial turning point in the participants' journey of overcoming school bullying. Here, they come to a realisation that they can only control their behaviour and thoughts, not those of others. Most of them came to an acceptance that the bullying incident was not their fault, but in order to move forward, they could only change themselves. Hence, this is the point where participants realised that they were in control of their life and could take action to overcome their past. They realised they should rely on themselves to get better because no one would be with them forever. Quoting some of them,

> "*We have to take care of ourselves (on) our own. I feel like my friend is not going to be there all the time. If something happened to me, I have to react for myself, (and) due to that I make myself strong and then I try to face the thing by myself.*" (Dev, lines 185-187)

> "*Are you going to see yourself as a failure person? If you're going to die, who's going to cry for you? It's (only) going to be one month (of) people crying for you. After that, nobody is going to think of you.*" (Lena, line 365-367)

Theme 6: Adaptive Coping

Adaptive coping is when participants take healthier, newer, and more effective strategies to deal with adversity moving forward. It was found that some people are action-oriented while others are more cognitive-oriented. In other words, some of the participants do a certain action and then process the effectiveness of said action to repeat it in the future, while others thought thoroughly before trying new coping strategies. Hence, there was no clear answer which comes first, but a matter of one's preference. Examples of action-oriented coping were reading self-love books, talking to close friends, or taking a walk, whereas cognitive-oriented coping was using humour, self-reflection, or optimistic thinking. For example, Chris learned that it was fine to make fun of himself and embrace any perceived flaws.

> "*I guess I feel I accepted who I am as a person. Not a lot of people can say, I've accepted myself.*
> *Last time it (was) like, "I'm fat and ugly", then I cried. Now, I just laugh at it.*" (Chris, line 249-251)

Theme 7: Letting Go and Moving On

'Let Go' is defined as to stop holding something or someone whereas, 'Move On' is to change, progress, and improve (Longman, n.d.). The definition provided indicates the element of time within the two actions, the former; i.e., letting go of the past, and the latter; i.e., moving on to the future. Within the context of overcoming, "Letting go" involves the process of detaching oneself from the painful memories of the past, allowing individuals to release the emotional burden associated with their experiences. This phase encourages the cultivation of emotional healing, enabling participants to free themselves from the lingering impacts of bullying.

> "*I think now, after few years after that incident I don't feel angry and I don't blame them although*
> *we are not so close now, I don't blame them (anymore).*" (Lin, line 179-180)

> "*I mean if you actually sit down and think about it you would think "Ah, it's heavy", but you*
> *can leave it once you stop. You can just like, "Okay it happened", and move on. The end (chuckle).*"
> (Ari, line 128-130)

On the other hand, "Moving on" signifies a transformative journey where individuals undergo significant change, progress, or improvement. It reflects the proactive choice to seek personal growth and development beyond the shadow of bullying. Moving on is a dynamic process, emphasising not only the positive changes that have already occurred but also the ongoing commitment to further improvement.

> "*It has changed. If I'm not comfortable, I will speak out. I don't care who you are now.*
> *So, that is definitely a huge change. I would say maybe I know myself a lot better compared*
> *to before.*" (Ayla, line 188-189)

> "*Honestly, I'm quite happy with who I am now. Obviously, I have flaws and all that but I don't*
> *hate myself for it anymore. But instead, I just take notes in my mind and say, like, oh, if I did*
> *something wrong, then I would just like, take note. I wouldn't beat myself up anymore.*"
> (Jean, 224-225)

Together, these intertwined components mark the concluding chapter of the narrative of overcoming school bullying, signifying the empowerment of individuals to reclaim agency over their lives and shape a more positive, healthier, and promising future.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to extend beyond the limitations of previous research, which often touched on isolated components of the overcoming process. In contrast, the focus of the current study was on delving into the complex and multifaceted processes involved in how individuals successfully navigate and triumph over the adversity of school bullying. As we engage with the findings, our aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of overcoming school bullying, shedding light on the comprehensive strategies and experiences that contribute to the successful resolution of this challenging journey.

Immediate Coping During Bullying and the After-effect

Previous literature has underscored that bullied students employ various coping mechanisms (Laskowski, 2016; Zackius-Shittu, 2014). However, a fundamental question arises: Why do these after-effects persist? The second theme, 'After-effect,' aligns with prior research indicating that the impact of victimization can extend beyond the

bullying period and persist into adulthood (Arseneault, 2018; Jadambaa et al., 2020). Study participants reported experiencing mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress, and eating disorders, aligning with past research. Additionally, 'changes in behavior/personality,' was a sub-theme that was not sufficiently explored in past literature as an after-effect of school bullying.

The findings suggest that bullied students might be employing maladaptive coping strategies. Hunter, Mora-Merchan, and Ortega (2004) aligned on this and further explained that the feelings of surprise, confusion, and anxiety caused by bullying incidents can undermine the effectiveness of coping strategies. This indicates that spontaneously employed coping mechanisms by children and adolescents in response to bullying may not offer long-term protection against future distress (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Mora-Merchán, 2006).

Cognitive Reappraisal in Overcoming

Cognitive reappraisal involves individuals reinterpreting the meaning of an event to alter their emotional response to it, and it has been linked to various positive outcomes in adults, such as a sense of purpose in life, self-acceptance, and improved emotional well-being (Cutuli, 2014; Sheppes & Gross, 2011). It's interesting to note that this phase is critical because two potential participants (interviewed but not included as data samples) who did not fulfill the criteria for overcoming still harboured hostility and anger towards their bullying experiences. It is hypothesized that these individuals may be suppressing their emotions as a coping mechanism. Expressive suppression occurs late in the emotion-generation process, and it demands the individual's deliberate management of emotional responses as they arise which can lead to cognitive resource depletion. This results in poor social performance and detachment between inner experiences and outward expressions (Higgins, 1987). Studies have shown that suppression can have detrimental consequences, reducing pleasant emotional experiences while leaving negative emotions largely unaffected and even exacerbating physiological activation (Hayes et al., 2010; Brans et al., 2013). Furthermore, research has indicated that individuals who use suppression may experience more stress compared to those who employ reappraisal (Butler et al., 2003; Richards et al., 2003). These findings again highlight the importance of using effective cognitive strategies post-bullying in processing emotions, as some strategies may be maladaptive and ineffective.

The Role of Catalyst

This study identified the presence of catalysts that expedited participants' cognitive processes, leading to the realization of control. There are two explanations as to why these adolescents could not reach the realisation of control without a catalyst. Firstly, cognitive processes, even in adults, are complex and involve different brain mechanisms, similar to cognitive reappraisal (Ochsner & Gross, 2008). Emotional and cognitive maturity do not progress at the same rate as physical maturation. Younger individuals, unlike adults, may not have fully enhanced both the limbic (emotion centre) and the prefrontal cortex (judgment and thinking centre) in their brains. Several studies have shown that young adolescents may struggle more with regulating emotional responses to social stimuli due to their cognitive limitations or brain maturation constraints (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014; Barnea-Goraly et al., 2005). Furthermore, cognitive abilities, regulation success, effective reappraisal, and cognitive control tend to increase linearly with age (Nakagawa et al., 2017; Theurel & Gentaz, 2018).

The Element of Control

Previous studies have consistently linked heightened perceptions of control to reduced distress among bullying victims (Hunter, Mora-Merchan & Ortega, 2004; Mora-Merchán, 2006). These findings suggest that a sense of control can act as a protective factor in victimized populations. Previous research has found that perceived control can mitigate the link between childhood maltreatment and adult stressors (Mooney et al., 2016, Elliot et al., 2017). This concept can be further understood through the Temporal Model of Control developed by Frazier, Berman, and Steward (2001). The model focuses on three dimensions of control that differ along the time dimension: control over the past, future, and present, which reveals that not all forms of control are adaptive (Frazier, Steward & Mortensen, 2004). For instance, if victims dwelt on the thought about how the bullying could have been undone, they would experience higher distress, as by focusing their mental attention on the past, victims perpetually re-experience the distressing event (Frazier et al., 2011). This highlights the concept of letting go (Theme 7), where participants were able to detach themselves from their past emotionally. This process helps in eliminating the negative emotional aspect of their experience, hence why participants stated they no longer felt any distress while sharing school bullying experiences.

In contrast, the feeling that one had control over some part of the trauma in the present was consistently linked to improved emotional adjustment. This means, that when survivors take their first steps toward recovery, they experience positive emotions which aligns with the concept of moving on (theme 7). Believing that one had control over encountering a comparable experience in the future (future control) was related to improved adjustment (Frazier, Steward & Mortensen, 2004), where individuals can perceive them as controllable by

practising effective coping strategies to manage or completely avoid the situation (Frazier et al., 2011). This shows how crucial each theme was, especially from Theme 3: Catalyst, onwards all the way to the final Theme 7: Letting Go and Moving On, in explaining an effective process to support individuals to overcome their school bullying experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This qualitative study aimed to understand the process of overcoming school bullying among young adults, resulting in the identification of seven key themes. The findings emphasised that even with immediate coping strategies during bullying incidents, after-effects can persist once the bullying stops. Catalysts played a crucial role in helping participants reevaluate their responses and emotions regarding past trauma. Additionally, the significance of the concepts of control in facilitating the process of letting go and moving on should be the aim of practitioners and researchers to effectively address the needs of individuals overcoming past bullying experiences.

Implication

This study's findings hold significant implications for counsellors and psychologists working with young adults who have experienced school bullying. By gaining a deeper understanding of how bullying victims overcome their challenges, practitioners may provide more effective therapy. These findings highlight key concepts like catalysts, cognitive reappraisal, and the realization of control, offering new approaches for helping this population. Moreover, the study's insights may be used to develop tailored training modules for professionals in the helping field, enabling them to better grasp the overcoming and recovery processes when working with clients who have a history of school bullying.

Additionally, the research has implications for educational institutions. It underscores the importance of teaching students about emotion regulation and effective coping strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal, at an early stage. This includes not only teaching students how to report bullying but also how to respond to it. Self-management training, with a focus on teaching emotion regulation skills, should be integrated into the curriculum. School counselors may also be employed to assist students in cognitively reappraising their bullying experiences by being catalysts supporting students who experience bullying.

Limitation

One limitation of this research pertains to the sample. The majority of participants were private university students, which may not represent a broader population of Malaysian young adults, especially working young adults. Secondly, the qualitative nature of the study restricts the generalisability of the findings. The in-depth insights gained from the participants may not be universally applicable to broader populations. Furthermore, the study's cultural specificity adds another layer of limitation. The cultural context of Malaysia may influence participants' responses in ways that might differ significantly from individuals in other cultural contexts. Lastly, language limitations pose a constraint on the study. The researcher was proficient in Malay and English, and thus, participants whose primary language differed might have faced challenges in fully expressing themselves. This language barrier could potentially result in missing nuances or important expressions that participants might more comfortably convey in their mother tongue.

Recommendations for Future Research

Researchers could use the thematic framework findings to develop questionnaires, intervention programmes, or practitioner training modules. Based on the research findings, future studies may benefit from employing quantitative research methods to investigate catalysts, reappraisal, and forgiveness as mediating or predicting variables. Quantitative methods, such as causal-comparative and experimental approaches, may provide stronger evidence for these variables identified in the process of overcoming school bullying. Additionally, creating a questionnaire to measure individuals' progress in overcoming their bullying experiences could serve as a valuable screening tool for counsellors and psychologists. Furthermore, future researchers could explore the experiences of school bullying victims who have struggled to overcome their ordeals, offering different perspectives and insights. Another recommendation for future exploration is on the catalyst. This study has shown the importance of catalysts, however, there is still a gap in understanding what makes one a catalyst. Lastly, a qualitative cross-sectional design could be employed to compare experiences across different age groups, generations, or ethnicities in Malaysia, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the framework's applicability across diverse backgrounds.

DECLARATION of STATEMENT

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome. Additionally, there was no funding received for this work. On top of that, this work obtained the approval of the IMU-Joint Committee

and confirmed written consent to publish potentially identifying information, such as details of the case, was obtained from the participants. Finally, we confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication. (Thank you for the write-up, nothing to add from both authors)

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Appendix A: Participants Background

Pseudonym	
Ari	Ari was a 28-year-old medicine student. She is currently in her tertiary education. Ari came from a boarding school where a bullying culture exists between seniors and juniors. Ari and the rest of the students suffered from their seniors' bullying throughout Form 1 and Form 2. She explained that they had to obey all the commands of the seniors, if not they would be verbally tormented. Ari described: *"You just wanted to blend in you know. You just wanted to be as small as possible. I remember during holidays; I really didn't want to go back to school." (Ari, line 53-54)* The bullying finally stops when she enters form 3, where they are given freedom due to the "important" PMR exam. Ari mentioned that she felt a huge relief and finally could enjoy school.
Ad	Ad was a 21-year-old degree student. Ad suffered a series of bullying from the age of 12 to 16 from different groups and individuals in the school. Ad was verbally bullied by a group of students but it came to a stop when she became the top 3 student in the school for the PMR exam. Ad mentioned that the bullies became friendly due to her achievement. However, Ad encountered another bully at the age of 16 who would physically push her around and loved to pull her by the tie. Fortunately, that was put to a stop with Ad's sister's intervention.
Ayla	Ayla was a 22-year-old degree student who was verbally and relationally cyberbullied by her college friends. Due to a misunderstanding with the bully, Ayla's personal information was leaked out to the public through the bully's well-known social media. Ayla was isolated from the rest of her peers and suffered from depression that year. Ayla described: *"I would say that at that time she is a mess because her academic is quite low. Then, her personal life is also being spread…And then she's very isolated, lonely, and wouldn't talk to anyone." (Ayla, line 130-132).*
Cher	Cher was a 23-year-old degree student who was bullied by other students throughout her schooling period back in their hometown. Cher said: *"So, when you don't have that many friends that's fine, but people will actually pick on you." (Cher, line 8-9).* Cher's group of friends tended to be the target of the whole school without a specific reason that they were aware of. Cher was brought up by authoritarian parents who believed that in faced with challenges she should chin up and they would only step in if the situation escalated to physical bullying. Cher's way of coping with the situation back then was to get back at the bullies anonymously. *"Catch cockroaches and put it in their pencil cases because crying for me is not going to solve anything and crying is like losing without getting the fight started." (Cher, line 94-96).* Like many other participants, the bullying stopped when all of them had to focus on SPM at the age of 17.
Chris	Chris was a 22-year-old medicine student who was bullied in school due to his sexuality and behaviour that others deemed not appropriate for his gender. Chris faced different types of bullies and mocking for as long as he can remember. They felt that only when he reached the university level did the bullying stop. Chris felt wronged and constantly confused as to why they faced such treatment. *"It's especially natural for teens to go through these feelings but I'm wrong because I'm different? It felt like everyone was against me." (Chris, line 81-82).*

Dev	Dev was a 25-year-old degree student who was targeted by the school bully due to her being new and their physical appearance. The bullying escalated from harmless teasing to intimidation which caused Dev to not want to attend school anymore. *"So, sometimes when I wake up, I thought, "oh no, why is it not holiday or why can't I skip", because I scared to see him. It's quite long as well, four months." (Dev, line 44-46)* Dev tried to reach out to the teachers but that made the bully madder and reacted worst. Dev finally had enough after 3 months and begged her father to step in. The father advised the bully and managed to put a stop to it.
Jean	Jean was a 19-year-old dietetics and nutrition student who was bullied by the person she thought was her friend back in high school. The bully spread rumours about Jean due to her being close to the person the bully had a crush on. *"So that wasn't like the main issue. But it was until later that year, where she started calling me names because I was quite chubby at that time. So, she started calling me fat and all that." (Jean, line 10-12)* The bully's action was followed by their group of friends and naturally, the rest of the class started to isolate Jean. Over the school break, Jean started to become obsessed with her weight and developed an eating disorder. Though the bullying stopped when Jean and the bully was separated into different class she was left with a long-lasting impact.
Lena	Lena was a 27-year-old degree in Psychology graduate who encountered bullying throughout her primary, high school, and college life. Lena had a skin condition called vitiligo and was isolated from her peers at school even after multiple attempts to explain that the condition was not contagious. Lena suffered bad treatment from both her classmates as well as teacher. In high school, Lena faced new bullies who mocked her body size and this went on up until college where verbal mocking escalated to cyberbullying. All these took a toll on Lena's mental health where she developed depression with suicidal ideation as well as Bulimia. *"I do have suicidal thought, I won't lie. I do try, I won't lie to you. I do try to commit suicide…" (Lena, line 353-354).* Things turned around for Lena once she entered her degree where they met great and accepting people.
Nik	Nik was an 18-year-old culinary art student who was bullied when she was 12 due to her body size. *"So, because I was fat, they mocked me, they would call me names like 'dugong' or 'badak'. Plus, when they address me or call me, they will not use my name, instead the names they have created." (Nik, line 6-8).* Nik constantly felt alone and tried to cope with any negative feelings on her own through writing in her diary. She stopped responding to the bullies after quite a while and that managed to stop their verbal mockery.
RJ	RJ was a 20-year-old degree student who was bullied due to his language proficiency when he transferred to a new school that uses Chinese as the main language of communication. The bullies looked down on him and tried to fight him at any opportunity and that took a toll on RJ. *"Psychologically, yes, I was suffering almost every day when I attended the school, but I did not inform anyone at the time. They did actually hit me on a few occasions" (RJ, line 8-9).* The bullying escalated to social media and RJ had trouble in making friends in school. However, through the school reunion, he managed to talk with his past bullies, they apologised and eventually made peace.

Lin	Lin was a 22-year-old psychology student who experienced bullying both in primary and secondary due to her being "weird", small, and pale. The bullies constantly would talk behind her back, make a Facebook page about Lin, and comment negative things regarding her. *"There was one time where they created a Facebook page and put a profile picture of a ghost and then they put my name mocking me." (Lin, line 25-26).* It was worse when she found out her own friends followed along with the cyberbullying. Lin tried her best to ignore the comments and moved on to a new group of friends until she found one that would accept her as she is. At one point a few of her old friends confessed that they succumbed to conformity and apologies.
Thar	Thar was an 18-year-old student who used to be bullied by her group of friends back in primary school. She expressed that the friendship was not mutual and felt used. *"Whenever I made friends, they would always tell me what to do but not help me. However, I was young back then so I just follow them around like a pet." (Thar, line 3-4).* Thar parents advised her that she had to defend herself and could not let the situation escalate further. Thar got the motivation from her parents to stand up and put a stop to the bad treatment herself.
Yo	Yo was an 18-year-old medicine student who was bullied for 2 years in high school when he first transferred to Malaysia from his home country. The main reason he was bullied was due to his English proficiency and he could not make any new friends as the bullies would constantly spread lies about him to other new students. After 2 years of isolation, he befriended a new student who was older and muscular than the rest. The new student stood up for Yo and his school life took a turn. *"He said on that day, if there's one person, anyone who messes with me or Yo, he will deal with them. And he said, "you will not like it. So please don't try". He was so confident. (Yo, line 57-59).*