



EXPERT CONSENSUS: DISSECTING BULLYING ATTRIBUTES IN KLANG VALLEY SCHOOLS, MALAYSIA

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 21.01.2026

Revised date: 15.02.2026

Accepted date: 26.03.2026

Published date: 31.03.2026

To cite this document:

Chua, S. S., Kuek, F., & Ching, T. H. (2026). Expert Consensus: Dissecting Bullying Attributes in Klang Valley Schools, Malaysia. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 8(29), 1348-1370.

Abstract:

Bullying remains a significant global concern that negatively affects the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of students. This leads to psychological distress, low self-esteem and an increased risk of suicidal ideation among adolescents in Malaysia. Despite growing awareness of bullying, the prevalence of bullying continues to rise, which highlights the need for a deeper understanding of its underlying determinants. This study aims to identify and prioritise the key determinants of bullying among Malaysian primary and secondary school students. A qualitative exploratory design employing the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was utilised to systematically identify and prioritise expert consensus on bullying determinants in school. Data were collected from five experienced school counsellors with over 15 years of professional practice in the Klang Valley. Structured NGT sessions were conducted to elicit, discuss and rank the most significant contributing factors of bullying behaviour. The findings reveal seven key determinants of bullying behaviour, which are mental health, family dynamics, peer pressure with social dynamics, educational environment, insufficient awareness, inadequate character education, and social media influence, prioritised as the core seven determinants of bullying factors in primary and secondary schools in Klang Valley. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence grounded in expert ecological insights on the contextual determinants of bullying within the Malaysian educational context. This empirical context offers a prioritised, targeted prevention framework and practical intervention strategies for policymakers, educators, and parents to develop effective anti-bullying policies and programmes.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.829080 **Keyword:**

Bullying, Bullying Determinants, Expert Consensus, Malaysian Schools, Nominal Group Technique (NGT),



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Introduction

Bullying remains a significant public health and educational concern globally, exacerbated by new technologies and the digital environment. Statistics revealed that 130 million students, 1 in 3 students aged 13 to 15, have experienced this social scourge (OHCHR, 2023). Moreover, national statistics indicate that 16.2% of adolescents in Malaysia experience bullying, which is significantly associated with psychological distress and suicidal thoughts (NHMS, 2017; Liew et al., 2023). Countries in the Southeast Asia region also reported high rates of bullying victimisation, with 20.7% of students in Indonesia, and at least half of students in Myanmar and Nepal having experienced one or more episodes of bullying in the previous 30 days. Cyberbullying also showed an increasing trend based on Prati (2025), by using HBSC data from over 40 countries from 2013 to 2022, showing that post-pandemic cyberbullying rose among 11 and 13-year-old adolescents.

The World Health Organisation asserts that childhood bullying is a major public health concern in view of the serious educational, physical and mental health consequences during both childhood and adolescence. Victims of bullying are more likely to skip school, perform poorly on tests, and suffer from anxiety, fear and emotional distress, sleeplessness, psychosomatic pain, and other detrimental effects which have tragically led to suicide among young people in different parts of the world. Based on Vadukapuram et al. (2024), the US National Survey data found that 21,000 bullied children were nearly twice as likely to miss school days and be disengaged from school. Even in adulthood, victims experience the far reaching effects of bullying, in recurring depression and unemployment in adulthood, which is hardly surprising as some studies have established a significant association between bullying among children and adolescents and depression, nonsuicidal self-injury, sleep loss, reduced health-related quality of life, poorer rates of graduation from high school and long term mental health problems (Bhatia, 2023).

Literature Review

While numerous incidents of bullying have been reported among young people in the West, it is observed that Asian societies are not spared from this scourge. It has been identified as the most prevalent form of low-level violence occurring in schools. Thus, bullying in schools poses a serious risk to children's healthy development (Rigby, 2010; Rigby, 2012) and may adversely affect victims' future lives (DeVoe, Kaffenberger and Chandler, 2005). Revealing studies have uncovered the prevalence of bullying among school children in Malaysia including its

detrimental effects on their mental health. Bullying is widespread issue in Malaysian secondary schools, with approximately 16.2% of students experiencing bullying and 79.1% involved in bullying dynamics as perpetrators, victims, or bully-victims (LeeAnn Tan et al., 2019). In fact, a study revealed that there are high levels which is 79.1% among Malaysian secondary school students involved in bullying with significant associations found in individual, peer, and school domains (Sabramani et al., 2021).

Moreover, the Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale (MDPVS) administered in a Selangor high school showed that social manipulation bullying stood at 25.0% while bullying actions constituted the remaining 75% which is property attacks (25.4%), physical victimization (24.9%) and verbal victimization (24.7%). (Abdalqader et al., 2018). In a cross-sectional study consist of 207 students in Kuantan, bullying is significantly associated with psychological disturbances related to stress and anxiety among Malaysian secondary school children (Isa, 2021). Moreover, The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2017 showed that 16.2% of Malaysian adolescents experienced bullying, and a significant association was found between bullying and increased rates of suicide attempts among school-going adolescents in Malaysia. Bullied students were nearly five times more likely to attempt suicide compared to their peers. That the suicide attempt rate among adolescents rose from 6.8% to 6.9% compared to the findings yielded in NHMS in 2012 was concerning, especially when bullying was reported to be one of the factors for adolescent suicide attempts (Liew et al., 2023). In 2022, NHMS indicated 8.6 % of students aged 13 to 17 had experienced bullying, having three times higher risk of depression or self-harm. (New Straits Times, 3 December). According to Liew et al. (2023), bullying is highly associated with serious psychological impact such as depression and anxiety which increased the risks of suicide attempts of 4.8 times. These underscoring the urgent need for preventive measures research to inform the development of effective strategies for long-term social, educational and structural structural solutions to address the bullying phenomenon.

In recent studies by Sabramani et al. (2021), the most common type of bullying was verbal bullying (50.9%), followed by physical bullying (33.6%), relational bullying (10.6%) and cyberbullying (4.9%). A similar pattern was shown in bullying victims, with the most common type of bullying being verbal bullying (38.8%), followed by relational bullying (30.6%), physical bullying (20.7%), and cyberbullying (9.9%). Verbal bullying has resulted in a high incidence of school absenteeism. A study children in schools experienced verbal bullying practices like abusive language, mocking, and teasing (Ang et al., 2018). Kurniati et al. (2023) found that verbal bullying among elementary school children led to psychological problems, sleep disorders, socialising difficulties, and diminished academic performance. In view of the finding that victims' mental health may be severely affected, school authorities certainly need to be vigilant and take urgent action as a study found that this form of bullying can occur at any time or place, including both primary and secondary schools (Muluk et al., 2021). Appropriate action taken can prevent victims of bullying from developing the fear of attending school, becoming resentful and potentially becoming perpetrators themselves.

In physical bullying, a UNESCO report using data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) and the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study (HBSC) defines physical bullying as being kicked, shoved, pushed, hit, hurt, or locked inside. It also involves having personal belongings taken or destroyed, stolen, or being forced to complete tasks. Another study defines physical bullying behaviours as beating, kicking, throwing paper, and stealing personal belongings (Ang et al, 2018). Moreover, according to GSHS and the

HBSC reports, it is found that 56% of elementary and 65.3% of secondary school students experienced physical bullying. Drawn from comprehensive nationwide studies in a cross-sectional survey of 677 participants from 23 secondary schools, physical bullying emerges as the most dominant form with significant variations by gender and age (Abdul Hamid et al, 2023).

The New Strait Times (1 November 2023) reported a total of 9,207 bullying cases in schools nationwide from 2021 to October 2023. In the report, Deputy Education Minister Lim Hui Ying acknowledged that 326 cases were reported in 2021, 3,887 cases in 2022, and 4,994 cases from January to October 2023. Media groups have also raised awareness of bullying in schools, sparked by this disturbing trend and disconcerting viral social media videos like the video of the slapping of a 15 year old victim by two girls, motivated by jealousy, in Perak high school. In that video, the victim was told not to cry before each slap, while she was seen wiping away her tears during the incident (The Star, 26 June 2024).

On top of that, according to UNESCO (2014), psychological bullying encompasses verbal and emotional abuse, as well as social exclusion. It is defined as undesirable teasing, calling unpleasant names, intentional exclusion of victims from activities, complete ignorance, and being the target of untruths or malicious rumours. Uba et al. (2010) found that psychological bullying is more common than physical bullying. Another report revealed that the most common non-physical forms of bullying included teasing, stealing, taking money, isolating others, and excluding peers from social groups. (The Malay Mail, 2018). Moreover, GSHS and the HBSC reported that 95.8% of secondary school students and 82.7% of primary school students were psychologically bullied. NHMS (2019) reported that 424,000 children in Malaysia were victims, and 9.5% of them were between 10 and 15 years. These findings suggest that lower secondary students are particularly vulnerable to being bullied in one form or another. Strategies would need to be formulated to ensure that the school environment is safe for children and teenagers to thrive and fulfill their potential.

Cyberbullying is defined as mocking or humiliating others by sending emails, texts, posting on social media, participating in instant chats, or creating website images, making fun of others. It also refers to being treated cruelly or unpleasantly through cell phones or on social media platforms. (UNESCO, 2014). The Committee on the Rights of the Child considers bullying, including cyberbullying, as a form of violence. The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recognises cyberbullying as a form of abuse affecting girls almost twice as much as boys, both as victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying. Although the prevalence of cyberbullying is still relatively low compared to other forms of school violence and bullying, it is still a concerning issue. A report stated that in seven European countries, the proportion of children aged 11 to 16 years who had experienced cyberbullying while using the Internet had increased. Alarmingly, the incidence of bullying increased dramatically from 7% in 2010 to 12% in 2014 (Mascheroni and Cuman, 2014). Without intervention, the number is expected to increase now that ubiquitous computing has become embedded in all spheres of life. Cyberbullying, with its wider reach, produces even more detrimental effects on victims who are unable to cope with the relentless harassment. According to reports, desperate victims, especially teenagers, have resorted to taking extreme measures, like suicide. A Canadian teen killed herself at home after being subjected to severe cyberbullying in 2012 (Kemal Vali, 2016), and in 2013, a 14-year-old Italian girl jumped from her bedroom window after being persistently cyberbullied when her video was viral on Facebook by cyberbullies (Nadeau, 2013).

In Malaysia, cyberbullying is widespread, facilitated by pervasive computing. Findings revealed that among 28 countries, Malaysia was ranked sixth in the world and second among Asian countries in cyberbullying. (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). Besides, Malaysia ranked second in Asia for cyberbullying among youths in 2020. Moreover, 28% of teenagers reported being victims, 43% of whom were bullied via personal messaging applications and three out of ten young people in Malaysia have become cyberbullying victims. In view of the widespread use of social media platforms, cyberbullying has certainly become an issue that needs to be urgently addressed in Malaysia. Like in other countries, victims unable to bear cyberbullying often resort to extreme measures. In May 2020, a 20-year-old teenager committed suicide by hanging herself after receiving negative comments on her TikTok videos that had gone viral on Facebook (Nortajudin, 2020). In 2019, a 16-year-old girl jumped from the roof of a building after creating a poll vote for her death (Fullerton, 2019). One of the most tragic cases of cyberbullying in Malaysia happened in 2019 in the remote district of Padawan, Sarawak. A teenager who held an online suicide poll was discovered dead hours later (Dawum, 2019).

Bullying Trends in Malaysia in 2021-2025

The COVID-19 epidemic caused significant changes in bullying in Malaysia between 2021 and 2025, with cyberbullying becoming the most prevalent form during this period. Adolescent victimization rates for cyberbullying varied from 13.7% to 38.9%, which is significantly higher than the 13.1% reported in pre-pandemic baseline data from 2017 (Fadhli, 2022). The pandemic's effects went beyond its prevalence from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic which correlates between cyberbullying and depression more than tripled, indicating the cumulative impact of social isolation, essential online learning, and the loss of offline support systems. Although verbal (51% increased to 56%) and physical (27 to 37%) forms of bullying predominated over relational (12 to 40%) and cyber (5 to 13%) forms in pre-pandemic assessments, traditional bullying remained widespread, with 79.1% of secondary students involved as perpetrators, victims, or bully-victims when measured comprehensively in Malaysia (Khong et al., 2023).

Cybervictimization has a double higher risk of anxiety and psychological distress, which is formed by intensive weekend social media, frequent peer conflicts with younger adolescents and those experiencing academic pressure in full-boarding schools. (Vikneswaran et al., 2023). Therefore, Malaysian school-aged adolescents faced escalating cyberbullying exposure, causing a rising trend in psychological impact. After the 2020-2025 post-pandemic period of school closures, driven by increased smartphone use, online anonymity, and low self-esteem. Cyberbullying, alongside physical forms, impacts youth mental health significantly and prompts government initiatives in the Anti-Bullying Bill 2025.

Besides that, recent national data from KPM's disciplinary database reveals that bullying cases increased from 6528 in 2023 to 7681 in 2024, with 1992 cases occurring in primary schools and 5,689 in secondary schools (Astro Awani, 27 August 2025). 160 bullying cases involving both physical and online bullying, with 78 % of victims aged between six and seventeen. Furthermore, more than 14,000 bullying cases have been reported annually in Malaysian primary and secondary schools since 2019. 160 bullying cases, covering both physical and online bullying, with 78 per cent of victims aged between six and 17. (The New Straits Times, 3 December 2025).

According to an IPSOS survey in Malaysians' Perception and Attitude Towards Bullying, a 2025 national parent survey indicated that victims who choose not to disclose experiences or formally report their cases result in substantial underreporting and decrease the data visibility at the school and family levels. Moreover, due to insufficient reporting on SSDM data on cyberbullying, relational or emotional bullying, the substantial underreporting in research studies creates a systemic data gap of a comprehensive national prevalence survey between 2023 and 2025. This mismatch between recorded cases and the broader experiential reality underscores the need for evidence-based prevention and intervention approaches, such as expert consensus studies and values-based character education, to provide a clearer understanding of bullying attributes for targeted prevention and intervention strategies in Malaysian school settings. This finding was startling, given that religious and moral education is given much emphasis in the curriculum.

Generally, awareness of cyberbullying among Malaysians is relatively low, leading to a lack of policy enforcement in schools and urgency in prevention programmes. Despite the severity of cyberbullying, Malaysia lacks specific laws addressing bullying, both in schools and online. Nevertheless, Malaysia's current legal framework is insufficient to shield kids from cyberbullying (Nurulhuda et al., 2022). Therefore, special provisions should be included for the protection of children from cyberbullying, considering that young people are now highly dependent on digital technology which provides more exposure to cyberbullying (Benjamin et al., 2023).

School bullying among school-aged children is also on the rise in Malaysia, creating an alarming issue that undermines the goals of the National Education Philosophy (NEP) on value inculcation and cultural elements among school children. Determining the underlying causes of bullying is therefore crucial and collective action must be developed and implemented to address this social ill. Although existing literature highlights multiple determinants, these factors remain fragmented and lack prioritisation within the Malaysian context. Therefore, Malaysian schools must play an active role in curbing bullying. Undeniably, bullying in schools goes against the objectives of the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM 2013-2025), which aim to instill good values in students. Treating bullying solely as a disciplinary issue and imposing punishment on the bullies will not address the root cause of the problem. In all its forms, bullying constitutes a major social problem that needs to be tackled holistically, with the involvement of policymakers, the school, and the community with follow-up measures, including guidance and counselling. In contrast, vital measures take time to be effective.

Therefore, recent statistics highlight higher rates of school bullying nationwide, which underscore the necessity for research on the underlying causes. A thorough examination of bullying in schools is the starting point for formulating effective measures to curb the issue. Although numerous studies have examined the prevalence and impact of bullying, existing research in Malaysia has largely focused on statistical trends. Limited attention is given to examine practitioner determinants from practitioner perspectives within Malaysian primary and secondary schools on bullying prevalence, particularly from experienced school counsellors who manage bullying cases within school environments. The absence of prioritised, context-specific determinants limits the development of targeted and effective intervention strategies.

Furthermore, bullying is a multi-factorial phenomenon influenced by individual, family, peer, institutional, and societal factors, requiring a more holistic and context-specific understanding. Hence, this highlights a critical gap in systematically identifying and prioritising key determinants of bullying based on expert consensus within the Malaysian educational context to support the development of targeted intervention strategies. Therefore, this gap necessitates a structured approach, such as NGT, to generate and prioritise expert-driven insights. From an ecological standpoint, bullying is understood as a complex phenomenon influenced by interactions among individual, relational and environmental systems. This study seeks to establish a contextually relevant and prioritized framework of bullying determinants by integrating practitioner expertise, hence enhancing the efficacy of preventative and intervention efforts in Malaysian schools.

Research Aims

To address this gap, this study employs a qualitative exploratory methodology by utilizing the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to systematically develop and prioritise expert informed determinants of bullying. By integrating practitioner expertise, this study aims to provide a contextually grounded and prioritised framework of bullying determinants to support more effective prevention and intervention strategies in Malaysian schools.

Specifically, this study has three main objectives:

1. To identify the key determinants of bullying in Malaysian schools based on expert perspectives.
2. To validate the identified determinants through structured expert discussion using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT).
3. To prioritise the key determinants of bullying in Malaysian schools based on expert consensus

Methodology

To achieve this, a qualitative exploratory design was employed, to explore and prioritise expert perspectives on the determinants of bullying in Malaysian schools. Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was used due to its structured approach in generating, discussing, and prioritising ideas through expert consensus in a structured and efficient manner. NGT is suitable for identifying and ranking key factors, as it minimises dominance bias and ensures equal participation among experts. Therefore, five professionals with over 15 years of experience in handling student behavioural and counselling cases in primary and secondary school education were purposively selected from schools in the Klang Valley to form the panel of experts. These qualified NGT members or experts were sampled and invited to participate in this study, as detailed in Table 2. Due to logistical constraints in gathering them in person, an NGT session was conducted virtually via Google Meet. Adapting Ven and Delbecq (1972)'s NGT practices in this study, two consecutive 2-hour sessions with a 30 minute break in between were conducted. During the sessions, the panel of experts brainstormed and generated many bullying attributes in Malaysian schools. Their ideas were first listed individually and then compiled and classified for discussion. From their cumulative experience, active discussions took place until they were ready to vote. The total item score and percentage were calculated based on each item's voting. 70% were required to reach an expert consensus. In this study, the list was reduced, and the final consensus was reached through the final expression of opinions from each participant. The entire process was recorded and transcribed accordingly for analysis for the study.

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) from Ven and Delbecq (1972) gained popularity in 1972 for its structured approach to eliciting qualitative information from target groups associated with a problem. NGT allows participants to identify, rank and rate critical problem dimensions without unbalanced involvement, preventing domineering participants from dominating group discussions and identifying previously unidentified issues. The NGT has been used in empirical social science research examining education and health issues. Moreover, it has also been employed in specific educational research (Lomax & McLeman, 1984), evaluating market and management research (Boddy, 2012), nursing education (Thomas, 1983), meetings of religious groups (Bartunek & Murningham, 1984), among others.

The approach helps with problem identification, solution research, and prioritisation. It works especially well at generating nuanced opinions on controversial issues, where knowledgeable group members summoned might be unfamiliar with one another, and an equilibrium between vocal dominance and group members' standing is necessary. NGT typically consists of the following steps:

1. **Problem Statement:** The inherent issue to be investigated is stated clearly so that every NGT member understands it.
2. **Brainstorming:** Individuals work in silence to independently jot down answers to a prompt question. There will be no discussion at this point to ensure as many ideas or solutions are written down.
3. **Round Robin:** Each person contributes one suggestion to a large flip chart, which is then recorded. Discussion is still not permitted, but their completed work will be posted on the wall and visible to all. Participants are called to provide input until the group has generated a sufficient number of ideas.
4. **Notion Checks:** The NGT participants address each notion named on the list so that everyone agrees on the meaning of all the codes or notions.
5. **Voting:** Participants vote on a flipchart, identifying essential concepts and ranking their choices. Anonymous voting fosters genuine results. NGT records group processes and outcomes by capturing all inputs and authorising modifications on the flipcharts (Fox, 1989; Mustapha et al., 2022). List reduction and multivoting may be practiced until a final consensus is obtained)

Sampling

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is implemented with single cohorts or groups to facilitate effective communication according to the specific requirements of the research. According to Van de Ven & Delbecq (1971), the sample size is between 5 to 9 experts. Horton (1980) states that the sample is 7 to 10 people, while Harvey and Holmes (2012) assert that 6 to 12 participants would be sufficient to implement the NGT procedure. Table 1 lists the sample sizes used in previous research:

Table 1: Number of NGT Sample Sizes as Reported in Various Literature

Author	Sample
Van de Ven & Delbecq (1971)	5 – 9 experts/participants
Horton (1980)	7 – 10 experts/participants
Harvey & Holmes (2012)	6 – 12 experts/participants
Abdullah & Islam (2011)	7 – 10 experts/participants
Carney et al. (1996)	7 – 10 experts/participants

Given that a sample of 4 to 7 qualified participants is acceptable for forming an NGT panel of experts (Fox 1989; Roth et al., 1995), the NGT group for this research comprised 5 participants after some individuals declined the researchers' invitation to participate. According to table 1, the sample size of five experts is consistent with recommended NGT practices, which involve between 5 to 9 participants for focused consensus generation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that only experienced practitioners with relevant expertise were included. The process involved idea generation, round-robin sharing, clarification, and ranking of factors.

Table 2: Experts' Work Experience

	Schools serviced	Counselling Experience
Voter 1	SMK 1 (Suburban)	18 years
Voter 2	SMK 2 (Urban)	32 years
Voter 3	SMK 3 (Suburban)	20 years
Voter 4	SJKT 4 (Urban)	16 years
Voter 5	SJKT 5 (Suburban)	20 years

The five purposively selected experts from various educational localities had served in government schools for more than 15 years, meeting NGT's expert criteria. In this study, a 3-point rating scale was used to prioritise and rank experts' generated ideas. This simplified scale is used to promote clearer expert judgement and facilitate decision making within the educational and microsystem contexts. According to Delbecq et al., (1975) and Harvey & Holmes (2012), a simplified scale is widely accepted in NGT due to supportive fast decision making, cognitive load reduction, enhancing clearer differentiation between low, moderate and high priorities. Moreover, a 3-point scale prevents unnecessary complexity and avoids experts' force on overly fine distinctions that are unnecessary for consensus building. Hence, the 3-point scale is methodologically appropriate and consistent with standard NGT procedures for expert consensus scales in educational and psychological research.

In this NGT phase, the research enables experts to prioritise bullying factors by reaching consensus on the relative importance of each proposed solution, rather than measuring behaviours quantitatively and initiating bullying prevention strategies effectively. The structured nature of NGT enhances the credibility and reliability of the findings by ensuring equal participation and reducing potential bias in group discussions.

Data Analysis and Findings

After the NGT session was conducted, the recommendations and views of the experts were carefully examined. The researcher then formulated factors that contributed to bullying among students. Following a thorough analysis of the recommendations, the factors contributing to bullying in schools were identified. Table 3 lists the factors and characteristics.

Table 3: Factors Contributing to Bullying in Malaysia

Attributed Factor	Description
1 Mental Health Issues	Aggressive behaviour: Individuals with aggressive tendencies or a history of violence are more likely to engage in bullying. Low self-esteem: Compensate for their own feelings of inadequacy or to assert dominance. Psychological issues: Manifest disorders or antisocial behaviour.
2 Family Dynamics	Parental styles: Children who experience harsh discipline, inconsistent parenting, or exposure to domestic violence are at higher risk of becoming bullies. Family environment: A lack of emotional support or parental involvement can contribute to aggressive behaviour.
3 Peer Pressure of Social Dynamics	Peer pressure among peers and the desire to fit in Group dynamics and the need to assert dominance
4 Educational Environment	School climate: A negative school environment such as poor supervision or a lack of clear anti-bullying policies foster bullying. Teacher attitudes: Teachers who do not actively address bullying or show favouritism can unintentionally contribute to the problem. Inadequate support systems: Schools lacking proper support systems for victims of bullying may fail to address the issue effectively.
5 Insufficient Awareness, Knowledge and Regulations	Inadequate awareness: Insufficient education about the impacts of bullying and the importance of respectful behaviour. Inadequate preventive policies and incident handling SOPs, lack of training for teachers and awareness programs
6 Inadequate character education	The significance of moral education, instilling human and social values in schoolchildren, and character education are not sufficiently emphasised.
7 Social Media Influence	Exposure to violent or aggressive behaviour in media normalises such actions
8 Socioeconomic status	Socioeconomic status of children from different backgrounds
9 Cultural Norms and Attitudes	Cultural norms: Accepted standards of behaviour and social practices within a culture. Cultural values such as emphasis on traditional values of respect for authority and hierarchy, which discourage open discussion on bullying, enable bullying to happen. Societal norms: Societal attitudes towards aggression, power, and dominance

Table 3 presents the factors and their descriptions that contribute to bullying cases in Malaysia, which serve as a guideline for a structured process comprising idea generation and round-robin sharing during the NGT process. Based on the views of NGT experts, nine key determinants of bullying were identified. During the sessions, participants independently generated ideas, followed by group discussion to clarify and refine responses before ranking the determinants based on perceived importance. The data were analysed using aggregated scores to determine the relative importance of each determinant, with higher scores indicating greater consensus among participants. Consensus was determined based on aggregated ranking scores and agreement levels. Based on the NGT analysis, nine determinants of bullying were identified and prioritised based on expert ranking.

Table 4: Attributed Bullying Factors Based on Expert Consensus (Voters) In The Study

Items / Elements	V 1	V2	V 3	V 4	V 5	Total Item Score	Percentage	Rank	Voter Consensus
Mental Health Issues	3	3	3	3	1	13	86.67	2	Suitable
Family Dynamics	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Peer Pressure and Social Dynamics	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Educational Environment	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Insufficient Awareness, Knowledge and Regulations	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Inadequate Character Education	3	3	3	3	1	13	86.67	2	Suitable
Social Media Influence	3	3	3	3	3	15	100	1	Suitable
Socioeconomic Factors	2	1	1	1	3	8	53.33	3	Not Suitable
Cultural Norms and Attitudes	3	1	1	1	1	7	46.67	4	Not Suitable

Note: 3 = Agree; 2 = Neutral; 1 = Disagree.

Table 4 shows the aggregate agreement and assessment ratings for the bullying factors. A value of more than 70% was required for expert consensus (Dobbie et al., 2004; Deslandes et al., 2010; Mustapha et al., 2022). The expert approval data showed that seven items exceeded 70% expert consensus. These include family dynamics, peer pressure and social dynamics, educational environment, insufficient awareness and regulations, social media influence,

mental health issues, and inadequate character education indicated that these seven factors were significantly associated with bullying, while two factors showed negative associations.

Among these, family dynamics, peer influence, educational environment, awareness, and social media emerged as the most dominant determinants (100% consensus), indicating their critical role in shaping bullying behaviour in Malaysian schools. In contrast, socioeconomic status and cultural norms were excluded due to low consensus, suggesting that bullying transcends socioeconomic and cultural boundaries. These findings demonstrate that bullying is primarily influenced by relational and environmental factors rather than structural or demographic variables, highlighting the importance of microsystem interactions in understanding bullying behaviour.

Three experts disagreed that socioeconomic factors and cultural norms contributed to bullying, as these factors had less than 70% consensus and were excluded from the attribution of bullying factors. All panel members in the NGT in the study agreed that the seven-item components were acceptable, while two items may not account for bullying in secondary schools in Malaysia, suggesting that these two factors do not drive associations with bullying but are rather influenced by the seven factors suggested, as shown in Figure 1.

Hence, nine items in Table 3 have been prioritised to seven items (Table 4) for voting by the NGT panel in this study. During the voting and discussion, the majority of experts agreed that individual factors such as mental health, family dynamics, peers and social dynamics, educational environment, social media influence, bullying awareness, and instilling character education were of utmost importance. However, more than three experts disagreed that socioeconomic status and cultural norms and attitudes contributed to bullying in schools. Expert 2 argued that bullying occurred regardless of background. The incidence of bullying among students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds was equal to the incidence of bullying among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, it is unlikely to be related to bullying factors.

Besides, Expert 1 disagreed that respectful cultural norms aggravate bullying, arguing that they serve as protective factors. Respect for hierarchy and authority is emphasized in cultural norms, which may act as deterrents to bullying rather than being sources of bullying aggravation. In schools, these norms foster a respectful community that can help prevent bullying. Placing a hierarchy-focused approach combined with strong ethical values creates clear expectations for behaviour and prevents power abuse. According to expert 2, societal norms such as aggression, power and dominance are not inherently negative, and they may be valued for leadership, protection or survival. Bullying is not caused by norms, but rather by how individuals interpret and misuse them. School competitions and co-curricular activities are often held to provide a controlled and socially acceptable environment for the expression of aggression.



Figure 1: The Seven Attributed Factors of Bullying Based on NGT Experts' Consensus In The Study

Figure 1 shows seven bullying-attributed factors based on the highest consensus among the NGT experts. A high level of experts' agreement on these factors suggests they are more significant than other variables, as demonstrated through ranking.

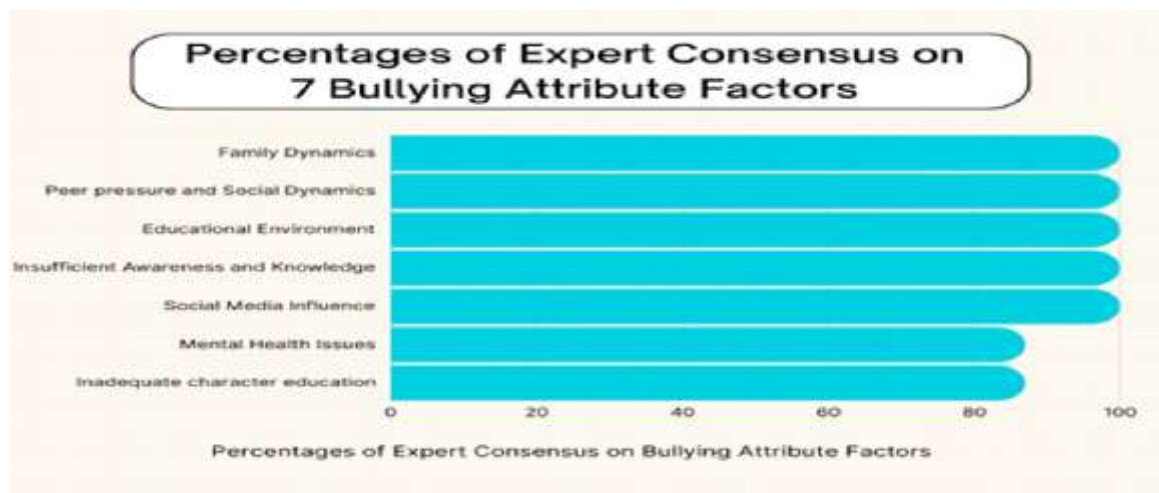


Figure 2: The Percentages of Seven Bullying-Attributed Factors Based On NGT Experts' Consensus In The Study

Figure 2 shows the percentages of experts' consensus on the seven bullying-attributed factors. A high level of expert agreement on these factors suggests they are more significant among the acceptable factors as demonstrated by the ranking.

Table 5: Ranking Of the Seven Bullying Attributed Factors in This Study

Elements	Ranking
Family Dynamics	1
Peer pressure and Social Dynamics	1
Educational Environment	1
Insufficient Awareness, Knowledge and Regulations	1

Social Media Influence	1
Mental Health Issues	2
Inadequate character education	2

Table 5 demonstrates the ranking of bullying attributed factors, showing each factor's relative significance and association. Based on the ranking results, significant factors associated with bullying in schools are identified as family dynamics, peer influence, educational environment, inadequate awareness, and social media influence which emerged as the most influential determinants of bullying behaviour among students and can be grouped into individual, family, school and societal categories.

Less significant factors associated with bullying include mental health issues and inadequate character education. Contrary to general assumptions, cultural attitudes and economic factors were not identified by the majority of experts as significant contributors to bullying among secondary school students in Malaysia. These findings suggest that both internal psychological conditions and external social influences play a critical role in shaping bullying behaviour. The results support an ecological perspective, demonstrating that multi-level interactions across individual, relational, institutional, and societal contexts influence bullying. Moreover, these prioritised determinants provide a structured basis for understanding bullying behaviour and inform targeted intervention strategies.

Discussion

The findings mentioned above and analysis of the NGT experts' consensus draw attention to the following aspects of Malaysian society and educational contexts relating to the bullying phenomenon among youths, whereby bullying behaviour is shaped by multiple interrelated determinants across individual, family, school and societal levels.

Family Dynamics

The family dynamics factor was ranked number 1 as agreed by the NGT in this study, compatible with findings yielded by previous studies. This indicates that both internal psychological conditions and external social environments play a critical role in shaping bullying behaviour. According to Haru (2023), familial factors contribute to bullying behaviour in students, especially those from less harmonious families. Children who experience violence or neglect at home may be more likely to bully others or become victims themselves. Therefore, to address the issue, all experts agreed that communication, parent-child bonding and parental environment were essential. Anger in children can be influenced by a lack of emotional support or parental involvement.

The family is a crucial and essential component of both society and community. Children who grow up in at-risk families are more likely to experience problems in later ages. Living in families experiencing violence, poverty, neglect and other conflicts (Pramesa & Ramalinggam, 2021), these children undergo traumatic experiences, such as abuse, poverty and lack of parental guidance during childhood (Frymier and Gansneder, 2001). Parents' parenting styles have a significant influence on shaping healthy development. Parental guidance is children's primary source of education until they start school; hence, it has a significant impact on children's learning through school and beyond (Ceka & Murati, 2016). Malaysian teenagers are at risk of becoming distressed and getting involved in negative activities such as gangsterism,

bullying, drug abuse and crime when facing various life challenges. To cope with life challenges, support is needed. However, an analysis of satisfaction with support showed that parents of adolescents did not provide sufficient emotional and esteem support to their children, compared to that given by their friends. Teenagers are more vulnerable and need their parents' emotional support to persevere to face challenges associated with adolescence (Hashimah, 2007). Hence, peer pressure or negative influence in schools might trigger bullying incidents.

Furthermore, bullying can also result from authoritarian parenting styles, particularly among parents who are inconsistent in their parenting, use harsh discipline, or are among children witnessing domestic abuse. Research indicates that bullying behaviour in teenagers is associated with authoritarian parenting, while democratic parenting encourages responsibility and adherence to social norms (Chairunnisa et al., 2023). It has also been found that parenting style significantly influences bullying behaviour in elementary school children, as less parental involvement increases the risk of bullying (Meinita et al., 2023). A parent is the child's first teacher and should remain the best teacher throughout the child's life, as parents play an important role in shaping behaviour (Pramela & Ramalingam, 2021). The lack of strong positive relationships with parents increases involvement with bad company (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2011).

In view of the findings of the present research and those of previous studies, warm, supportive parenting, parents' beliefs against aggression and high communication levels correlate with lower bullying and victimisation levels among adolescents, impacting conflict resolution and problem-solving. Parental education has been highlighted to be important for prevention and intervention (Christina et al., 2017) as the effectiveness of measures may be hindered by interactions between parents and adolescents (Jessica and Adrienn, 2021). Hence, good parental guidance and communication, parenting styles, parenting involvement, and a warm and supportive home environment are crucial to curb bullying in school.

Peer Pressure

The consensus among experts was that bullying in schools was also influenced by peer pressure. All experts agreed that peer pressure was another factor contributing to bullying in schools. It is observed that peers' encouragement of bad behaviour leads to intense peer interactions, which is a major concern among school-aged children. Bullying others can be driven by the need to elevate oneself socially or to blend in with the group. Group dynamics can play a key role in bullying, often occurring in environments where hostility is accepted or even encouraged, such as gangsterism. Consequently, social issues like fights and socialist parties quickly surface, as pointed out by Jeff Tong (2014), which exacerbates the bullying problem. Consistent with previous studies, peer influence and family dynamics remain as significant predictors of bullying behaviour. However, this study uniquely prioritises these factors through expert consensus, providing a clearer hierarchy of influence.

Educational Environments

School climate plays an important role. Negative or unsupportive school environments, such as poor supervision, lead to bullying issues. Such environments, compounded by teachers who fail to take proactive measures against bullying or demonstrate partiality, may worsen the issue. When teachers do not respond appropriately to bullying, considering it to be a minor or non urgent issue, victims may not receive the adequate support they need in schools. Indeed, few

schools are well-equipped to manage bullying. In 2018, only 25% to 30% of schools had certified counsellors who were adequately prepared to deal with bullying cases (New Straits Times, 2023), and in 2024, the situation remained unchanged. When bullying is not properly addressed and when support is not readily available, victims' ability to deal with the problem is affected.

Insufficient Awareness, Knowledge and Regulations

Vague anti-bullying regulations facilitate bullying. It was found that students who identified certain behaviours as bullying did not know about anti-bullying structures, as there was insufficient deterrence due to rules not being implemented transparently. There was a lack of commitment from the authorities to stop the bullying. A study has highlighted that a commitment to promoting awareness against bullying and open communication regarding behaviour expectations is necessary to foster a positive psychosocial learning environment (Tay, 2023). The persistence of bullying is attributed to a lack of knowledge and instruction regarding the negative effects of bullying and the significance of respectfulness. Besides, due to the lack of readiness to combat bullying in schools, the standard operating procedure (SOP) or handling mechanism was seldom discussed or implemented. At the same time, teacher training deficiencies lead to ineffective measures in handling bullying-related issues in secondary school classrooms and environments. In the absence of the appropriate training and empowerment from the authorities, it is expected that bullying will continue unabated.

Effective support systems such as programmes for raising awareness and training are essential to reduce the incidence of bullying. The current anti-bullying campaign named 'Bye Bye Bully Malaysia' remains ineffective as it faces issues such as the lack of trained psychologists in the field, and financial constraints in implementation. Although the Parent Action Group for Education recommends that the Education Ministry allocate funds for this purpose and assign psychologists to problematic schools on a rotational basis, this recommendation has yet to be implemented.

Social Media

The emergence of social media has given rise to new channels for bullying, such as cyberbullying. Anonymity and high use of social media amplify the impact of bullying and exacerbate the difficulty of monitoring and control. School-aged children misuse social media as a medium to carry out bullying in the form of non-verbal behaviour (Haru, 2023). The Movement Control Order (MCO) implemented in Malaysia during 2020 and 2021, with online instruction increased students' Internet usage. As a result, excessive Internet usage has increased the exposure to inappropriate content like violence on websites. A study found that students are more vulnerable to negative online influences when parental supervision is lacking (Siti Khadijah, 2021). They are easily exposed to violence in online games or on television, which can inadvertently influence their bullying behaviour. They lose interest in learning, creating personal barriers that hinder student development and potentially lead to cyberbullying. However, according to Expert 3, while social media influences students in rural areas, their exposure is not as extensive and varied compared to students in urban areas, unlike in urban settings, where the frequency and risk of bullying-related violence are higher than in rural areas.

Mental Health Issues

Individual factors, such as poor mental health, have been linked to bullying. The NGT panel in this study highlighted the need to address mental health issues among students. Bullying is more common among certain students, with those with an aggressive personality or a violent past. Bullies might attempt to make up for their inferiority complex or project a sense of superiority due to low self-esteem. Psychological issues such as antisocial behaviour may trigger bullying. However, individual factors appear to contribute less to bullying than environmental factors such as family dynamics, peer pressure, school environmental factors and social media influence. Although these factors have a relatively weaker association with bullying actions based on experts' perspectives, Students with aggressive behaviour, low self-esteem and psychological issues certainly need to be identified so that proper forms of support could be given to them.

Inadequate Character Education

The present study found that lack of emphasis on moral values in schools was a dominant factor. This finding was startling given that the Malaysian school education is firmly rooted in religious and moral values. In relation to bullying among school students, numerous studies have highlighted the importance of character education, moral responsibility, and inculcation of human and social values in school students. Dipty Subba (2017) argues that schools are acknowledged as critical settings for character formation and value-based education, and teachers must foster moral education and develop students' moral character. A responsible and ethical generation that can make positive contributions to society must be raised in schools, and this requires addressing the absence of morals and values in school. However, based on the experts' consensus, the family environment plays a more significant role in addressing bullying than the emphasis on the school's teaching of moral values.

This finding on the key role of the family environment highlights the importance of active parental involvement in creating a harmonious family environment and building close relationships with their children. When children are brought up in a family environment that builds good character in children, it is argued they are less likely to be bullies. Hence, addressing the issue goes beyond formulating anti-bullying policies in schools and strengthening the teaching of moral values in the school curriculum, as parents will need to be made aware of their own conduct and the importance of developing anti-bullying behaviour in their children.

Cultural Norms and Attitudes

Based on expert consensus, cultural norms and attitudes, and socioeconomic factors were not found to be significant factors in bullying among school-aged children in secondary school. No relationship was found between cultural attitudes and bullying, as only 46.67% of experts agreed that it was a factor. In some school cultures, aggressive behaviour might be normalised, which can increase the likelihood of bullying. However, the NGT experts in the study were of the opinion that cultures that emphasise empathy and respect can promote a respectful community and lower the incidence of bullying. Hence, schools can help to prevent power abuse by setting clear expectations for behaviour. Societal norms such as aggression, power, and dominance, which may be valued for other aspects such as leadership, protection, or survival, and are useful in competitive sports and activities in school, such as competitions and

co-curricular activities, would need to be reexamined and clarified to help students display appropriate values in context.

In schools with rigid social hierarchies, bullying may be more prevalent due to the normalisation of power dynamics, which discourages open discussions about bullying. It makes it difficult for victims to seek help from authorities or schoolteachers. However, in secondary schools, while students are required to abide by school rules and recognise the authority of the institution, discipline teachers and staff could offer more alternatives for students to seek help. Victims can seek help from counselors, teachers and parents. As suggested by Expert 3, schools can establish a complaint box to address bullying, enabling victims to express their concerns and seek help. Providing the victims with the necessary knowledge and guidance on how to react when faced with bullying is crucial. Enhancing anti-bullying programmes and educational interventions to improve students' understanding of bullying are key measures. While cultural norms and attitudes might contribute to bullying behaviour, bullying remains a complex human social issue that cannot be taken lightly.

Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic status may affect bullying. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds might face bullying due to their low economic status, while financial stress within families can exacerbate emotional issues leading to bullying behaviours. However, the consensus among the experts was 53.33%. While students from lower income families tend to be associated with bullying behaviour, higher income families' children would also engage in bullying. This finding suggests that other factors beyond socioeconomic status are at play, as bullying occurs across different socioeconomic backgrounds. Situational factors, such as social or environmental influences, might be more immediate causes of bullying than broader socioeconomic factors. Expert 2 attributed bullying to the home environment, explaining that bullies tend to be strongly influenced by the behaviour of the parents themselves, and there is no direct connection between socioeconomic factors and bullying. These findings demonstrate that bullying is primarily influenced by relational and environmental factors rather than structural or demographic variables, highlighting the importance of microsystem interactions in understanding bullying behaviour.

Discussion

Bullying in Malaysia has undergone a significant evolution, from physical and verbal acts to psychological and cyberbullying. These are hardly identified, hence controlling cyberbullying and psychological bullying through traditional disciplinary methods is more challenging due to subtlety and occasional integration into peer relationships and online interactions. This trend indicates that modern abuse must look into changing social and technological landscape context, reflecting a broader transformation in digital environments, surveillance methods and adolescent communication modalities. Although preventive measures have been introduced to diminish bullying in schools, additional research is still necessary to develop more effective public health strategies, striving to prevent bullying at an early stage, in reducing the prevalence of mental disorders among adolescents. (Han, Z.Y, 2025).

Moreover, ecological perspective from expert consensus, indicating that bullying cases are multi-factorial involving individual, relational, institutional and societal contexts. This study investigated the causes of bullying to provide informed solutions effectively, suggesting that

schools, organizations, communities, teachers and parents collaborate to address it. While it is imperative that moral education be given equal importance in schools alongside academic instruction to ensure that students not only achieve academic success but also grow into morally upright adults who can positively impact society. However, a rote-learning education system in Malaysia may limit the implementation of holistic, value-based prevention approaches, posing a challenge for school policies to curb bullying effectively. Bullying issue necessitates more than mere punitive measures, highlighting the need for greater emphasis on values-driven approaches and humanistic education from early childhood, in primary and secondary schools settings, to strengthen children's moral awareness and promote a positive school climate that discourages bullying.

Besides that, data indicates that bullying behavioral issues are directly associated with deficiencies in value internalisation and familial involvement. Therefore, family dynamics, including effective parenting and the provision of a supportive home environment, plays a vital role in parent-child relationships in early behavioural development, where limited emotional support and inconsistent guidance increase children's vulnerability to bullying. Similarly, peer interactions and school context influence behavioural norms when awareness and support systems are insufficient. Significantly, the identification of inadequate character education reveals a gap in fostering moral values, empathy and social responsibility within current educational practices. Hence, bullying prevention requires a shift from disciplinary-based approaches to a proactive value-based education, serving as preventive measures. In this regard, humanistic frameworks such as Jing Si Aphorism education, which emphasise compassion, gratitude, self discipline and filial values, offer a meaningful pathway for strengthening character formation and prosocial behaviour such as social responsibility. Therefore, addressing bullying effectively requires integrated efforts across family and school environments, grounded in value-oriented and humanistic educational practices.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by providing a context-specific and prioritised framework of bullying determinants based on expert consensus within Malaysian schools. By exploring bullying determinants within Malaysian context in addressing the root causes of bullying, sustainable moral development among future generations can be developed. This provides practical implications for policymakers, educators and school counsellors in designing targeted and evidence-based anti-bullying programmes. Humanistic and values-based practices that cultivate empathy, gratitude, self discipline and moral reflection, such as daily reflection, cooperative learning, peer support systems and mindfulness routines, which are shown to reduce aggressive behaviour and enhance emotional regulation should be implemented in schools. Moral development, parental engagement approaches and character cultivation, such as Jing Si Aphorism education, may offer a significant framework for fostering prosocial behavior and reducing aggressive tendencies among children.

Directions for Further Research

This exploratory study, which collected data from experts using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), can be further expanded through different research methods. Large scale qualitative studies can provide an in-depth understanding of the factors related to bullying and effective strategies to address it in Malaysian schools. Moreover, the effects of bullying can be explored through in-depth interviews with bullies, victims, teachers, school administrators, parents and

siblings of victims and bullies to obtain more insights into the phenomenon of bullying in Malaysian schools in the expanded Klang Valley. This raises awareness among the public, authorities and families to prevent it from occurring.

As this study was conducted in only several school settings, further studies can be conducted in other educational contexts such as preschool tuition centers, sports academies and higher learning institutions, where formal and informal education is provided to gain more insights into bullying and offer a broader understanding of bullying in Malaysia. Besides, the influence of the humanistic character education model emphasizing gratitude, empathy, self-discipline, and moral reflection can be explored to curb bullying effectively, such as the Jing Si Aphorism educational system used in specific Malaysian early childhood settings, which offers insights into how value-based practices can reduce aggression and enhance prosocial behaviour among children.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Malaysian Chinese Research Centre, Universiti Malaya, Experts from various schools in Klang Valley for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Modern Education (IJMOE)

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Dr Ching Thing Ho was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Chua Soo Sien handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Dr Florence Kuek Chee Wee contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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