University Campus Bullying on Digital Platforms in Bangladesh: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper investigates how university-based digital platforms in Bangladesh have transformed bullying into complex and insidious forms. Using a multimodal discourse analysis framework, the study examines the linguistic and non-linguistic markers that bullies employ on these platforms. It collected qualitative data on digital bullying through 43 interviews with victims and from their social media conversations to identify specific patterns of language and digital discourses. The findings reveal that the rising types of bullying comprise identity-based practices, interactional aggression, and technologically mediated manipulation. Additionally, bullies strategically use language such as sarcasm, humour, insults, and backhanded compliments with multi-modal features (memes, GIFs, emojis, and captions) to disguise hostility. The study provides useful examples with critical reflections and insights for university digital platform administrators, cybercrime investigators, and policymakers at institutional and governmental levels.

Keywords

Bullying on digital platforms, education in Bangladesh, impoliteness theory, multimodal discourse analysis, speech acts, university social spaces

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Introduction: The shift from physical to digital bullying

Bullying is a strategic abuse of power that involves a consistent and deliberate attempt by one or more people who are, or assumed to be, physically or socially stronger to assert control, harm, and degrade weaker individuals (Carter 1229; Campfield 2; Tran et al. 108; Phye and Sanders 4; Kowalski et al. 1073). It is found in physical spaces of educational institutions, such as hallways, classrooms, bathrooms, and playgrounds, during class sessions or breaks (Gourneau 118). Historically, bullying was easily identifiable through certain acts like pushing, shoving, kicking, spitting, mocking, hitting, name-calling, using harsh words, and stealing or damaging personal belongings, and was easy to spot and identify who the bully and the victim were (Phye and Sanders 5; Sabrin 12). Teachers, peers, and even sometimes bystanders could intervene and stop these behaviours before they went too far (Peebles 527). These incidents were often brief and confined within those physical spaces and ended when the bell rang. However, the digital age has drastically changed this landscape; bullying has shifted from physical spaces to online platforms (Campfield 4). Bullying is no longer confined to the walls of the classroom, and aggression does not disappear with bell rings but remains in the digital world, always accessible to anyone with a screen (Tran et al. 113). Digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Email, and Messenger have given bullies new ways to disguise aggression and enabled them to target victims anywhere at any time (Campfield 13; Bauman 12-13; Kowalski et al. 1107; Sabrin 13; Hamuddin et al. 194).

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is not always direct or explicit; it is indirect, subtle, and systematically disguised as humour or banter, making it difficult to detect, even when it happens in front of everyone. It is no longer just about physical or verbal abuse, direct insults or threats, but has evolved into a more sophisticated form of manipulation that incorporates sarcasm, backhanded compliments, coded language, exclusion, and multi-modal elements like memes, GIFs, visuals, hashtags, sexting, emojis, and many more (Kowalski et al. 1074; Peebles 527). These strategic approaches create a dangerous paradox as the bullying is visible yet difficult to call out, leaving victims feeling isolated, powerless, and humiliated (Campfield 28; Gourneau, 120). In an online group chat, if a student asks a question and others respond with sarcastic remarks such as "Oh, great question!," accompanied by an eye-rolling emoji, or "Here comes another Nobel prize-winning question!" with a clown emoji followed by laughter reactions, it is meant to mock, not appreciate. This can lead the recipient to feel humiliated and embarrassed in front of others (Sabrin 15). Similarly, memes and GIFs, two popular forms of visual communication on social media, are also being used to isolate and humiliate an individual (Ahmed et al. 28). For example, a

meme might be shared to mock someone's appearance and actions or might create a photoshopped GIF with embarrassing pictures or a swapped face. Figure 1 shows sample visuals, where human faces are placed on animals, and a human cartoon is shown drooling to portray the person as a pervert.

Figure 1: Examples of edited images and cartoons used for online mockery

While these images and GIFs may be shared with witty captions and seem like a harmless joke to others, repeated and intentional uses of them humiliate the person, hurt their dignity, and turn them into a public joke (Campfield 29-30). Together, these linguistic and non-linguistic elements on digital platforms are weaponised against victims, making it harder for them to escape the harassment and providing bullies with more control over the victims' psychological state. Through a multimodal discourse analysis framework, this paper aims to discern these elements and unfold the psychological tactics that bullies use to exert control while remaining unnoticed despite being visible to all.

The rapid growth of digital platforms has dramatically changed the landscape of bullying, particularly in university settings (Haider et al. 95; Ajis et al. 52). The digital turn of university social spaces has brought in a new form of harassment for students – cyberbullying – which knows no boundary related to space and time and involves repeated harmful behaviours, often in an anonymous way (Carter 1229). As there is no face-to-face contact or immediate consequences, the aggressor is empowered to be more pugnacious and relentless. Hamuddin et al. (192) explain that in most cyberbullying situations, there is a power imbalance, whereby the aggressor bullies people who are perceived to be weaker. Interestingly, some forms of cyberbullying may not be intended to harm right away, but arise from either linguistic play or cultural misunderstandings (194). Bauman (3-4) and Hamuddin et al. (194-195) observe that cyberbullying takes various forms, including flaming, imitating, harassing, spreading rumours, and excluding from social groups, with common sites being Facebook and Instagram. As Oravec (49) points out, these forms of cyberbullying are not only

pervasive but also persistent due to the rapid rise and widespread access to mobile phones and global Internet connectivity.

The effect of such bullying often exceeds that of traditional bullying since it is public and long-lasting (Ajis et al. 58). It not only affects students' mental well-being but also their academic performance, leading to a lack of concentration, poor grades, and even dropping out (Irma and Carolina 200). The psychological and academic impacts of cyberbullying are closely intertwined with its linguistic components. Haider et al. employed Dijk's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse social media chat data to show how bullies use targeted, harsh, and derogatory language to exploit and isolate victims (101). Likewise, Mutunga (31-35) shows, through Speech Act theory, that language is a face-threatening act in cyberbullying and erodes the dignity of victims. According to Yuan and Liu (85), on platforms like Facebook and TikTok, bullies rely heavily on direct insults and personal attacks for public humiliation. Instagram, on the other hand, often features visual elements with captions and derogatory comments to amplify emotional impact.

Farida et al. (70-73) present a semiotic approach to bullying discourses that explains how both verbal and non-verbal signs establish power relations. Negative comments, such as insulting phrases along with non-verbal features, help to amplify power dynamics. Ahmed et al. (27-28) analyse cyberbullying through memes as a multimodal form of online aggression, focusing on bullying memes in Bangla, the language of Bangladesh. According to them, the combination of text and images in memes makes it difficult to detect bullying, as the bullying message might not be clear when the text and images are examined separately.

Bullying shows notable differences when viewed from a gendered perspective. Girls often use tactics like spreading rumours, creating deep-fake or edited images, making fake profiles, or ignoring the victims, while boys are more direct and use physical or verbal aggression (Rosen and Schoenberger 200). Lee et al. (21) claim that female students tend to be more affected than their male counterparts. However, a study by Ajis et al. (56) among Malaysian students found no major differences in online victimisation based on gender.

Although all the studies concluded with similar findings that cyberbullying is common in university settings and affects students' mental well-being, several key gaps still exist in addressing its multidimensional nature. One of the least explored dimensions of cyberbullying is the linguistic one. While most of the previous studies focused on language usage alone, such as verbal attacks and their impacts, concerted linguistic and nonlinguistic patterns remain underexplored. As most of the digital bullying behaviour is expressed nowadays

through a variety of different multimodal elements, involving GIFs, visuals, videos, and audio, combined with humorous captions, this study attempts to explore these multimodal aspects in the context of cyberbullying among university students in Bangladesh.

Humour or bullying?

Now the question is: Should people stop joking and avoid humour? The boundary between humour and cyberbullying is often unclear. Comedians make fun of others all the time; does that mean they are bullying? The answer is: Context and intent matter. Humour itself is not a problem, but misused humour is. Humour is usually meant to be fun and shared; however, its impact changes when it is used to embarrass, exclude, or humiliate particular individuals. For instance, in Figure 2, a person's face has been placed into a dancing hot dog. Suppose this GIF is shared in a group post, without the person's consent, tagging the individual with captions like "Who wants a bite?" or "Anyone hungry?," and others respond with comments like, "X got extra meaty [drooling face emoji]," "I would rather starve [ha ha emoji]," or "Who ordered this shit?." This throws us into a dilemma: Is it friendly banter or bullying?

Figure 2: Digitally altered GIF used for cyberbullying

If the person being tagged laughs along, joins the conversation, and makes their own sarcastic remarks, then it is likely to be taken as just playful teasing or an inside joke among friends. The joke in this case is understood within a shared context, where all feel comfortable, and no one is attacked (Buglass et al. 288). However, when the person feels uncomfortable or embarrassed, finds the post inappropriate, or asks for the post to be removed, and the post-givers and the commenters refuse to do so and respond with follow-up comments, such as

"Ever heard of humour?," "Imagine ruining a joke because someone's fu**ing brain cannot take it," the joke turns into clear bullying – cyberbullying. Here, the intent shifts; it becomes mockery rather than humour, and the line between joking and bullying blurs. Humour is meant to be shared, to laugh with, not to laugh at. So, when it is weaponised to insult, embarrass, isolate, or silence someone, it turns into a systematic use of humour to disguise bullying (Mills and Carwile 279). Speech Act and Impoliteness theories help us to ascertain bullying here, while a multimodal discourse analysis facilitates our investigation of linguistic and non-linguistic markers of bullying on university students' online social platforms in Bangladesh.

According to Austin's Speech Act Theory, language has situational consequences and impacts on interlocutors; it carries the power to communicate intent or an illocutionary force. The same language can carry vastly different messages depending on its intent and context. In this study, Speech Act Theory is used to identify how cyberbullying texts act or serve functions such as insulting, ordering, or mocking. For instance, expressions like *gaadhaa* (donkey), dumb, *chhaagol* (goat), *bhondo* (fraud), *murkho/oshikkhito* (illiterate), bitch, joker, "No one cares about your opinion," "Keep quiet," "You're so annoying," "Just go away," and "Why do you always look so ugly?" may seem like harmless teasing among friends. But when repeatedly used with certain intentions, along with sarcastic GIFs, memes, tags, and emojis, they become a tool of systematic humiliation.

Speech Act Theory helps us reveal how bullies strategically manipulate utterances, such as questions to mock someone, commands to silence, and sarcastic comments to dominate, as forms of cyberbullying. For instance, comments like "disgusting clown" or "Don't talk to a dumbo" are not just language; they perform an act of humiliation and exclusion. Similarly, spreading rumours, insulting via group chats, or posting photos with insulting captions like "loser," "pathetic," and "piggy" performs a degrading speech act.

Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory further explicates this misuse and suggests that people sometimes use language deliberately to embarrass others, hurt their feelings, and damage their "face" (self-image), or intentionally violate norms of politeness through sarcasm, insults, visuals, mockery, threats, and exclusion (Bousfield and Culpeper 162). For example, a bully might comment under a victim's post, "You are such a pathetic loser," or might share distorted images with mocking captions in a university group chat to cause emotional harm. These are not accidental or habitual mistakes; rather, they are intentional and calculated (Toddington 2), often used to assert power, dominance, or superiority (Yadav 178-186).

As we conceptualise bullying markers on digital platforms and attempt to analyse them, we are intrigued by how their various forms, such as written text, audio messages, images, emojis, videos, and signs, work together to convey meaning in interaction. This is where multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) helps, which focuses on how different semiotic resources interact to convey meaning in social contexts (O'Halloran 1). It is more relevant to cyberbullying because online aggression is not expressed through words alone. Instead, it often combines various modes of expression and visuals to amplify aggression and humiliation. An emoji that may appear harmless at first can carry negative connotations depending on the context. A photo can be edited to make a person appear laughable, or a video can be captured in someone's vulnerable situation and spread with embarrassing captions, causing long-lasting harm to their self-esteem and reputation. Likewise, memes or GIFs created from someone's private photo, such as editing the victim's image with insulting comments or stickers, swapping the victim's face with an animal, adding a mocking voice-over, or sharing embarrassing screenshots, can be terribly damaging. Therefore, this study uses MDA to analyse how these different elements are weaponised to form and spread cyberbullying practices among university students.

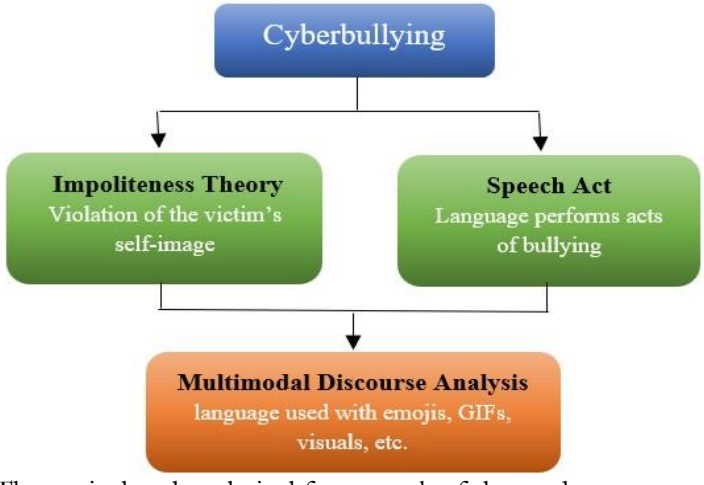

Figure 3: Theoretical and analytical framework of the study

Research design

This study applied a qualitative research design to identify and categorise the linguistic and nonlinguistic markers of cyberbullying among university students in Bangladesh. Qualitative inquiry provides contextual insights into multifaceted social phenomena and helps us understand participants' experiences and

interpretations of digital interactions (Creswell 13, Tenny et al.). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 43 university students who had experienced cyberbullying. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling as the study focused on students with relevant experiences. To ensure diversity, they were drawn from different universities in Bangladesh, including 2 public, 4 private, and 1 national, and from diverse academic disciplines and levels (undergraduate and postgraduate). The participants were aged between 18 and 28, ensuring the focus on young university students who actively use digital platforms.

Interviewees were selected through academic contacts and peer referrals. An invitation explaining the purpose of the study was shared, and interested participants took part voluntarily in the interviews. The semi-structured interview contained open-ended questions about participants' experiences of cyberbullying, the types of interactions they faced, and the derogatory or belittling text and non-text elements involved in the respective interactions. Along with their spoken responses, some participants also provided content from their social media, such as texts, screenshots, memes, and images. These materials were used as examples to support the analysis.

A small pilot test of the interview process had been conducted to make sure the questions were clear, easy to understand, relevant, and appropriate. To ensure that the research is ethically sound, several ethical principles, such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, a safe and supportive environment, and ethics in data collection and usage, were followed throughout the research. Also, the examples of cyberbullying shared by participants during the interviews were included in this study with their permission. These principles have been maintained as grounded in the COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) framework and Malaysia's PDPA (Personal Data Protection Act) 2010.

For data analysis, every mini conversation or response was considered a discourse and checked for its out-of-norm tone or message (impoliteness) that may cause a potential speech act of humiliation. To do so, the diverse elements of the mini conversations were assessed carefully to see how they collaborate to perform the respective speech act and then confirmed with the help of the interviewees. The instances of cyberbullying detected and coded this way were checked for corresponding patterns and divided under the consequent categories, such as identity-based practices, interactional aggression, and technologically mediated manipulation. This process has also revealed the multimodal strategies of disguised humiliation as another outcome of the research. To ensure the validity of the research results, the study made sure to accurately present participants' experiences and maintain consistency between the coded patterns.

Reliability was maintained by checking the data against the identified categories several times.

Findings: Words and non-words that wound

While platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, and Discord are commonly used for interaction, collaboration, academic, and campus-related communication, the interviewees in this study reported that these platforms also contribute to cyberbullying practices. These practices can be grouped into three categories: identity-based practices, interactional aggression, and technologically mediated manipulation. In all these categories, bullies strategically and systematically use language with multimodal elements, such as memes, emojis, visuals, and GIFs, to disguise their actions.

Identity-based practices

As reported by the interviewees, the forms of cyberbullying that target individuals' identities, such as gender expressions, physical appearances, and linguistic or regional background, and use derogatory labelling, are frequent among university students. Most interviewees mentioned experiencing body shaming, such as being called disparaging names like *"moda"* (fat), *"shutki"* (dried fish [skinny]), *"hatir baachcha"* (elephant calf), *"boltu"* (shorty), *"haddimontree"* (bone minister), and *"gittu"* (insinuating a short individual whose joints are not yet developed). They also received insulting comments from their peers, such as:

1. "You are so tall; what's your height for?"
2. *"Tor cholar shomoy bhumikompo hoy keno?"* (Why does an earthquake occur when you move?)
3. *"Tui to raate hariye jabi, eto kaalo!"* (You're pitch black. Careful at night, or you might vanish in the dark.)
4. *"Tor daat ki brush dekhechhe kokhono?"* (Have your teeth ever been in touch with a brush?)

The interview participants also reported that frequent uses of derogatory nicknames or mocking expressions, such as "piggy", *"gobor ganesh"* (foolish person), and *"raamchaagol"* (blockhead), names/nicknames of social and political figures, such as "Hasina," "Kaua Quader" (Obaidul Quader), "Dipu-Moni," *"cha-wala"* (Modi), "Ananta-Jalil," "Haun-Uncle" (Harun), or "Hero-Alom," and politically or culturally significant words (e.g., *"razakar," "shahbagi"*) are being highly used sarcastically in cyberbullying. Participants added that they felt very angry when referred to by these nicknames in mocking or sarcastic contexts, which thus function as insulting speech acts. The language used in the

expressions above is not simply descriptive but performative, and the utterances are intentional, repeated to humiliate, degrade, and embarrass the victims.

Gender-based bullying has emerged as a disturbing trend, particularly against students whose gender expression is different from the conventional norm, especially for boys who are seen as "girlish" or display slightly feminine traits. They are often called *"aapu"* (sister), "sissy," "half-ladies," *"Sharifa,"* "gay," "*chaiya-chaiya/hijra"* (intersex), "lesbo," "homo," or "LGBTQ+." These labels are often accompanied by sexually suggestive teasing, rumours, and mocking visuals. They are also mocked for their behaviour, gestures, and postures by both boys and girls, with comments such as: *"Maigga bole kotha, or to emoni hobe"* (What do you expect from a sissy?), *"Kire tor golao to meyeder moto hoye gechhe"* (Hey, even your voice has turned girlie!), "Girls not allowed," or "Girls' turn hasn't come yet; why are you here?." These are face-threatening acts that target an individual's identity to humiliate, while disguising aggression through humour and shared culture.

Similarly, mocking of a regional identity and language mistakes (e.g., spelling, accents, dialects, and pronunciation) is another common form of bullying in online campus groups to humiliate victims. Some interviewees revealed that these mistakes are repeatedly mocked in group interactions. Below are some examples that show how one's language is weaponised in digital spaces to humiliate them:

1. *"Bhai noakhaila tan to tor ghum-er modhyeo thame na."* (Your Noakhali [a district in Bangladesh] accent doesn't take a break, not even in your sleep.)
2. *"Tui ki Dhakar lok? Eto shuddho koira kotha kos ken?"* (Are you from Dhaka? Why do you speak in such standard Bangla?)
3. "Before posting things in English, first learn how to spell."
4. "Since you wrote it in English, maybe it is correct." (Mocking English writing mistakes)
5. "*Oke niye keu hasahasi korben na; oke Allah brain chara pathaise."* (Make sure no one makes fun of him; God has sent him without a brain.)

Interactional aggression: Social dynamics in cyberbullying

The interview findings reveal a variety of social dynamics that contribute to cyberbullying on campus, with interactional aggression emerging as a major category. This includes sarcasm, teasing, backhanded compliments, rumours, and exclusion. Participants shared that bullies are now using subtle ways to hurt victims. Instead of using direct offensive language that can be easily recognised as bullying, they often use humour that seems harmless, such as sarcastic praise,

teasing, or inside jokes, to disguise their intentions. Such sarcastic comments may read: "Wow, you're so impressive," "You're so competent today," or *"Tumi besh bhalo, shudhu ektu beshi kotha bolo"* (You're pretty decent; just can't seem to shut up). These comments appear as positive compliments at first; however, as participants repeatedly emphasised, placed in their contexts, they actually act as mockery. These are implicit speech acts in which the illocutionary force differs from the literal (locutionary) meaning.

The interview participants also suggested that "high-achievers" (those who excel academically) and students considered teachers' favourites are frequently bullied and become targets for ridicule and exclusions online due to jealousy or resentment related to their success, such as: *"Ki laav eto poira…* (What's the use of studying so much?) … *Sir er sathe prem shesh naki?"* (Is your love affair with the teacher over?), "Such a snake!," or "… only because we cannot kiss any ass." When the victim responds by saying, "What do you mean? I kissed their ass for grades!?," the bully counters with, "Someone admitted she kissed their fu**ing ass." The bullying continues with others laughing and passing comments like: "Tell us, how does it feel?", or "Licking = Grading." Then, if their grades drop, they again become targets of humiliating expressions, such as:

1. *"Kire sir to tore chude dilo."* (Sir fu**ed you real hard)
2. *"Sir er sathe prem shesh naki?"* (Is your love affair with Sir over?)
3. *"Pa chaitta ki laav hoilo?"* (What did you get out of lickspittling at Sir's feet?)

In addition, individuals who remain silent or refuse to engage in bullying also become the target of cyberbullying and group-based exclusion. These interactions function as deliberate face-threatening acts that attack a person's identity and academic position. The use of sarcasm, humour, direct insults, group-based mockery, and deliberate exclusion comprises common impoliteness strategies. Also, the involvement of the peers shows that impoliteness works as a way to control a group, strengthen group power, and exclude the targeted individual. However, according to some participants, bullying is not limited to verbal or social exclusion but also involves psychological targeting. Bullies sometimes target individuals' phobias when their verbal tactics do not work. In these cases, they harass victims psychologically by sending or tagging disturbing images or content to scare them. Such behaviours function as harmful speech acts, where the intended meaning is not expressed through words but through context-driven illocutions to cause psychological harm.

Technologically mediated manipulation

Our findings further reveal that the dynamics of how we interact online have significantly changed in the digital age, and new forms of cyberbullying have

emerged. The use of fake profiles, doxing (revealing hidden information about one's life), deepfake videos, digital exclusion, strategic tagging, and hashtags has become commonplace. These forms of harassment are spreading fast, hitting different individuals in different ways, sometimes with devastating consequences. While some participants acknowledged that these tactics are still used in playful ways among friends, the majority expressed a serious concern over these digital practices.

One of the most alarming trends today is the rise of fake profiles. These profiles are used to impersonate individuals, share private content, manipulate, harass, and spread false information. One interviewee shared:

> *I have seen someone create fake profiles – using another person's photo. After that, he shared the private conversation and pictures between two people, one of whom was the holder of that fake profile. That was very humiliating to the person.*

Fake profiles are not just used to spread rumours or private messages; they are also used as a tool for personal attack. The identity (face) of a person is stolen to make them appear guilty of actions they never committed. Another interviewee described a devastating experience:

> *One of my peers opened a fake account using my name and pictures. Then the account sent fake nude pictures and bad messages to my family and others. It spread lies about me, and people started to believe them. This is a pain I will never forget.*

Another emerging form of cyberbullying is deepfake videos. This AI-generated content allows realistic images and videos to be altered or fabricated in humiliating ways. An interviewee mentioned:

> *I have seen AI-generated images and videos of people being uploaded to social media without their permission. Even after requesting to remove them, these images and videos are still shared, just to get likes and make the post viral.*

Another interviewee shared one of her most disturbing experiences with deepfakes that turned her life upside down:

> *They morphed my photos into something unrecognisable. These fake images were uploaded online, and no matter how much I begged for them to be removed, people kept sharing them. It was a disgusting experience, and I felt utterly exposed.*

These practices combine visual manipulation with fast online sharing, which intensifies public humiliation and makes people lose control over their identity.

When opinions clash or actions go against the majority, retaliation often takes the form of digital exclusion and doxing. One interviewee narrates an incident involving a campus group:

> *A student voiced a different opinion during a heated discussion. That's why the group started bombarding him with attacking questions and cancelled him. Later, they*

> *scrutinised all his past activities and exposed him by sharing his personal information and conversations, making him feel isolated and humiliated.*

Many interview participants said that now people are being exposed and excluded without any proper reason. Whenever a group does not like or agree with others' opinions, they often leak personal information or boycott that individual without giving them a chance to defend themselves. These actions often drive social media trends, but they make victims feel alone and helpless, as their existence is being erased. Interviewees also pointed out the growing use of strategic tagging and hashtags to belittle, insult, or humiliate people online. Although they did not give examples of this practice, the following visual helps to explain how this form of online harassment works.

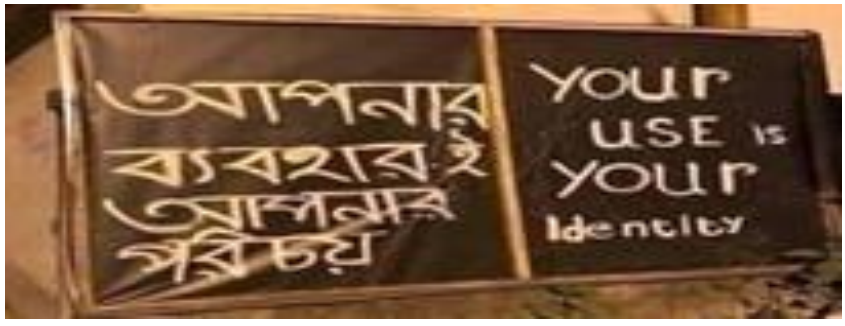

Figure 4: Mocking language mistakes

The English side of the poster contains errors; the words "use" and "behaviour" have been mixed up deliberately, as both have the same Bangla equivalent word – "*byabohar.*" Those who misspell the vocabulary or make grammatical mistakes in a social media post are tagged with images posted by others in their group, accompanied by sarcastic comments such as: "The talent indicates none but your lost brother" or *"Tui tahole birol prani na; tor moto aro kichhu treasure achhe dekh"* (So, you aren't a rare species; there are some 'treasures' like you.); "Aah that's why your 'use' is so lame [clown face emoji]." Moreover, hashtags like *#NewLanguageHero* or *#GrammarChampion* would give it a cloak of ridicule that would make the person an object of widespread digital harassment. While some may find this kind of humour funny, to the person being targeted, it can bring shame and isolation as they are being mocked publicly for something as personal as their language skills. Such acts of strategic tagging illustrate the power dynamics of speech acts, where language is used to humiliate and exclude.

Multimodal strategies of disguised hostility

As is common to all the aforementioned categories of cyberbullying among university students in Bangladesh, bullies strategically combine multimodal

elements to hide their hostility. According to the participants, combining non-verbal elements (memes, GIFs, visuals, or emojis) with language through captions, phrases, or comments enables bullies to convey mockery, sarcasm, or contempt in a way that verbal language alone cannot. These elements make bullying appear humorous or harmless to outsiders, while making it harder for the victim to confront or report such behaviour. One interviewee shared:

> *Just insulting someone through comments is a thing of the past because it doesn't garner the reaction the bully wants. Instead, if the bully makes a meme or GIF, it stays public for a longer time, and more and more people find it hilarious, which can eventually force the victim to surrender.*

Another response emphasises how often harmful opinions are silently expressed by using emojis or memes:

> *If I want to tease someone about their gender, instead of using language, I will simply use an emoji, meme, or GIF. The target already knows it's about them, but others will take it as a joke. Other members in the group will comment on it, but indirectly, all the comments will hurt the victim because the meme itself is about them.*

Furthermore, interview participants claim that memes, along with captions and emojis, create a whole context and serve a significant role in bullying, targeting individuals or groups through humorous content. Most of the time, bullies point out flaws or exaggerate stereotypes for common mockery. An interviewee shared comments from a group chat that mocked her peer's dressing style: *"duniya kapano fashion sense* 👌 😂 *"* (a fashion sense that shook the world). The comment was used to mock the student whose outfit was different from the group's usual style. The laughing emojis added a layer of ridicule, making it clear that the comment was not a genuine compliment but an attempt to belittle the person's dressing choices. Another participant shared an example where group members posted memes in the group chat featuring a dog failing an exam, mocking a student named XYZ with captions: "If you take XYZ's notes, you will pass like this," and "Gold medal confirmed 🏆 🥇." The two memes are shown below in Figure 5, where the gold medal and trophy are used sarcastically, as the group knew the student was not very good at studying.

Figure 5: Mocking Academic Performance

The most typical form of hidden mockery is probably the use of smiling emojis in combination with ironic comments, such as "Wow, that's so impressive😊." It becomes ironic when somebody says this after the targeted person's failure at something. The cheerful emoji in this case creates a contrast that enhances the mockery. Another interviewee shared a personal experience where the victim posted a picture of a car on his timeline, reflecting his aspirations, and the bullies repeatedly commented sarcastically:

1. *"Tor shopner gaari oi golir riksha* 🛺 *chala giya ja."* (Your dream car is the rickshaw in that alleyway, drive that.)
2. "If daydreaming had a face 💩!"
3. *"Shokher to ar komti nai* 🐿️*."* (No shortage of hobbies)

Moreover, interviewees described sexual harassment of individuals as an extremely disturbing form of cyberbullying, particularly in group chats using emojis and memes. For example, a girl being referred to as a "tomato" in a group chat with texts, such as:

A: "Nice weather; *Onek tomato* 🍅 *khete hobe."* (Must eat lots of tomatoes)

B: "Tomatoes 🍅 are healthy and juicy (drooling face emoji)."

A: "People need juicy 🍅 to survive."

These were not harmless comments about food but a backhanded way of objectifying the girl, with "tomatoes" hinting at certain parts of her body. Several participants gave examples of how such sexual innuendos are often emphasised with emojis and visuals to harass in group chats, such as 🍊 (orange) and 🍒 (cherries), which were intended to refer to specific body features. Likewise, 🍆 (eggplant), 🍌 (banana), 🍑 (peach), and 🌭 (hot dog) are quite common sexually suggestive remarks. Then again, these memes or GIFs of certain fruits and vegetables come with captions like "Let's cook/have some juicy X." Bullies sometimes use visuals strategically to harass others (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Visuals bullies use to harass

Even when victims realise that these subtle elements are used intentionally to sexualise and harass them, they find it difficult to react or respond because the ambiguity allows the bully to deflect by saying, "I was just talking about food! Now, I can't even talk about food!?" Thus, the humiliation is strengthened by the multimodal interaction of text and visual elements (GIFs, emojis, and images) as much as it becomes harder for victims to report or respond to such behaviour.

Conclusions

Students who are perceived as weak or different from others and who do not fit in with social norms are often bullied online in Bangladeshi universities. It is usually disguised and appears as a joke to others, while harming the victims. To understand these nuances, this paper explores linguistic and nonlinguistic markers that bullies employ to humiliate victims strategically. It is found that verbal as well as non-verbal elements, such as memes, GIFs, sarcasm, visuals, and emojis, play a significant role in increasing the intensity of cyberbullying.

As understood from the above findings, several interventions and strategies can be useful to mitigate the effects of cyberbullying in educational settings. According to the interviewees of this study, most victims never report incidents of cyberbullying. The reasons include fear of retaliation, privacy concerns, and the belief that nothing will happen. Therefore, educational institutions must establish secure and anonymous reporting mechanisms that enable students to report bullying incidents without fear of retaliation, while their privacy is guaranteed.

Educational institutions should also organise regular awareness programs regarding the challenge of bullying among students, faculty, and staff. Such programs could help challenge the belief that reporting 'won't make a difference' by pushing collective responsibility and making campuses more supportive both offline and online. It is necessary to form support groups of peers and prepare

teachers to help victims. Peer networks provide emotional support, while teachers can guide students through the reporting process, ensuring the victims feel listened to and protected.

There should be strict anti-retaliation policies to make students feel safe when reporting bullying incidents, without fear. These policies should be well communicated and enforced. Bullying can be prevented only when the bullies are punished duly. There should be clear and mandatory disciplinary actions by the educational institutions against those found guilty of bullying. By holding bullies responsible and imposing penalties for bullying, institutions can avoid bullying and show that they do not tolerate it.

This study used an extensive number of interviews to gather insights into the real examples, nature, and multimodal composition of cyberbullying among university students in Bangladesh. However, future researchers can employ other methods, particularly quantitative ones, to categorically measure the instances and components of cyberbullying and gauge their varied impacts on victims.

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