ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Revisiting the Definition of Bullying in the Context of Higher Education

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Abstract

This study used a qualitative method to verify the interpersonal interactions that students consider to constitute bullying in higher education. The data came from 58 semi-structured interviews with students and administrators from two public universities in Ghana and one in Norway to show how national differences influence bullying. The broad range of behaviours identified highlighted themes like "inconveniencing", "exclusion", "intimidation", "shaming", "booing, gossiping, and teasing", "sexual harassment and unwanted touching, fondling, and kissing", and "ignoring or facing hostile reactions". The study found that behaviours students identified as bullying are subtler and are intertwined with everyday interpersonal encounters, making identifying, reporting, and redressing them elusive. Students identified their limited awareness of anti-bullying structures, insufficient deterrence due to a lack of transparency in rule implementation, and noncommitment by authorities as favouring bullying. The study suggests the use of communication about behaviour expectations and a commitment to creating consciousness against bullying to ensure a positive psychosocial learning environment.

Keywords Bullying definition · Prevention · Higher education · Qualitative research · Ghana · Norway

Introduction

Research often reports the prevalence of bullying in higher education (e.g. Harrison et al., 2020; Pörhölä et al., 2020; Sinkkonen et al., 2014). We argue that the conceptualisation of bullying, the nature of bullying in higher education, and underlying institutional factors pose challenges to identifying and confronting it.

Bullying occurs through repeated and persistent attempts by an individual or a group to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another person. It is a treatment that persistently provokes, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts the victim (see Brodsky, 1976, p. 2). The targets of bullying perceive themselves to have experienced negative actions from the aggressor(s) over a period of time and find it difficult to stop or defend themselves from them (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Einarsen et al., 2020a).

According to the original definition from Olweus (1993), bullying is not a single incident. He argues that extreme instances of one-time intimidation and unfair treatment that can have a long-lasting embarrassing effect on the target do not constitute bullying. The definition of bullying thus includes specific characteristics. These elements include taking *harmful actions* that can inflict injury or cause discomfort. The *intent is to harm or upset another person*, so the *behaviour repeats over time*. The perpetrator is physically or psychosocially superior, which creates *an imbalance of power between the parties* (Cowie & Myers, 2016; Spadafora et al., 2022).

These aspects constitute the bases for objective or subjective criteria to distinguish actual bullying from occasional uncivil behaviours (Brodsky, 1976; Einarsen et al., 2020b). However, increasing consciousness exists of the need to prevent bullying at different institutional levels, with more attempts to reconsider the tenets of bullying, particularly in higher education, which was not the initial focus of bullying researchers. Some authors (Spadafora et al., 2022; Volk et al., 2017) have also noticed a fundamental challenge in fulfilling all the tenets of Olweus (1993)'s definition. The definition of bullying has thus evolved, and cultural values and context have played a considerable role in its conceptualisation, leading to challenges in terms of achieving a unifying definition (Grimard & Lee, 2020; Lester, 2013; Spadafora et al., 2022; Volk et al., 2017). This has provided opportunities to rethink bullying by adopting new realities, and we try to evaluate the elements of the definition of bullying and then relate them to our findings.

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The Imbalance of Power

The imbalance of power is a central feature of definitions of bullying (Einarsen et al., 2020b). Economic, physical, psychological, and social factors are sources of power imbalance, which bullies exploit to harass their targets (De Cieri et al., 2019; Einarsen et al., 2020b; Spadafora et al., 2022). Citing Wrong (2017) and Spadafora et al. (2022) indicate that power varies in its form, intensity, and context. However, personality factors, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, health status (e.g. depression, anxiety, obesity), economic status, learning or developmental disabilities, nationality, knowledge, experience, and social connections, have the potential to make a person subservient to another and often underlie the experience of bullying (Cowie & Myers, 2016; Einarsen et al., 2020b).

Superiors are often considered perpetrators; nonetheless, bullying can come from a group of colleagues, often reflecting organisational or cultural predispositions to power dynamics (Rayner et al., 2002). In our study context, the perpetrator can be a student, lecturer, or administrator who misuses their power to cause harm, verbally or physically, in person or online, and in an obvious or hidden manner. Einarsen (2000) argues that continual bullying by colleagues may also weaken the victims' defence, and the victims' inability to defend themselves can create an imbalance of power (Branch et al., 2013). A person may bully a colleague (Lester, 2009; Zapf et al., 2020), and a subordinate or student can also bully a superior (May & Tenzek, 2018; Zapf et al., 2020).

Intention to Harm

Intention to harm is usually a critical component of the definition of bullying (Olweus, 2003). However, intent has not been considered essential when identifying bullying in most European workplace research because it cannot be easily verified (Einarsen et al., 2020a). Practitioners expect bullying to cause emotional, psychological, and physical harm (see Einarsen, 1999), resulting in the target feeling distressed, humiliated, and offended (Lester, 2013), and so intention is usually linked to the repetition of the act. That is, "it is intended to expose somebody to repeated and systematic acts over time" (Einarsen et al., 2020a, p. 21). However, Lester (2013) argues that the intention is already apparent even when a person fails to harm a victim or get them fired after spreading untrue and vicious rumours.

A take on this comes from Einarsen (1999), who defined bullying as the repeated actions that one or more people experience in the form of deliberate or unconscious acts by another person or a group of persons that cause distress, humiliation, and offence and can interfere with the victim's performance by creating an unpleasant working condition. Einarsen et al. (2020b) note that when people try to exclude an individual from a group with continuous negative behaviours, they might not necessarily intend or understand the psychological harm the target suffers. The World Health Organization also acknowledges that a target's injury or harm might not be intended (see Krug et al., 2002). It means one can unconsciously bully another person, and the underlying issue is that such behaviour ignores the victim's fundamental right to fair treatment and dignity.

Agervold (2007), therefore, narrowed definitional demands to the principal criteria of the objective identification of activities that symbolise the occurrence of bullying and a subjective part indicating the victim's perception that the act is bullying (see also Nielsen et al., 2020). This also points to Rhodes et al. (2010)'s assertion that bullying occurs when an individual ignores the need to respect the rights or dignity of others. There might be a need to repeat harmful behaviour to communicate intent and distinguish it from single-time impulsive actions, but the situation and context can communicate the intention to intimidate a victim before an audience. In effect, the intent may instead be assumed or deduced and not explicitly examined (Lester, 2013).

Repetition Over Time

One-time incidents do not constitute bullying (Olweus, 1993). Leymann (1996) considers a behaviour to be bullying when it occurs weekly (at least once) for 6 months, and some (e.g. Zapf et al., 2020) favour less frequent occurrences. However, some authors (Einarsen et al., 2020b; Volk et al., 2017) posit that a one-time heinous aggressive act or some isolated incidents can constitute existential threats or critical life events that can permanently change the psychology and behaviour of a victim or destroy the target's career prospects.

Einarsen et al. (2020b) note that the persistence of occurrence is minimally fulfilled in many cases because all bullying is not episodic; harmful rumours that circulate only once may destroy the target's career. They redefined the criteria for the repetition of bullying: "the behaviours or their consequences are repeated on a regular as opposed to occasional basis" (Einarsen et al., 2020b, p. 12). The critical point here is the "consequence" of the behaviour repeating. When a person exposes a nude photograph of a victim through cyberbullying (i.e. outing) (see Willard, 2007), the act may occur once, but the effect on the victim lingers on because the photograph can circulate for an entire life period, also creating the repetition of the act.

Many person-related types of bullying (e.g. social isolation and gossip) produce psychological imprints that

remain with a person (Einarsen et al., 2020b). Psychological imprints do not need to be repeated or last long to produce social stress (Solomon & Heide, 2005). Single acts may be too ambiguous to be labelled as bullying, considering bullying behaviour is frequent and continuous (Einarsen et al., 2020b). However, Agervold (2007)'s opinion that isolated acts are prone to objective and subjective appraisal means that the context and nature of the provocation can tell us whether a single uncivil behaviour will produce a long-lasting effect, just as would be the case concerning "outing" in cyberbullying.

Harmful, Unethical, Unreasonable, and Hostile Behaviours

Researchers consider bullying to be significantly negative, inappropriate, hostile, and unreasonable, rather than minor behaviours (Einarsen et al., 2020b). However, the complexity of the behaviours that are identified as bullying by the research community and the various subjective assertions of bullying experiences make it impossible to reach absolute agreement on the definition of bullying (Branch et al., 2013; Jia & Mikami, 2018; Volk et al., 2017).

Brotheridge and Lee (2010) found an affective reaction to each negative behaviour. Whether belittlement, verbal abuse, or the underrating of a person's work output, there was an associated feeling of sadness, restlessness, anger, or even confusion. It means that while we might be interested in ensuring the tenets of the definition of bullying, we must also consider behaviours that cause the target to feel hurt.

Aquino and Bradfield (2000) argue that the victim's subjective experience strongly impacts their emotional and psychological well-being. Nixon et al. (2021) found that the psychological strain experienced by people whose experiences may otherwise be considered incivility did not differ from those who experienced bullying consistently. Regardless of the definition, Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003) argue that subjective feelings must be central to any effort to prevent bullying. Similarly, in 2021, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Anti-Bullying Forum (WABF) emphasised the need to consider personal experiences of harm by the target, regardless of the frequency at which a student is bullied, when they proposed a new definition. Salin (2003) advocates for the need to consider the victim's perception of how the incident affected them because it determines their reaction.

Bullying, particularly in the current study, can be covert, overt, or subtle. It may include acts directed at victims (person-related), including socially excluding or isolating people from various group activities, mocking or humiliating them, and intimidating or threatening them. It can involve ridicule, taunting, unexplained rage, the threat of actions that could lead to some type of loss, exposing information that a person would not otherwise confidently share, stalking, and harm to an individual's reputation (Einarsen, 2000; Einarsen et al., 2020b; Vega & Comer, 2005). It can have a sexual orientation, such as unwelcome sexual advances, or be cyber-related, including directly or indirectly threatening a victim online. Some behaviours are directed towards students' work (work-related), including the constant criticism or undermining of their work performance, overloading the person with work, intimidation related to their professional standing, or confusing them (Rayner & Hoel, 1997).

Behaviours such as ignoring greetings, gossiping, withholding information, holding one's nose, or leaving a place as a target approaches (see Einarsen et al., 2020b; Nishina, 2004) are trivial and often only observed by the victim but can hurt for a considerable length of time. For example, Tehrani (2002) argues that not receiving a response to a greeting is seen as aggressive behaviour and causes stress because communication is reciprocal. Cultural tendencies may play a part, but mutual respect is a universal norm. The subjective social reconstruction of the process registers bullying rather than objective evaluations (see Einarsen et al., 2020b). A recent review by Boudrias et al. (2021) points to the varied effects of bullying. It undermines students' dignity and creates vulnerability, leading to academic difficulties (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), absenteeism, and eventual withdrawal (Cornell et al., 2013), all of which underlie the need to prevent bullying.

The Challenges of Preventing Higher Education Bullying

Higher education research (e.g. Chan et al., 2020; Gómez-Galán et al., 2021; Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021; Muluk et al., 2021; Pörhölä et al., 2020; Sivertsen et al., 2019a, b) continues to show how bullying occurs through the behaviours we have identified, despite the anti-bullying policies typical of most institutions. It draws our attention to the focus of efforts to combat bullying. Smith and Coel (2018) argue that higher education bullying does not involve the confrontational insults, threats, and other blatant verbal abuses that initiated bullying research (see Olweus, 1993, p. 9). In higher education, anti-bullying rules exist, so people find socially subtle ways of carrying out cruel actions to avoid detection and punishment (Cortina et al., 2013; Volk et al., 2017). These subtle behaviours (e.g. spreading rumours, not greeting, gossiping, holding one's nose, leaving the table when a target approaches, and refusing to pass a piece of vital information to the target) mostly fall outside anti-bullying frameworks, which primarily focus on verifiable, explicit actions (Hodgins & McNamara, 2017).

Most targets do not report bullying because of the complexity of the behaviours or the fear of not being taken seriously, especially with regard to physically harmless actions, the ease of being misunderstood or the fear of not being believed, the possible worsening of a non-situation or retaliation, and the social consequences of isolation and name-calling (see also Christensen & Evans-Murray, 2021; Saunders et al., 2007; Wójcik & Rzeńca, 2021). Hodgins and McNamara (2017) argue that people who perceive that their report will not receive redress do not report, resulting in the inconspicuous flourishing of bullying, which points to a problem in terms of society's definition of bullying and the identification of those actions that warrant a report.

Liefooghe and Davey (2002) referred to the controversies associated with workplace bullying compared to school bullying (relatively evident) and called for subjective definitions. For Liefooghe and Davey (2002), the term "bullying" only offers a link or a guiding framework between what happens in schools and what happens in the murky workplace, which also calls for an expanded definition of the concept. One can allude to respondents' statements about workplace bullying: "I think the old-fashioned way of bullying is non-existent, and your school-ground mentality-type bullying; there is more subtle bullying going on" (Liefooghe & Davey, 2002, p. 224). Liefooghe and Davey (2002), Volk et al. (2017), and Spadafora et al. (2022) have all proposed the need to be open-minded in identifying bullying. Nixon et al. (2021) also note that the same conduct that is deemed incivility in one context may be regarded as bullying in another, and we bear this in mind when drawing attention to our findings concerning two study contexts in Ghana and Norway.

Institutional and National Antecedents

The conceptualisation and occurrence of bullying are products of the learning environment (Eliot et al., 2010; Lyubykh et al., 2022). The learning environment encompasses the norms or policies, values, goals, relationships among people, practices of teaching and learning, and an institution's physical and leadership structures, which determine what happens to students and faculty (Cohen et al., 2009). The learning environment determines the structures that permit bullying and can help prevent it (Eliot et al., 2010). More so, institutions are not islands; they are part of a larger society and reflect broader cultural predispositions towards bullying.

We cannot exhaust the learning environment and cultural debate in this paper. However, Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) argue that culture determines how people experience and perceive bullying. For example, Agervold (2007, p. 162) argues that a target can be a "victim of a group's collective behaviour". Therefore, in our research to investigate higher education

bullying, we decided to use the contexts in Ghana and Norway to verify if there are differences based on this notion.

Over the years, bullying researchers have adopted Hofstede (1983)'s framework that compares international organisational culture to explain how national cultures influence people's values from generation to generation and how this can influence bullying. Using Hofstede (1983)'s framework, bullying researchers described antecedents that explain cross-national variations in bullying with (a) individualism versus collectivism, (b) masculinity versus femininity, and (c) power distance (see Ahmad et al., 2021; Samnani & Singh, 2012). Power distance societies emphasise power differences, with some people seen as being in subordinate positions and being bullied because society does not frown upon bullying (Vogel et al., 2015). On the contrary, low power distance societies are conscious of tendencies that create power disparities and abuse of those in subordinate positions (see Ahmad et al., 2021).

Ahmad et al. (2021) indicate that people in individualistic societies only care for themselves and their families. Samnani and Singh (2012) posit that the risk of bullying is greater in individualistic societies because individualism is linked with competition, which can cause bullying. Ahmad et al. (2021) posit that a collectivist predisposition creates a society with ingroup loyalty and minimal bullying.

Masculinity characterises societies dominated by masculine attributes like male dominance, confidence, forceful, or tough male behaviour, and distinct gender roles where women are expected to be tender, modest, and concerned with quality of life (Hofstede, 2001), leading to great power distance, and a higher possibility of bullying (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Feminine values symbolise caring and nurturing behaviours, cooperation among people, overlapping gender roles, and sexuality equality, with expectations that both men and women are modest, tender, caring, and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede, 2001), therefore leading to lesser bullying (Ahmad et al., 2021; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Samnani & Singh, 2012).

Concerning Norway, Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2001) argue that Scandinavian countries have low bullying rates because of their feminine cultural disposition, high individualism tendencies, and egalitarian leadership, with little to no power gaps between subordinates and superiors, except in terms of their job duties. Samnani and Singh (2012) argue that individualism leads to competition that will induce bullying. However, while we note that the other attributes would lead to lower rates of bullying in Scandinavia, in the present study, we foresee Norwegian individualism as having the potential to isolate minority groups from teamwork.

Comparatively, in Ghana, Anlesinya et al. (2019), Adom et al. (2018), and Marbell (2014) see Ghana as a collectivist, masculine, and high-power distance country, and so we

would expect correspondingly higher tendencies for bullying in terms of power distance and masculinity. For example, Leach (2003) studied bullying in some African countries, including Ghana, and found that boys bully girls and younger students, reflecting a cultural norm that supports masculinity. Respect for power in Ghana may also manifest in interpersonal interactions, and consistent with Samnani and Singh (2012)'s opinion, powerful perpetrators may bully at will when there may not be any check on their behaviour.

The above national or cultural tendencies might influence the predisposition of Ghanaian and Norwegian universities towards bullying, as could our findings. Norway has a national policy of zero tolerance against bullying and discrimination (Kyriacou et al., 2016; Ministry of Education and Research, 1998, 2005; Roland et al., 2010). In contrast, Ghana has no specific national legislation on bullying (Arhin et al., 2019), and its universities' anti-bullying initiatives are relatively new. Norwegian governments also try to ascertain the prevalence of bullying through students' health and well-being research (e.g. Sivertsen et al., 2019a, b), but we cannot identify any research effort of this sort in Ghana.

Nonetheless, there are procedures to report harassment at universities in Norway and Ghana. In Norway, internet platforms and walk-in mental health services handle complaints of bullying. Ghanaian public universities also have policies and provisions against bullying in the form of websites, student handbooks, and electronic billboards, with information about expected behavioural conduct, protection against harassment, and avenues for redress.

Noting that resource scarcity may also influence the occurrence of bullying (D'Cruz et al., 2018; Sinkkonen et al., 2014; Tuckey et al., 2012; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020), disparities in wealth and living standards in Norway and Ghana make them worth comparing. For example, in the United Nations Development Programme (2020)'s Human Development Index reports, Ghana and Norway also show economic disparities, which we believe can influence resource provision and the institutions' demography in terms of serving as international destinations for students, which may also influence the prevalence of bullying. These apparent disparities motivated our interest in selecting the two countries for our research, mainly because cross-cultural comparative higher education research is scarce in the extant literature.

The Aim of the Study

This study sought to provide an in-depth account of the nature and dynamics underlying the occurrence of behaviours that students may consider to be bullying across the learning environment of higher education in Norway and Ghana. In doing this, we partly evaluated the definitional elements of bullying in light of some of the behaviours in an attempt to awaken a new prevention consciousness. We also sought participants' views on learning environment dynamics that influence bullying experiences, with the aim of harnessing the findings to suggest practical remedies. The following research questions address this goal:

Research Questions

RQ1a: What is the nature of the behaviours that higher education students experience and consider to be bullying, and (b) to what degree do definitional prerequisites help identify them?
RQ2: What factors do respondents identify as contributing to bullying at their university?
RQ3: What prevention approaches can one suggest based on the findings?

Methods

The study prioritised the qualitative approach for its inherent advantage of giving in-depth insights into respondents' experiences. This choice enabled the respondents to describe bullying in their own words or in a real-life context to reveal the social dynamics of the behaviours (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2018).

Population and Participants

We chose two Ghanaian public universities that symbolised the attributes of most of Ghana's universities and their anti-bullying structures, as described above. They also captured our attention after being featured in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) exposé on sexual harassment-related bullying, making them places of interest for conducting this research. We chose one Norwegian public university that was representative of the attributes typical of other universities in Norway as described above. We excluded a second university as a result of the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns.

The participants were students, residential officials, student representatives, and personnel of units responsible for addressing harassment who had been at the universities for 2 years or longer. These varied groups of participants contributed to data source triangulation to provide adequate and dependable knowledge about bullying and why it occurs and for a more convincing and accurate conclusion (see Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). We chose them based on purposive sampling and convenience once they had opted in to being interviewed (Berg & Howard, 2017; Bryman, 2012). These criteria ensured that the respondents had adequate bullying experience

or knowledge of other cases, knowing that, theoretically, freshers will not fulfil the requirements of consistency in the occurrence of bullying (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996) because semester calendars make them experience less of their university environments in the short term. The participants in this study only shared their knowledge of the behaviours they consider to be students' bullying, as this was the focus of our investigation.

To ensure our inclusion criteria, we asked all student participants about their level of education before seeking to interview them, implying that all students who had been at the universities for 2 years had an equal chance to participate. As such, our participants mainly included undergraduate students at advanced levels of their studies and master's students. We expected our participants to be young adults of an average age of 20 years and above because students in Ghana complete secondary education at 18 years before enrolling in university education, and the age could be higher for Norwegian students. We contacted administrators and counsellors in their specialised offices and ensured they met the sampling requirement of serving in their position for not less than 2 years. We believe the sample represents diverse groups because we did not limit the recruitment of participants to any particular groups or departments.

We conducted 37 interviews in Ghana, involving 28 students, 4 residential officials, 2 student representatives, and 3 counsellors. In Norway, 21 interviews took place, with 19 students and 2 leaders of the unit responsible for addressing harassment (i.e. "Si ifra" or "Speak Up"). Since the participants were selected based on purposive sampling and convenience, we could not insist on having equal sample sizes from both contexts because our sample was based on the number of people who opted to be interviewed during the process.

Data Collection and Instrument

The data collection started with face-to-face interviews in Ghana from January 2021 to March 2021. The same process took place in Norway from April 2021 to August 2021. The author single-handedly conducted all interviews to avoid comparability issues with multiple interviewers. Individual interviews guarantee privacy for interviewees to speak freely without fear of others hearing their stories (Bhattacharya, 2017; Porta & Keating, 2008) because bullying can be a sensitive topic. Female interviewees have willingly reported

their experiences, like sexual harassment, even though a male conducted the interviews. In Ghana, where this should be a concern, a counsellor affirmed that female students confide issues of sexual harassment in male students more than any other people, and male students play significant roles in making follow-up reports on behalf of ladies, so this was not a problem. Moreover, most female participants welcomed the research, hoping it would become their mouthpiece.

An interview took place whenever we met a participant who fulfilled the sample characteristics, and a convenient location was found. We scheduled interviews with counsellors, administrators, and residential officials. Open-ended questions during semi-structured interviews helped collect qualitative data from the students and administrators. Interviews continued within a non-restricted frame until we exhausted the significant issues or when the interviewee needed to attend to other schedules. This made the interview highly open-ended (Bhattacharya, 2017; Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

The interviews began with self-identification and the disclosure of the purpose of the research to create rapport. Next, because varied backgrounds could influence interviewee understanding (Porta & Keating, 2008), educational brainstorming took place to inform participants about what we considered bullying and to help get insights into how respondents felt about their experiences, even if they did not qualify as bullying according to the definition. This process included obtaining official consent and permission to record the interviews and allowing the participants to withdraw if they did not want to participate. We conducted all the interviews in English, which we do not consider a study limitation because the researcher speaks English and Ghana is an English-speaking country. Most university students in Norway have also been taught English during preuniversity education, so speaking and understanding English was not a problem for the participants. The main questions that we asked to help answer the research questions are listed in Table 1.

We recorded all the interviews using an audio recorder. We transcribed the recordings verbatim at the end of each day. This facilitated the use of the emerging themes in the follow-up questions in subsequent interviews.

Analysis

There is an orientation towards phenomenology in this paper. Phenomenology-oriented, thematic analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017; Clarke & Braun, 2014) enabled an

Table 1 Main questions from the interview guide	1) What forms of aggression or negative behaviours do you or your colleagues experience that you consider to be bullying?
	2) Please give me an account of the university's provisions that deal with bullying
	3) What might be grounds for some bullying behaviours, and what do you think must be done differently?

inductive data-driven pattern to identify, analyse, interpret, and report the nature (themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020) of university student bullying. Based on thematic analysis, we tried to assign whole meanings to the various experiences of respondents in a more narrative way. This started with thematic content analysis (quantifying the themes) to outline and provide an at-a-glance picture of the frequency with which issues were mentioned and to identify general themes across the study settings while jointly presenting, interpreting, and discussing them to obtain explicit knowledge.

We followed the procedure consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006)'s approach. We first delved deep into the data by reading it iteratively and with rapt attention. A second reading looked at words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that constituted aspects of students' experiences of bullying, the meanings of these, and the factors that cause it, bearing in mind the extant literature, but not compromising the "in vivo code" procedure (Bryman, 2012, p. 573; Saldaña, 2016).

We generated codes using digital colour shading across the entire dataset by identifying and distinguishing all the respondents' significant and related experiences and narrations. Excerpts with similar colour shadings were copied and regrouped. We avoided copying similar excerpts twice for a single respondent to avoid overemphasising the "voices" of a few participants. A third reading of the extracts and the entire dataset ensured that the various excerpts were unique and represented similar expressions for all participants. We reviewed the excerpts during a fourth reading to generate themes encapsulating a common thread. We reread them a fifth time to reframe or confirm the themes.

The further processing of the themes involved writing them out and performing frequency counts to indicate the number of excerpts that mentioned each theme. We eventually submitted the data, analysis, and findings to two supervisors, who independently verified them to ensure some inter-rater reliability and credibility and made necessary suggestions to ensure investigator triangulation (Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). This process helped indicate the extent of any acts of bullying or issues in the learning environment.

Findings

The Nature of Student Bullying (RQ1a)

Table 2 lists the themes, revealing the nature of bullying, and the frequencies, which reflect the number of respondents that referred to each issue.

Excerpts demonstrating the above overarching domains of bullying-related experiences are subsequently presented. We labelled an excerpt with *#GS* when it came from a Ghanaian

student, with *#NS* when it was from a Norwegian student, with *#GA* when it came from an administrator in Ghana, with *#GC* when it was from a counsellor in Ghana, and with *#NC* when it came from a counsellor in Norway. Furthermore, we marked all the excerpts in sequence to make it easy to reference them in the discussion.

Inconveniencing

The Ghanaian participants think their experiences in residential halls constitute bullying. They called it inconveniencing because it causes impediments and weariness and occurs repeatedly. They share residential facilities in tight spaces, which creates friction when some students repeatedly ignore the need to respect their roommates' right to privacy.

My roommates bring ladies to the room, and they stay till 10 p.m., 11 p.m., and they sometimes stay the night. Sometimes it goes on for two to three weeks. For me, this is bullying; it becomes unbearable. (#GS1)

Exclusion

According to the extant literature, excluding someone is a form of bullying (e.g. Pörhölä et al., 2020). The only information regarding this in quantitative studies refers to its frequency of occurrence. Exclusion could occur by digital means or in person through social groups where victims living in a group are actively omitted from or removed from social events or group projects or moved away from or ignored by the group (Harrison et al., 2022). Examples of its dynamics were observed.

During the first semester of my second year, I experienced attitudes similar to exclusion. We were supposed to form groups for an assignment at one point, and it was surprising that they excluded some of us. (#GS2)

Table 2 Summary of country-specific themes of bullying-related behaviours and frequencies

Themes	Ghana (n=37)	Norway (n=21)
Inconveniencing	8	0
Exclusion	7	7
Intimidation	14	2
Booing, gossiping, and teasing	8	3
Ignoring or facing hostile reactions	6	4
Body and dress shaming	9	0
Wrongful photographing and circulation	4	5
Sexual harassment and unwanted touching, fondling, and kissing	6	4

There was this issue of rejecting a student from a study group for no apparent reason, and she ended up feeling left out until she reported it. (#NC3)

A colleague happened to be the only foreigner in his class. They excluded him, they backbit, and their body language expressed their rejection of him. It became unbearable, so he eventually dropped out of his programme and enrolled in a new programme where other foreigners were his coursemates. (#NS4)

We indicated earlier that disability is one personality factor that can lead to people experiencing bullying, and this was the case for a Ghanaian student.

In level 100, a quiet guy was a disabled person. He experienced exclusion and stigmatisation mostly… even my friends did not want anything to do with him. (#GS5)

Intimidation

Intimidation does not have an aggressive nature but is expressed through shrewd and perceptive comments. Bahji and Altomare (2019) referred to it as "using power to influence behaviour improperly". We received reports of intimidating comments about one-off or habitual events that offended some people and either led them to officially report what had happened or keep quiet and contain their emotions.

This lecturer made an unprofessional comment about a student's work. He said the student behaves like a baby and refuses to be independent; she should grow up and stop nagging. (#NC6)

Friends belittle you and make comments that make you feel inferior, give you low self-esteem, or suggest you are poor. For example, a friend said… "I think this weave-on hair will not last for a year." She was trying to say I was poor and that I would have the same weave for the whole year instead of changing it. (#GS7)

Booing, Gossiping, and Teasing

There are reports of booing, gossiping, and teasing among students. These indicate that students pick on targets, and bullying starts with covert acts, like gossiping, and develops into overt acts, like booing and teasing. Some booing also occurs in response to local norms, and these examples indicate that.

Ladies are not allowed to wear a red dress to this hall because it is sacred to the male god of the hall. When a lady comes to the hall in red, they shout and hoot at them in a persistent manner. They shout, "korkor oooo kor kor," and some people are shocked. (#GS8)

I know one person in my class. Everyone talks about him and boos at him a lot. They gossiped and spread rumours

about him; they excluded him, and it was like he was out of quality; he was always the centre of attention because people expected him to do something weird, which had a lot of negative effects on him. (#NS9)

"Korkor oooo korkor" in the above excerpt means shouting "red oooo red" to express dislike when a lady wears red, as it is sacred to their male god.

Ignoring or Facing Hostile Reactions

We previously reviewed how people being ignored, receiving a hostile reaction when they approach others, or not receiving a response to a greeting can constitute uncivil, hostile, or unpleasant behaviour (Tehrani, 2002). This was experienced by some students.

During my first year, my roommates were a year ahead of me, …you could see that their body language indicated that they disapproved of my presence. (#GS10)

I am the type that, when I see someone I know, I cannot just pass them by. I must go to say hi. However, they often look down on me meanly, ignoring me. (#NS11)

Body and Dress Shaming

In the extant literature, personality produces a power imbalance or social grounds for bullying. Examples exist with regard to the bullying of obese people (Stamate et al., 2021). There were cases where different students made frequent distasteful comments about the body size of their targets. We deduced hurt feelings from some excerpts.

Personally, people talk about my body, particularly my weight, and I do not like it. I feel somehow insulted. (#GS12)

During my first year at the university, I was tiny, so people intimidated me, saying, "Small boy, what do you want here?" They made fun of my body size, height, and colour. Some called me Dark Knight because I am dark, and one guy called me Deep Freezer. It gets to me sometimes. (#GS13)

Universities are also adult settings with no dress codes, except for the requirement to dress decently in most cases. This situation provides avenues for harassment when some students expect everyone to look gorgeous or meet cultural expectations of decency. Students who do not meet these expectations receive frequent uncomfortable comments or attacks based on their appearances.

People laugh at the authenticity of people's clothing …the quality, the originality, and the faults. They laugh at the person excessively. Some people only need

something to wear, but others think the clothing should meet some quality standards. (#GS14)

When people dress inappropriately, others fondle them by holding their buttocks, breasts, etc. They take them to be that kind of person and treat them as such when they do not cover themselves properly. (#GS15)

Wrongful Photographing and Circulation

The internet is commonly used to bully targets or harm the reputation of people in different ways. Some students treat it as a bit of fun, but others intend to hurt their targets. In some cases, what might be considered fun can also result in the targets getting hurt, which was the case in some of the examples we identified.

One guy slept during our group discussion, and another student took a photograph of him sleeping. Later, we saw the photograph circulating on social media. He felt awful, but it was on social media, so we could not stop it. (#GS16)

People are also in the habit of taking photographs and circulating them without permission, and some people are not comfortable with this. It is like encroaching on someone's private life, which is unacceptable. (#NS17)

Sexual Harassment and Unwanted Touching, Fondling, and Kissing

Our respondents reported sexual harassment, from which female students predominantly suffer. We identified cases of male students sexually harassing female students. Some of the cases in Norway involved sexual innuendos and touching, but what caught our attention was the faculty's sexual harassment of students.

A colleague went to a lecturer twice to correct a disappointing grade, and the lecturer said she must do something in return. The lecturer started calling her for outings. We went to see another lecturer, who eventually stopped this behaviour. However, another lady is about to graduate with an unexpected D grade after refusing a lecturer's proposal. (#GS18)

Another case was ongoing during this study:

I was going to the…, and a lecturer saw me, introduced himself, and said he wanted to be my friend. Afterwards, he came to my hostel around 8:00 p.m. and invited me into his car. After talking with me, he forcefully hugged me. Every week, he sends text messages, and I received one of them today. (#GS19)

For Norwegian students, friendship or intimacy ties can take an ugly turn to become a source of sexual harassment, and the finding is similar to those of Sivertsen et al., (2019a, b).

… the gentlemen tend to go too far with touching, cuddling, and all that. Because of their intimacy, they do not understand why they should be restricted. It becomes troublesome, and people come to report for counselling. (#NC20)

Underlying Institutional Factors Regarding Bullying (RQ2).

We asked participants about the factors influencing bullying in the study environment. Table 3 reflects their views and the frequency with which each issue was mentioned.

Existence of Rules, the Adequacy of Awareness, Ignorance, and Students' Indifference

Policies or rules, awareness of the same, and their enforcement determine the conditions of a learning environment, which also influence the rate of bullying. The university authorities have rules to prevent bullying, but varied views exist about their effectiveness.

The students' handbook and the website contain all the information students need. We give them out during matriculation. We refer to the handbook when someone breaches a rule. Most people do not come to matriculation, and some gain late admission, so I daresay that further awareness is needed. (#GA21)

Some students felt that the degree to which awareness of the university rules was created was insufficient.

Orientations and handbooks at matriculation are not enough because, mostly, we are so happy to be at the university, so we ignore issues regarding bullying. We only read the handbook to find out information about courses and how to calculate our grade points. (#GS22)

I know there is something like "Si ifra," but I do not know what it is all about. There is no awareness when students start their university education. Just as there are projections on the electronic billboards to welcome

Table 3 Emerging themes from students' views of learning environment factors related to bullying

Emerging themes	Ghana (n=37)	Norway (n=21)
Existence of rules, the adequacy of awareness, ignorance, and students' indifference	30	18
Availability of avenues for redress, commitment, fairness, and transparency	31	11
Physical and human resource structures	23	2

new students, bullying needs to be out there and visible through video courses. (#NS23)

Availability of Avenues for Redress, Commitment, Fairness, and Transparency

Sometimes rules exist and are enforced, but not always on fair terms, as expressed in the following excerpts:

Institutional dysfunctions lead to some of these issues … lecturers have the power or authority to go as far as they want. Sometimes their behaviours are unethical, but the student or the victim is vulnerable, and even when they report it, depending on who that lecturer is, one cannot go too far, so the issue dies. Sometimes, one thinks the student is lying. (#GC24)

Sometimes, it does not only come down to the fact that the rules are not fairly implemented; their application does not communicate transparency to encourage reporting either.

Why should I bother to go and report it when I know that they will not punish the perpetrator? It is not worth it. (#NS25)
For the past five or six years, the university has been very committed to issues of bullying and sexual harassment; …even before the BBC exposé. The only problem is that the university is not open about it when handling these issues. (#GA26)

Physical and Human Resource Structures

The extant literature notes that resource scarcity creates situations that lead to bullying (D'Cruz et al., 2018; Salin & Hoel, 2020; Sinkkonen et al., 2014; Tuckey et al., 2012; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). Sinkkonen et al. (2014) indicate that bullying increases when resources become limited at the university level and competition for the limited resources grows tighter. Tuckey et al. (2012) found that harassment could occur due to a lack of resources like office equipment, computers, training, and operational equipment, a claim that Salin and Hoel (2020) emphasised. Competition for scarce resources thus creates resentment and victimisation, which some respondents reported.

As a teaching assistant, I teach 400 students in a lecture theatre built for about 200 students. Some students reserve seats for other students who arrive late; there are always grudges that go beyond the lecture rooms. (#GS27)

Some university authorities viewed the phenomenon differently and explained why they proposed more resource provisions.

Resource shortages are a natural phenomenon of everyday life, but we need more independent staff, looking at the number of counsellors in relation to the number

of students. Somebody might need help when I am at a lecture. (#GC28)

Whereas resource scarcity was not an issue in Norway, a counsellor thought the university's human resources needed adequate training.

What I felt when I oversaw "Speak Up" was that I lacked competence, and it was very demanding to address these cases. I was not trained and didn't receive enough training to deal with these matters at the university, and there is no specific training for this. (#NC29)

Discussion

The findings in this study shed light on the nature and social dynamics that underlie bullying experiences. We partly discuss the findings relative to the definitional elements of "intention to harm", "repetition over time", the "imbalance of power", the "harmfulness of the behaviours", and the "subtleness" of the bullying to indicate the need for a new outlook. We also discuss the institutional factors that students believe favour bullying and how the national context might have influenced the findings. We provide suggestions (based on the findings) for prevention.

"Intention to Harm", "Repetition Over Time", the "Imbalance of Power", the "Harmfulness of the Behaviours", and the "Subtleness" of the Acts (RQ1b)

Liefooghe and Davey (2002) note that school bullying is relatively evident and can be prevented to some extent. However, there are controversies concerning workplace bullying, which can be subtle and hardly observable (Dzurec & Bromley, 2012; Harrison et al., 2022; Rollock, 2021). As such, there are calls to expand the definition of the concept (e.g. Spadafora et al., 2022; Volk et al., 2017). Einarsen (1999) and Glambek et al. (2020) argue that bullying may be deliberate or unconscious, and Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003) opine that subjective feelings must also be central in any effort to prevent bullying, just as UNESCO and the WABF emphasised. Subjective feelings indicate the victims' descriptions of how the incident affected them and how they reacted (Salin, 2003).

Einarsen et al. (2020a) note that the subjective perception of victims that their experiences are bullying should be the core of bullying regardless of how one labels the incidents, but based on the counterarguments concerning labelling subtle behaviours like "not greeting a person" as bullying, contextual pieces of information are needed. That is to say, independent of the definition one uses, it might be impossible to determine bullying from one observable hostile act

based on the bullying process (Einarsen et al., 2020b). Subjective feelings thus create a sense of the need to be mindful of any uncivil incident that can create existential threats or critical life events for a victim, regardless of the frequency of the acts (Dennehy et al., 2020; Einarsen et al., 2020a).

Whether we refer to an isolated incident of belittlement or verbal abuse, there will be an associated feeling of hurt (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010). Bullies will not confirm that they intend to harm a target; the intent can be assumed or deduced and may not be explicit (Lester, 2013), so the situation could communicate the intention to hurt a victim. On these grounds, we discuss our findings in relation to the definitional tenets of power imbalance, intention to harm, repetition, and harmfulness of the acts for new insights into higher education bullying and how to approach its prevention.

Excerpt *#GS7* is a case of belittlement whose frequency cannot be confirmed, even though the excerpt indicates it is the norm. The intention is not explicit, just like in *#GS12 and #GS13*, but the perpetrator cannot intend anything other than offence. There might be no repetition, but we cannot overlook the affective reaction Brotheridge and Lee (2010) argued about and the ongoing psychosocial intimidation whenever the victim is with their classmates. The act could better be termed incivility. However, considering that universities should be congenial places for students to study, we draw attention to the implications of this behaviour.

There can be consequences, like possibly shrinking away and withdrawing from others (see Trumbull, 2003), and the psychosocial trauma and economic stress of the urge to change one's weave can be grave. In this case, the behaviour was intimidating communication that can erode collegiality and harm the victim's well-being (Smith & Coel, 2018). Citing Adiyaman and Meier (2022), we have learned from Taris (2022) that the effect of uncivil behaviour like this would be more pronounced for the victim if she were the only person in the group whose weave had been mocked. Referring to such behaviour during this research helps explain victims' subjective feelings of hurt, which cannot be overlooked.

The notion that a bully consciously harasses a target is noteworthy. The example of impedimental and wearisome behaviour in *#GS1* draws attention to unconscious bullying (Einarsen, 1999) and to the need to note the context and appropriately interpret behaviours that ignore a victim's right to fair treatment and dignity (Rhodes et al., 2010). The behaviour in this example occurred several times, and shared university rooms cannot be used in the said manner without roommates' approval, even if the university rules accept it. For ethical reasons, we cannot cite a source to prove that both universities in this setting forbid the behaviour in the students' handbook. However, the fact that the behaviour creates growing discomfort and an uncongenial study environment for victims but that they cannot readily report it indicates unconscious bullying (Einarsen, 1999; Page et al., 2021).

We cannot presume the intent to harm, nor can we explicitly examine it, but the inappropriateness of the behaviour, which occurred many times, can be classified as unconscious bullying. Understanding the terrain as a researcher, one can assert that a junior student would not treat a senior student that way. Instead, situations like this occur between classmates or are performed by seniors, indicating relative power and the disregard for possible harm that Lester (2013) noted.

Noting the leverage of an imbalance in power in the conceptualisation of bullying, we argue the need to also perceive bullying from the perspective of the perpetrator's power, even if a behaviour is sporadic and we cannot ascertain harmful intentions. Example *#GS19*, which is an incident of sexual harassment, shows the leverage of a power imbalance in disregarding a student's need to focus on learning. Power dynamics originating from a possible dependence of the student on the lecturer for a grade, the lecturer's social position in the university's formal power structure, and masculine cultural dominance in Ghana are played out in the forceful hugging of the student. We cannot conclude any intention to harm because it was a friendship request, and the repetition of the behaviour is hard to confirm, except for the repetitive text messages. However, the psychological stress of keeping a superior at bay or the implications of reprisal in the advent of proactive rejection or reporting could be a heavy burden on the student.

Power influences institutional responses. Some bullies are powerful, and students will always dread reporting them, not only for fear of reprisal from the bullies and their sympathisers but also for fear of receiving attention from a larger group. Impliedly, the fear of reprisal makes targets vulnerable to bullying. In *#GS19*, the power imbalance helps conceal bullying. Until the student breaks the shell of fear that makes her tolerate the harassment, one will not have the opportunity to question the behaviour regarding the abuse of power.

Behaviours may not always need to be apparent or reoccur to be considered harmful or bullying. We refer to Brotheridge and Lee (2010)'s arguments about affective feelings and reactions and Dennehy et al. (2020)'s opinion about one-time incidents constituting existential threats to say that behaviours may not be repeated but can equally cause harm. We knew about the incident recounted in *#GS18* from the BBC exposé. The incident would be termed "sexual coercion", described as "quid pro quo" (see Aina-Pelemo et al., 2021). Putting ourselves in the position of the female student in this case, one can feel belittled and sad. Anger and hurt could also be experienced, and the reality of academic derailment due to a poor grade can lead to lingering effects. This brings to the fore our quest to be conscious of bullying, considering that Nixon et al. (2021) found that the psychological effects on the victims in situations like this would not differ from those of those who experienced bullying consistently.

We have already drawn attention to how power can prevent reporting, particularly in societies like Ghana that revere power. Some researchers might argue that #GS18 is a component of sexual harassment and must be treated as such. However, the context, the power element, and the possible affective outcomes for the female student portray abuse for a victim who cannot defend herself. In this case, we might agree with Volk et al. (2017) that a power imbalance probably distinguishes bullying from other aggressive behaviours.

We cannot refer to all our data to exhaust the debate about bullying; the findings speak for themselves. However, we draw attention to the subtleness of some behaviours and the need for a new awakening. We cannot say bullying occurs only because the authorities are not committed to preventing it (Hodgins & McNamara, 2019). We focus on the possible evaluations victims could make about the behaviours regarding bullying and how authorities respond following formal complaints.

Our findings show cases of subtle bullying, which Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) otherwise termed "incivility", occurring in ways that victims cannot readily report and authorities cannot punish within the context of anti-bullying policies (Hodgins & McNamara, 2017). However, receiving these reports from students in this research, we note that these behaviours can cause feelings of sadness, restlessness, anger, or even confusion and deny people their careers.

We propose being open-minded and narrowing down definitional demands to the principal criteria of the objective identification of activities that symbolise the occurrence of bullying while not compromising with regard to the subjective parts that indicate the victims' perceptions (see also Agervold, 2007). Behaviours that ignore the need to respect the rights or dignity of others must be a concern (Rhodes et al., 2010).

The Perceived Consequences of Institutional Antecedents (RQ2)

Aside from the subtle nature of bullying, which we argue limits bullying prevention, respondents identified some learning environment factors that underlie bullying. The existence of rules, inadequate awareness, and students' ignorance and indifference influence bullying in various ways. Anti-bullying policies serve as a statement of intent and a guideline to prevent bullying. Policies need awareness creation, and collaborative policies involving students help make them aware (Vaill et al., 2020).

There are various notions regarding university rules and student awareness (e.g. *#GS21*, *#NS22*, *#NS23*). Students in Ghana can find anti-bullying rules and behaviours in their student handbooks and university websites. The situation is no different in Norway, where a platform exists to address bullying. However, the findings indicate that the institutions need continuous awareness creation. There is a need

to increase bullying awareness (e.g. through the "Si ifra" or "Speak Up" campaigns). Information dissemination must not be limited to websites and flyers.

The findings indicate a need for redress avenues, commitment, fairness, and transparency in rule application to prevent bullying. Students do not witness practical deterrence, and they also doubt whether the system works. Vaill et al. (2020) confirmed that about 95% of universities do not follow up on sanctions outlined in their anti-bullying policies. Excerpt *#NS25* indicates the reluctance to report incidents if one knows justice will not be served, and opinions such as that expressed in *#GA26* that the university is not open about redress issues could affect reporting similarly in Ghana. Officials in Norway and Ghana have a "silence code". This tendency ("problematic secrecy") means students in both study contexts have lost confidence in the system.

Bandura (1971) considered punishment for wrongdoing as a motivational function of reinforcement that prevents perpetrators and observers from repeating destructive behaviours, thereby making the communication of punishments necessary. However, when one considers arguments about the counterproductiveness of punishments (Borgwald & Theixos, 2013; Holloway, 2002) and the consequences of exposing the victim and the culprit to further harm (Hubert, 2003), a "silence code" can be helpful. We argue that tactful redress is needed, particularly in sexual harassment cases.

We identified resource scarcity (*#GS1* and *#GS27*), which Sinkkonen et al. (2014), D'Cruz et al. (2018), and Zawadzki and Jensen (2020) considered a potential precursor of bullying. Competition for scarce chairs and tables creates avenues for resentment that can trigger the aftermath tensions that may cause bullying, and from the excerpts, it is clear that the provision of material and human resources must be adequate. Moreover, personnel shortages or ineptitudes (*#GC28* and *#NC29*) could be considered as denying victims immediate and appropriate attention.

The Perceived Consequences of National or Cultural Antecedents

We deduce that differences arise because of national commitment and cultural predispositions to bullying. Generally, more provocative or aggressive behaviours occurred in Ghana when we found that students could belittle others and mock, harass, or hoot at them because of their clothing or body size. Our judgement is based on the fact that people could not be fondled or touched inappropriately because of how they dressed or hooted at because of a particular clothing colour in Norway. Some of these tendencies point to cultural factors reflected in university rules, which demand that students dress decently. The single case of proactive harassment in Norway (*#NS9*) indicates that things could

go wrong and people could be bullied in any society, probably when they have personal deficits (Einarsen et al., 2003; Rosander, 2021), which in any case should not justify their ordeal (Zapf & Einarsen, 2020). Norwegian private-life predispositions (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001) might have accounted for incidents of exclusion and ignoring people (*see #NC3, #NS4, and #NS11*).

More so, students in Ghana may not report a lecturer for a comment about their academic output, like in Norway (*#NC6*), for which the authorities questioned a lecturer. This points to Rayner et al. (2002)'s argument about Norwegian egalitarianism and feminine values, contrary to a cultural predisposition of reverence for superiors and the tacit tolerance of some extreme behaviours due to Ghana's high power distance disposition.

Incidents like faculty sexual harassment and privilege of power in Ghana (*#GS18, #GS19, and #GC24*) reveal differences in institutional predispositions towards bullying, which might emanate from national predispositions or less consciousness about bullying, male dominance, and respect for power. In Ghana, sexual harassment (*#GS19*) should not be happening at the university if there is continual consciousness, particularly when one observes how the BBC exposé has made the case for a new level of vigilance. In Norway, students reporting subtle behaviours like rejection and fondling (*#NC3 and #NC20*) revealed a national consciousness of their rights. They are only disappointed when they do not receive feedback on redress.

Economic conditions in Ghana might have also accounted for fighting over limited chairs and tables in lecture rooms, which could eventually lead to bullying (#GS27). It also made students share tight spaces, creating weariness for some when others abused such shared spaces (#GS1). This could not be the case in Norway, where resources are provided adequately, and students are guaranteed a reasonable degree of privacy.

Recommendation of Bullying Prevention Approaches (RQ3)

Qualifying all behaviours as bullying based on longstanding definitions is not possible in the face of emerging types and varying intensities that cause some physical or psychosocial harm. Establishing a fundamental baseline policy (and context-specific definitions) for civil behaviours, the intolerance of abuse, and transparency in redress will help (Smith & Coel, 2018). In this vein, we recommend that antibullying units and the research community be more open in listening to cases and consider the context in which reported behaviours occurred to evaluate every unique case objectively.

Researchers have frowned upon overreliance on rules and punishments (Borgwald & Theixos, 2013; Cho et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, these are the fundamentals for preventing misdemeanours in any society, and universities need to implement deterrent approaches. As in other counselling enterprises, there must be adequate training of human resources to provide efficient personnel who will not be indifferent towards subtle but harmful behaviours (Thirlwall, 2015). This effort must also be part of national policies to make it more effective in eradicating local cultural predispositions that favour bullying.

Limitations of the Study

We cannot generalise the findings of this study to the general population since samples in qualitative studies do not constitute a significant proportion of the larger population. However, using varied groups of participants contributed to data source triangulation, which provides adequate, dependable knowledge and an accurate conclusion about a phenomenon of interest (see Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018).

We tried to get typical victims of bullying to participate in the interviews through a questionnaire that collected quantitative data, which failed. This also prevented the acquisition of a larger pool of typical victims of bullying, which would have enriched the research with more varied bullying experiences. We believe the reports we had from other students who witnessed bullying of their colleagues have not communicated the affective feelings that the original victims would have communicated if we had obtained the reports from them.

Furthermore, we have not asked the typical victims about how the incidents affected them, so the affective experiences were not emphasised, which is a limitation of the study. We should have also been keen on letting the respondents tell us how often and how long they experienced the negative behaviours. It would have provided added information to provide a superior evaluation of the bullying incidents. We also did not collect demographic information about the participants because of ethical concerns. However, we believe the excerpts, to a degree, indicated the victims' identities. We recommend that future studies consider these concerns during interviews.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that some higher education bullying does not occur frequently, is not visibly harmful, and does not wield power imbalances. Such behaviours are mostly subtle, making it difficult for prevailing policies or definitions to prevent bullying. The research also revealed that cultural predispositions influence bullying differently, so society must urgently identify, confront, and prevent bullying in higher education. Fortunately, universities can better prevent bullying, and there must be awareness creation surrounding the rules and transparency with regard to their enforcement. Institutions must also minimise the shortfalls that provide avenues for

bullying. More bullying research should be conducted across cultures, especially qualitative studies and those with a focus on Africa, to reveal emerging trends and add meaning to the quantitative results.

Data Availability As part of the ethical clearance, the NSD forbade the release of the research data to third parties because of the sensitive nature of the research. It demands that we delete the data from all storage devices at the end of the project. More so, we cannot disclose some disturbing findings to third parties.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) oversaw the initial ethical clearance of this research. It forbade the disclosure of the demographic characteristics of the participants since these details can provide clues to identifying respondents and their experiences. We neither distinguished participants by their age, gender, or level of education nor linked any such information to our findings. All participants read the relevant informed consent forms and agreed to participate in the research. The research institution wrote to seek permission from the research universities in Ghana with which it collaborates.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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