

## Psychosocial factors of cyberbullying experienced by Malaysian public university undergraduates

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### ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has emerged as a critical issue among university students in Malaysia, driven by the widespread use of digital technologies and associated with serious psychological consequences. Despite its increasing prevalence, limited research has explored how psychosocial factors shape cyberbullying victimization within the Malaysian higher education context. This study addresses this gap by exploring the psychosocial factors influencing cyberbullying victimization among university students in Malaysia. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving five university students who had experienced cyberbullying. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest that cyberbullying victimization is influenced by an interplay of psychological and social factors. Psychological factors include passive behavior, low self-esteem, irrational beliefs and personality traits, while social factors encompass peer relationships, parenting styles, social media engagement, and online gaming environments. This study suggests that cyberbullying is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both individual vulnerabilities and environmental influences. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive, psychosocial-based interventions to support students' wellbeing and promote safer digital environments in higher education institutions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has dramatically enhanced the efficiency of modern life. However, it has also introduced risks to individuals' mental, emotional and psychological well-being. In the past, public concern centered primarily on physical bullying. However, with technological developments, such harmful behaviors have shifted into the digital sphere, manifesting as cyberbullying [1]. Cyberbullying is commonly defined as intentional, harmful behavior repeatedly carried out by an individual or group using digital technology to target victims who are unable to defend themselves [2]. Cyberbullying is often considered to be more harmful than traditional bullying due to the anonymity of the perpetrators, the potential for harmful content to spread rapidly and the persistence of digital traces. Victims of cyberbullying often experienced depression, anxiety, diminished self-esteem and severe cases of suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviors [3]–[6]. Furthermore, Barlett *et al.* [7] emphasized that repeated

exposure to cyberbullying-related trauma can escalate into antisocial tendencies, such as increased susceptibility to criminal involvement and violent behavior.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a pressing social concern in Malaysia, with recent statistics indicating a significant rise in reported cases. In 2024, it was reported that there were 8,399 complaints related to cyberbullying, a sharp increase from 3,199 cases in previous years [8]. These figures demonstrate that cyberbullying is not only prevalent but also increasing at an alarming rate within the Malaysian context. University students represent a particularly vulnerable group, given their heavy reliance on digital platforms for both academic and social purposes. More recently, Hassan and Isa [9] found that two out of five university students in Malaysia experienced cyberbullying within a year, underscoring its alarming prevalence in this population. In addition, 59.7% of Malaysians are internet users, with university students comprising a significant portion of this figure [10]. Empirical evidence further reinforces the prevalence of cyberbullying in this population. A study by Lai *et al.* [11] found that 66% of students in Malaysian private universities and colleges had experienced cyberbullying, with female students reporting higher victimization rates than males, and Malay students reporting more cases compared to other ethnic groups. Similarly, Panatik *et al.* [12] emphasize that university students are equally vulnerable to cyberaggression due to their extensive use of the internet, particularly in the context of learning and peer interaction. Despite the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying among university students, research focusing specifically on this population remains limited. Much of the existing literature has traditionally focused on school students, leaving a gap in understanding the experiences and risk factors associated with cyberbullying among university students, particularly within the Malaysian context. This highlights the need for more focused research on university populations, who face unique academic, social and digital challenges.

To better understand cyberbullying among university students, it is important to examine the factors that contribute to such behavior. Previous studies have identified various factors associated with cyberbullying victimization. From a behavioral perspective, prior involvement in bullying has been found to increase the likelihood of becoming a victim of cyberbullying [13]. Psychological factors also play a significant role in cyberbullying involvement. Individuals with low self-esteem and higher psychological distress are more likely to experience cybervictimization [14]. In addition, personality traits, particularly negative traits such as Machiavellianism, have been associated with cyberbullying [15], while negative self-perceptions, including self-deprecation, have been linked to higher levels of victimization [16]. In social context, social support from family and peers has been identified as a protective factor, reducing the likelihood victimization. Social competencies such as communication skills, assertiveness and problem-solving abilities also play a crucial role in reducing vulnerability to cyberbullying.

Other studies have highlighted the role of cognitive and contextual factors, including irrational beliefs, resilience and psychological needs. Sabancı and Cekiç [17] found that resilience, irrational belief and unmet psychological needs were associated with victimization. In the Malaysian context, Talwar [18] identified self-esteem and loneliness as key predictors of cyberbullying involvement among postgraduate students, while Noh *et al.* [19] reported that personality traits and internet addiction significantly predicted victimization, with parental monitoring serving as a protective factor. Despite the identification of these factors, most existing studies rely on quantitative approaches, resulting in limited understanding of how these psychosocial factors are experienced in real-life situations. In addition, qualitative research focusing on cyberbullying victimization among Malaysian university students remains scarce. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the psychosocial factors that influence cyberbullying victimization among university students in Malaysia. Therefore, this study provides a novel contribution to the existing literature by offering an in-depth qualitative exploration of how psychological and social factors interact in shaping cyberbullying victimization among Malaysian public university undergraduates within digital environments, particularly social media and online gaming platforms. The findings provide practical insights that may inform higher education institutions, counsellors, educators and relevant stakeholders in strengthening existing support systems, enhancing digital citizenship awareness programs and improving preventive efforts toward creating safer online environments for university students.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research approach and design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of cyberbullying among university students in Malaysia. Given the sensitive and multifaceted nature of cyberbullying, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate to capture rich, in-depth insights into the psychosocial dimensions of this phenomenon. A case study design was employed to facilitate a holistic understanding of informants' experiences across different contexts. Purposive sampling was used to recruit undergraduate students with experiences of cyberbullying through social media and instant messaging platforms. Due to the

sensitivity of the topic, snowball sampling was also applied, whereby initial informants and lecturers referred to other potential participants who met the study criteria. A total of five undergraduate students (two males and three females), aged 22-26 years, participated in the study.

## 2.2. Data collection procedure

The data collection procedure for this study involved several systematic steps. First, the interview protocol was developed based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature and was verified by four experts in the fields of qualitative research and study related domain to enhance clarity and content validity. After incorporating their feedback, ethical approval was obtained from the UTM Research Ethics Committee. Study invitation was disseminated through different platforms including emails, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Potential informants who express willingness to participate were then provided with the information sheet, informed consent form, and the finalized interview protocol. Interviews were scheduled only after participants confirmed their understanding of the study and formally provided informed consent, ensuring that all ethical requirements were met prior to data collection. Data was obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2025. Interviews were held either in person or online, depending on the informant's preference. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face inside the campus, while two interviews were conducted online via the Webex platform. Written informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to the start of each interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted using either in Malay or English and lasted between 30 and 100 minutes. This approach was considered the most suitable for eliciting rich, in-depth insight while allowing informants to discuss potentially sensitive topics [20] and in line with methods adopted in previous research [21]–[23].

## 2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. Transcripts were read multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. Then, thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework [24]. The codes were generated deductively based on predetermined concepts derived from the existing literature and the study's theoretical framework by using NVivo software (version 15). These codes were applied systematically to each transcript for each informant. The coded data was then organized into categories using thematic network diagrams, from which themes aligned with the research objectives. Each code was carefully examined to refine the essence of its corresponding theme and to describe how it related to the research question. The refined themes were subsequently presented in a structured report, offering a detailed and interpretative account of the findings. To enhance the trustworthiness of the results, analytic triangulation was employed. An experienced researcher in the field reviews coding processes and refines themes until the consensus is achieved.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed two main themes, psychological and social factors. Findings are presented using verbatim quotations and integrated with existing literature to provide a deeper understanding of factors associated with cyberbullying victimization among university students.

### 3.1. Psychological factors

Figure 1 illustrates the role of psychological factors that contribute to university students becoming victims of cyberbullying. These factors are categorized under three main sub themes: behavioral, cognitive, and personality factors, representing different psychological dimensions associated with cyberbullying experiences.

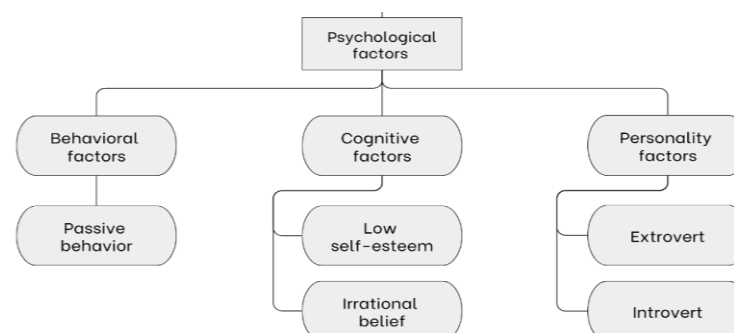


Figure 1. Psychological factors that influence cyberbullying among university students

### 3.1.1. Behavioral factors

Within the behavioral factor dimension, the first sub-theme identified is passive behavior. This sub-theme describes the tendency of victims to accept actions or circumstances imposed by others without confrontation or questioning. Passive behavior is often associated with shyness or low self-esteem and can be perceived by perpetrators as a sign of weakness or vulnerability [25]. Findings from the interviews indicated that several informants identified their passive responses as a significant factor contributing to their continued victimization. Informants Amirah, Badrul, and Damia reflected that their tendency to remain silent was a primary reaction to online harassment. Amirah (pseudonym) highlighted how her belief in non-confrontation might have inadvertently encouraged the perpetrator, stating:

*“Maybe people keep doing it (cyberbullying) because I stay quiet? From what I believe, I always remember that when someone throws something at us, we shouldn’t respond. So, when it happened, I didn’t say anything. I just stayed silent.”*

Similarly, Badrul (pseudonym) and Damia (pseudonym) echoed this sentiment, noting that they chose not to respond when insulted online. These narratives suggest that, among the informants, cyberbullying experiences were often associated with passive responses. This finding is consistent with Gahagan *et al.* [25], which highlighted that university students often disregard or ignore cyberbullying directed at them. A possible explanation for this trend is that victims may perceive the situation as unchangeable after assessing their personal resources and the power dynamics involved [26]. This behavioral avoidance may, in some cases, perpetuate victimization by signaling to aggressors a lack of resistance, thereby increasing the likelihood of future cybervictimization [27]. These findings suggest that for university students, passive coping mechanisms, while intended to de-escalate the situation may inadvertently lead to prolonged victimization due to the perceived lack of consequences for the perpetrator. University may incorporate a coping skills development into student support programmed to help students respond more effectively to online harassment.

### 3.1.2. Cognitive factors

Within the psychological dimension, cognitive factors specifically low self-esteem and irrational beliefs, play a significant role in shaping an individual’s vulnerability to cyberbullying. These factors may foster negative self-perceptions and distorted thinking patterns that intensify the impact of online victimization. Low self-esteem defined as an individual’s evaluation of self-worth [28]. When this self-worth is diminished, individuals often perceive themselves as less valuable, making them more vulnerable to negative treatment in online contexts [29]. In this study, informants Badrul and Caliph linked their low self-esteem to their performance in online gaming. Badrul (pseudonym) explained how the perceived weakness of his gaming character mirrored his own feelings of insecurity, leading to repeated provocation:

*“Yes, my character isn’t as strong as theirs (perpetrators). It feels weak and less powerful now, which is why it’s not very impressive (to them).”*

Similarly, Caliph (pseudonym) reflected on how underperforming in games led to a pattern of self-deprecating thoughts. The criticism he received from teammates further reinforced his negative self-perception:

*“I often engaged in self-deprecating thoughts. I would put myself down so much that it eventually made me feel low and led to stress.”*

These narratives suggest that, for some informants, that fragile self-esteem manifests through deep self-doubt, which discourages victims from seeking help. This finding aligns with previous research [29], which emphasizes that low self-esteem increases exposure to cyberbullying, whereas healthy self-esteem acts as a protective shield. The analysis also indicated that irrational beliefs defined as rigid, absolutist and unrealistic thinking patterns distort a victim's perception of reality and negatively influence their emotional well-being [30]. Amirah (pseudonym) demonstrated a clear example of "black-and-white" thinking. Despite having contact with friends via telephone, she maintained an irrational belief that she was entirely isolated:

*“I really am alone. One hundred percent alone because I don’t talk to anyone. Even with my friends, we only communicate over the phone. So physically, it’s just me and myself.”*

This perception of being "one hundred percent alone" suggests a cognitive distortion that contributes to social exclusion, creating a psychological environment where cyberbullying can persist unchallenged. This is consistent with findings by Sabanci and Cekic [17], which suggest that irrational thinking patterns significantly increase the likelihood of becoming a target for cyberbullies. This finding highlights the importance of strengthening counselling services in universities, particularly in addressing self-esteem and cognitive distortions through targeted psychological interventions.

### 3.1.3. Personality factors

Within the psychological dimension, personality traits which include extraversion and introversion were found to significantly contribute to the risk of cyberbullying victimization. While these two traits represent opposite ends of the personality spectrum, both were shown to create unique vulnerabilities in the online environment. Extraverted personality traits, characterized by sociability, expressiveness and an openness to interacting with others were found to influence vulnerability to cyberbullying [31]. In this study, informants who displayed high levels of extraversion often faced risk. For instance, Amirah (pseudonym) described herself as naturally carefree and approachable, which led her to readily accept friendship requests from strangers. However, this extravert personality was later exploited by a perpetrator who used these social connections to monitor and stalk her online presence. She narrated:

*"I used to be carefree and very friendly, always open to making new friends. But then someone used their friends' accounts to stalk me and check my social media activity."*

Similarly, Emma (pseudonym) demonstrated extraverted tendencies through her ease in sharing personal information on social media, which inadvertently exposed her to harassment. These accounts illustrate how sociability and high levels of self-disclosure can increase exposure to online risks. This is consistent with earlier studies [16], [32], which suggest that the outward-reaching nature of extroverts may increase their likelihood of becoming targets. In contrast, introverted traits such as reserved behavior and cautious social engagement also presented specific vulnerabilities. Caliph (pseudonym), who identifies himself as an introverted, intuitive, feeling, judging (INFJ), based on the MBTI framework [33] reported that his introverted nature made it difficult for him to articulate thoughts quickly. This communication struggle was exploited by perpetrators to humiliate him online:

*"I am an INFJ... I find it hard to quickly articulate or form complete sentences. Because of this, they (perpetrators) targeted me, looking for my mistakes and mocking me."*

These findings align with previous study [34], which indicate that non-extroverted individuals are often more susceptible to victimization. The reserved interaction and limited assertiveness typically associated with introversion can be misinterpreted as a lack of defense, thereby inviting online harassment. Therefore, these findings suggest that a student's personality, whether extroverted or introverted, plays a role in the informants' vulnerability to cyberbullying. Extroverts tend to be targeted due to their high level of online activity, whereas introverts are exploited because bullies perceive them as easier targets who lack defense [32].

### 3.2. Social Factors

Figure 2 illustrates the role of social factors in shaping the experiences of cyberbullying among university students. These factors were categorized into four sub-themes: peers, family, social media and online gaming, reflecting important social contexts related to cyberbullying victimization.

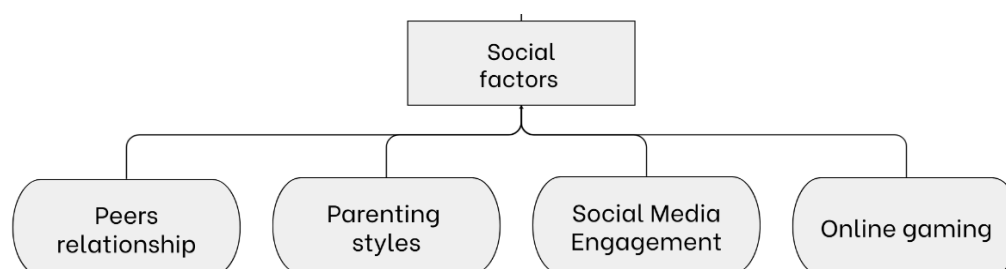


Figure 2. Social factors that influence cyberbullying among university students

### 3.2.1. Peers' relationships

Within the social dimension, peer relationships emerged as one of the social factors in cyberbullying experiences, encompassing peer dependency and social exclusion. The findings suggest that toxic peer environments may heighten vulnerability to cyberbullying. Notably, some victims remained dependent on peers who engaged in cyberbullying due to perceived social benefits. For example, Badrul (pseudonym) continued interacting with cyberbullying peers because he depends on them for online gaming information.

*"I felt that I needed to keep playing (with them) because they (the perpetrators) were sharing useful tips and updates about the game, so I thought it was important to continue participating."*

This suggests that for some university students, the desire to remain part of a specialized community (such as gaming) outweighs the need to protect their emotional well-being, leading to prolonged exposure to abuse. Social exclusion and breach of trust by peers were also identified as critical factors that increased vulnerability to cyberbullying based on the findings. Damia (pseudonym) described how being marginalized and ignored in physical group settings eventually translated into online ridicule:

*"They excluded me. Even after I tried to reconcile, they ignored me... This made it easier for them to mock me online."*

Furthermore, Amirah (pseudonym) became a victim when her friends shared her personal matters with outsiders. This breach of privacy where information was spread across different social circles over several years. These narratives suggest that peers can actively influence an informant's risk of becoming a cyberbullying victim through marginalization and the exploitation of personal information. These findings are consistent with previous research [35], [36], who emphasized that while positive peer interactions can serve as a protective buffer, negative peer dynamics such as exclusion and betrayal are strong predictors of victimization. It is crucial for university support systems to recognize that "toxic" peer circles can trap victims in a cycle of harassment that is difficult to break due to social dependency. This indicates that universities should promote positive peer environments through peer-mentoring programs and awareness campaigns to reduce exclusion and harmful peer dynamics.

### 3.2.2. Parenting styles

Within the social dimension, parenting style was identified as a significant factor contributing to an individual's vulnerability to cyberbullying. Parenting style refers to the specific methods and approaches parents use in child-rearing, including emotional support, disciplinary practices and communication patterns. The analysis of the participants' narratives revealed that strict or authoritarian parenting was perceived by informants to influence their online behaviors and susceptibility to becoming targets. The findings suggest that authoritarian parenting, characterized by high control and rigid rules, can lead to a breakdown in trust and communication. For instance, Caliph (pseudonym) described his parents as particularly strict, especially regarding religious matters. He perceived their advice as manipulative and felt blamed for his problems, which ultimately led him to seek refuge in online gaming:

*"My parents were very strict. They often gave advice in a manner I felt was manipulative, blaming me for incidents and making me reluctant to share my problems, which led me to engage in playing games."*

Similarly, Emma (pseudonym) reflected on the strictness of her parents regarding social media usage. Despite the restrictions imposed by her mother, she continued to use social media and occasionally defied their advice, creating a gap in open communication. These narratives illustrate how authoritarian and controlling parenting, which often lacks supportive guidance [37], can impede the development of effective coping mechanisms and assertive communication skills. When students feel they cannot turn to their parents for support or fear being blamed, they are more likely to hide their online struggles, thereby increasing their risk of prolonged cyberbullying victimization. These findings are consistent with previous study [38], which highlight that a lack of supportive parenting is a strong predictor of an individual becoming a victim in the digital landscape.

### 3.2.3. Social media engagement

Within the social dimension, engagement with social media platforms plays a significant role in an individual's susceptibility to cyberbullying. High levels of online visibility and the use of publicly accessible accounts may increase the risk of being targeted by perpetrators. The analysis reveals how the nature of

content sharing and privacy management are critical factors in the victimization process. The study found that maintaining public profiles often leads to unwanted attention. Informant Emma (pseudonym) shared that her initial lack of privacy restrictions on social media made her more vulnerable, prompting her to take proactive measures later for her safety:

*“Previously, my Instagram account was public, but I later made it private and removed unknown followers for safety reasons. I also limited the number of public posts on TikTok.”*

This adjustment in privacy settings highlights the ongoing struggle for university students to balance social connectivity with personal safety. Furthermore, the findings illustrate that content shared with benign or positive intentions can be maliciously appropriated by others. Emma (pseudonym) further expressed how her online presence, which was intended to showcase her interests, was misused by perpetrators, leading to a profound sense of insecurity:

*“I took pictures because I enjoyed capturing beauty, not to provoke anyone. Yet, someone exploited them, which made me feel uncomfortable and unsafe.”*

These narratives underscore a critical ramification of social media engagement that the "digital footprint" of a student may be exploited regardless of their original intent. This finding indicates that frequent social media use and high visibility are associated with a higher prevalence of bullying victimization [39]. These results suggest that for university students, digital literacy must extend beyond technical skills to include a deeper awareness of how their online presence can be manipulated by others. This also underscores the importance of integrating digital citizenship education into university programs to enhance students' awareness of online safety and responsible content sharing.

#### 3.2.4. Online gaming

Results show that online gaming was identified as a significant context in which cyberbullying occurs among university students. These virtual environments, which facilitate constant interaction between known peers and anonymous players, can become spaces where harassment occurs. The findings indicate that the competitive nature of these games frequently leads to verbal abuse and emotional distress. The study found that harassment in gaming often stems from a lack of tolerance for perceived weakness or poor performance. Badrul (pseudonym) reported that engaging in online gaming with friends frequently exposed him to verbal ridicule, particularly concerning his skill level:

*“He reported that while engaging in online gaming with friends, they frequently experienced verbal harassment. Peers would ridicule him, often making comments about his perceived lack of skill or weakness.”*

Similarly, Caliph (pseudonym) shared that his long-term involvement in online gaming since the age of 13 has exposed him to persistent provocation. He noted that losing a game often triggers the use of offensive language by others, which results in significant psychological frustration:

*“I started playing online games at age 13 with both friends and strangers. When my group loses, I would be provoked with offensive language, causing stress and frustration.”*

These experiences illustrate that online gaming environments provide a unique social context where aggressive behavior may be normalized in some gaming contexts. This aligns with the finding supports by previous study [40], which identified online gaming as a common setting for cyberbullying. It highlights that gaming platforms may become high-risk environments where competitive dynamics and unmet group expectations contribute to negative online interactions. These findings highlight the need for digitally supported preventive and counselling interventions that strengthen students' psychosocial well-being, positive values, and resilience through character education [41].

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sought to investigate the determining factors of cyberbullying victimization among university students. Analysis of this study indicates that the informants' victimization was influenced by a complex interplay of factors, grouped into two main themes consisting of psychological and social factors. The psychological dimension includes behavioral patterns, cognitive tendencies and personality traits, whereas social factors encompass peer relationships, parenting styles, social media engagement and

online gaming environments. Overall, the results suggest that cyberbullying victimization in this study cannot be attributed to a single cause but arises from the dynamic interaction between individual vulnerabilities and contextual social factors. Recognizing these complexities highlights the necessity for comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies within the university setting. However, this study is subject to several limitations. The small number of informants may limit the transferability of the findings and the data were based on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to bias. Additionally, the focus on undergraduate students within the Malaysian context may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or settings.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that universities and policymakers implement comprehensive strategies to reduce the risk of cyberbullying victimization among students. Socially, interventions could include peer-mentoring programs and workshops that promote positive peer interactions, enhance digital etiquette, and build resilience against online harassment. Universities should offer digital literacy programmes on privacy management and responsible content sharing to promote safe social media use and reduce cyberbullying risks. For research advancement, future studies should consider quantitative or mixed method approaches to validate these findings and explore broader patterns of cyberbullying risk factors among university students. Collectively, these recommendations may contribute to the development of a more holistic framework that addresses both psychological and social factors, ultimately promoting safer online environments and reducing cyberbullying victimization.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

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D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

### INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

### ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research (Reference No. UTMREC-2025-110).



## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [MM]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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