The Trends of Verbal Bullying among University Students: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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Abstract

Bullying remains a pervasive problem within the educational institutions of Pakistan. Students, especially the ones with any kind of disability are constant victims of bullying. Among the many forms of bullying, verbal bullying is the most common one. The objectives of the present study are to understand the trends of verbal bullying behavior within Pakistani Universities and to identify practical bullying prevention strategies. The study is delimited to studying only the verbal bullying that relates to the use of language to persecute, oppress or victimize people. The researcher has delimited the study to the undergraduate students of three major universities in Islamabad Pakistan: FAST-NUCES, NUST, and NUML. The present study uses questionnaires as a method of data collection. The study highlights the effects of verbal bullying on the health, well-being and also on educational career of students. This study concluded that bullying culture is common among the universities of Pakistan which is mainly reflected in the language students use. Keeping in mind the findings of the study, better strategies can be suggested to the educational institutions to deal with the bullying culture in their institutes so that students do not suffer at the hands of the bullies.

Keywords: Verbal bullying, bullying culture, educational institutes, students.

Introduction

Language is the most powerful tool an individual can use to communicate his ideas and thoughts. Language can be used to achieve either positive or negative communicative purposes. The positive purposes include using language to appreciate people, to encourage them, to express gratitude, and so on. On the other hand, negative communicative purposes include using language to discourage, defame and bully others. In Pakistan, generally in many societies of the world, language has been used to achieve negative communicative purposes out of which the most common one is bullying. Bullying is one of the major forms of aggressive behavior that occurs when an individual is repeatedly and over time subjected to unfavorable or offensive acts on the part of other people. Bullying can be verbal, physical and it can have many other forms. Bullying results usually when there is any kind of imbalance (power) between the perpetrator and the victim. The bullying behavior is commonly being observed among the students studying at different educational institutes. Being a victim or active bully is linked to a higher risk of mental and physical health issues. Bullied children are more likely to develop health problems such as insomnia, headaches, stomachaches, and depression, as well as suicidal thoughts. Active bullying has been linked to higher rates of depression, as well as emotional and behavioral issues (Fekkas et al, 2005). Because bullying has a detrimental impact on children's mental and physical health, it is essential that teachers at schools recognize bullying behavior and take steps to avoid or stop it. This article focuses on verbal bullying that is the use of language to belittle, discourage and defame others for one or the other reason.

Problem Statement

Bullying remains a pervasive problem within the educational institutions of Pakistan. Students, especially the ones with any kind of disability are a constant victim of bullying. Among the many forms of bullying, verbal bullying is the most common one. Besides health issues, bullying has directly or indirectly affected the academic performance of the students. This is the reason that this problem needs to be addressed. Parents and teachers collectively need to play a role in helping their children deal with bullying behaviors. The present study aims to understand what verbal bullying is and how it can be prevented.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the trends of verbal bullying behavior within Pakistani Universities

2. To identify practical bullying prevention strategies

Research Question

1. How to get rid of verbal bullying and promote prosocial interactions among the students of different universities in Pakistan?

Significance of the study

It has been observed that bullying remains common within different educational institutes in Pakistan. Students are suffering on a daily basis due to the bullying behaviors in their schools or universities. The present study is significant because it studies the trends of bullying behaviors in different universities of Pakistan. The study also focuses on identifying practical bullying prevention strategies to promote prosocial interactions among students.

Delimitations

The present study is delimited to studying only the verbal bullying that relates to the use of language to persecute, oppress or victimize people. The researcher has delimited the study to the undergraduate students of only three major universities of Islamabad Pakistan: FAST-NUCES, NUST and NUML.

Literature Review

Whitted & Dupper (2005) identified some of the major practices for preventing bullying in schools. Educators, parents, and legislators are all concerned about reducing violence in schools. Violence takes many forms, and there is mounting evidence that low-level or underlying forms of violence have a significant impact on the school's learning environment. Bullying is the most common kind of low-level violence in today's schools, and it can progress to more serious forms of violence if left uncontrolled. As a result, identifying and implementing treatments and techniques to prevent or minimize bullying in schools is an important part of school violence prevention. The writers explore different types of bullying in schools, occurrence statistics, and the effects of bullying on bullies, victims, and the school community. Bullying has substantial and long-term implications for both the bully and the victim, as well as the school community. Bullying victims may experience long-term emotional, academic, and behavioral issues. Bullying victims had poorer self-esteem and report feeling more unhappy, lonely, worried, and insecure than other children. Bullying contributes to a variety of school-related issues, such as disliking school and dropping out. Many kids appear to avoid going to the school's public areas in order to prevent being bullied.

Because of their fear of being bullied, an estimated 160,000 students in the United States miss school every day. Children who bully others, like victims, are at risk for social and emotional difficulties. At each stage of intervention, school social workers can use a variety of hands-on practical tactics. Behavioral norms—that is, adopting classroom and schoolwide regulations that prevent bullying and promote adult modelling of respectful and nonviolent behavior—should be the goal of school-level interventions. Efforts to intervene are unlikely to succeed unless school personnel acknowledge that bullying is an issue. Teachers and other adults must recognize that every adult in the school has a responsibility to play in the fight against bullying. Bullying is handled seriously and will not be tolerated, and the principal should communicate strong messages to the entire school community.

Bullying is presently one of the most important issues confronting the school community, with statistics ranging from 10% to 35% depending on research conducted in various contexts. Some scholars have linked bullying episodes to the physical education (PE) environment. In this regard, it has been proposed that victims of bullying tend to avoid school environments that make them feel vulnerable, particularly those involving physical activities, according to the authors. As a result, these children tend to distance themselves from PE, which leads to increased school absenteeism and prevents bully victims from benefiting from the social, psychological, and physical benefits that physical activity in general, may give. However, because of its great benefits in stimulating the externalization of emotions and increasing social skills, some prevention programmes have explored the role of PE in the intervention against school violence. As a result, the necessity of PE teachers creating a pleasant classroom environment has been emphasized, promoting student empowerment and the development of social empathy. PE teachers and sports coaches, according to certain authors, should not only assist students in improving their physical condition, but also in developing their social skills, enhancing their personal growth and empowerment, and learning to live constructively in society (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2019).

Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amaya (2009) made a comparison between victimization and bullying rates among students in special education and in general. Bullying and victimisation are still prevalent in schools around the nations. According to international research, kids enrolled in special education curriculum are more likely to be bullied and to commit bullying than their general education counterparts. Bullying and victimisation rates among American schoolchildren in special education programmes have been the subject of few empirical studies. Their research

looked at the rates of bullying and fighting perpetration and victimisation among middle and high school students participating in both general and special education programmes. Students in special education reported higher rates of bullying, fighting, and victimisation than students in general education. Self-contained students reported higher perpetration and victimisation than students in inclusive classrooms. In special education settings, fighting perpetration was equivalent for younger and older students, however in general education, fighting perpetration was reduced for older students compared to younger students.

Research Methodology

The present study is quantitative in nature.

Data Collection

The present study uses questionnaires as a method of data collection. There were 12 closed ended and two open ended question. A Google form was created and its link was sent to 150 students studying at FAST, NUST and NUML. The total number of students who responded is 139.

Sampling

The sampling technique employed was purposive convenient sampling. The total number of participants is 139 who are students of FAST, NUST and NUML Islamabad.

Theoretical Framework

The present study uses Van Dijk's model of *Us versus Them*. One of the aspects this model emphasizes on is "Expressing/emphasizing information that is negative about Them." Bullying is a process where people try to highlight the negative side or weaknesses of an individual's personality. In case of verbal bullying, language is used to highlight the negative aspects of a person's personality with the help of language. People are verbally bullied for any kind of physical, mental or intellectual disability.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Students studying at FAST, NUST and NUML responded to the research questions in the following way:

1. Have you ever seen students verbally bullying others in the institute you are studying?
139 responses
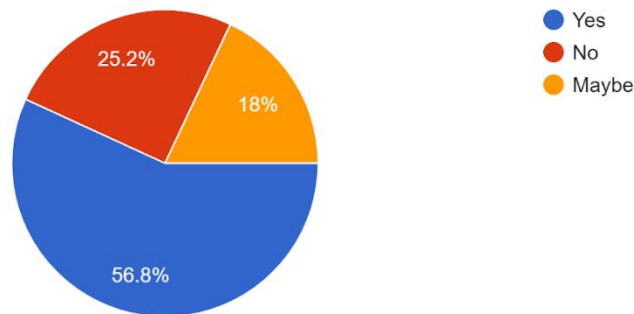
The first question was asked to find out if the students have seen people bullying others in their universities. To this question, 56.8% students responded 'yes', 25.2% responded 'no', and rest of the 18% weren't sure about it, so they responded 'maybe.' Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2019 found that bullying is presently one of the most important issues confronting the school community, with statistics ranging from 10% to 35% depending on research conducted in various contexts. The present study also claims that bullying is prevalent in the major universities of Pakistan.

2. Do you think victims of verbal bullying suffer from health problems?
139 responses
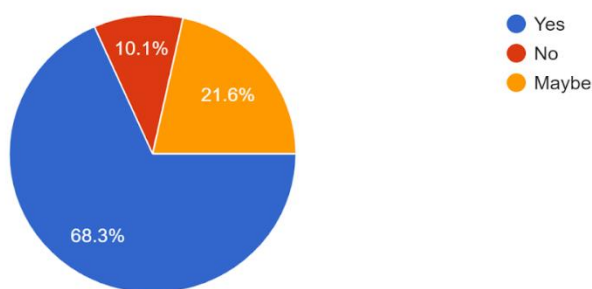
68.3% of the students believe that victims of the verbal bullying suffer from health problems. 21.6% of them are not sure whether verbal bullying affects health of the victims. Only 10% of the students responded 'no' to this question. Whitted & Dupper (2005) identified that bullying has substantial and long-term implications for both the bully and the victim, as well as the school community. Bullying victims may experience long-term emotional, academic, and behavioral issues. Bullying victims had poorer self-esteem and report feeling more unhappy, lonely, worried,

and insecure than other children. This study presents similar findings that bullying does affect a person's health.

3. Do you believe that verbal bullying affects a student's ability to learn and be successful at school?
139 responses
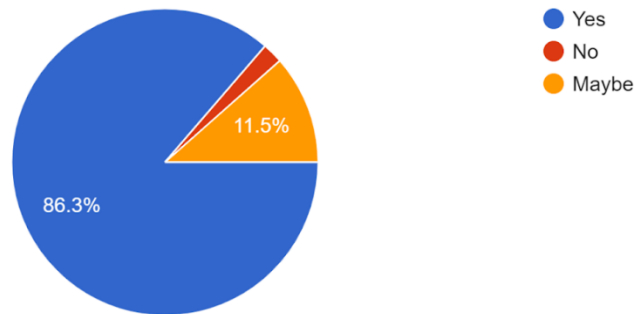
86.3% of the students agreed that bullying affects a student's learning ability. Whitted & Dupper (2005) found in their study that bullying contributes to a variety of school-related issues, such as disliking school and dropping out. Many kids appear to avoid going to the school's public areas in order to prevent being bullied. The present study has found that verbal bullying at universities affects a student's ability to learn and be successful at school.

5. How far do you agree that girls are bullied more than boys?
139 responses
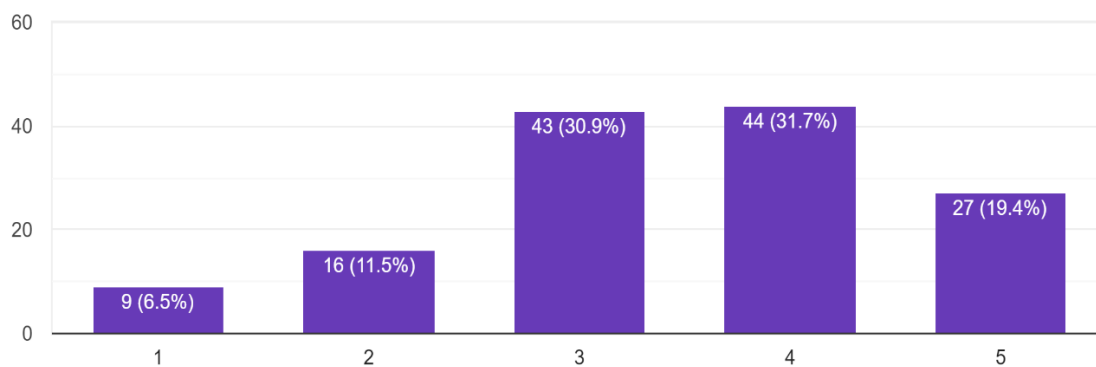
Another question was asked to see if girls experience more bullying than boys. Only 6.5% of the students strongly agreed to this that girls are bullied more than boys.

6. Do you think students with physical disabilities are bullied more than the ones with intellectual disabilities?

139 responses
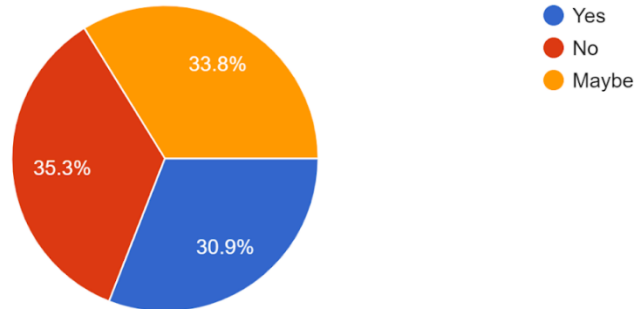
The present study also aimed to find out if students with physical disabilities are bullied more than the ones with intellectual disabilities. There was nearly equal percentage of the students who opted for the options: yes, no and maybe. This means that students with intellectual disabilities are also bullied. A relevant study was conducted by Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amaya (2009) where they made a comparison between victimization and bullying rates among students in special education and in general. Bullying and victimization are still prevalent in schools around the nations. According to international research, kids enrolled in special education curriculum are more likely to be bullied and to commit bullying than their general education counterparts. It can be inferred that bullying is more common among students with special needs.

7. How far do you agree that students are bullied for their learning disabilities as well?

139 responses
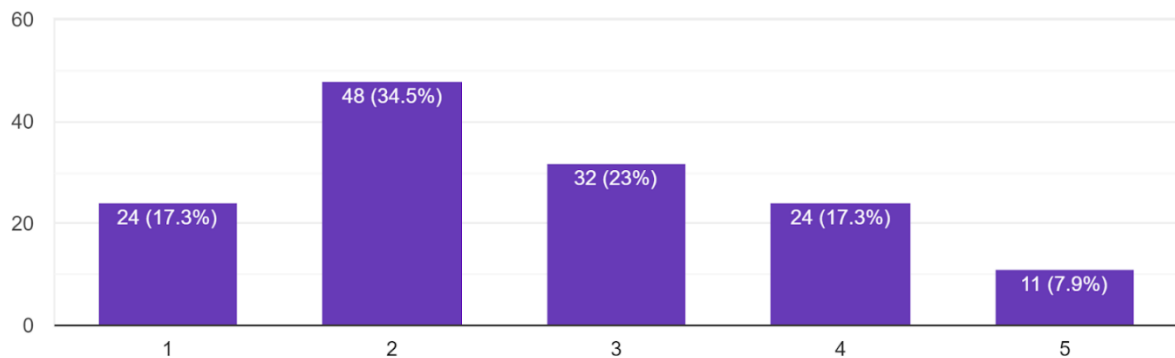
A greater percent of the participants believed that students are also bullied for their learning disabilities. Rose, Espelage & Monda-Amaya (2009) found in their study that students in special education reported higher rates of bullying, fighting, and victimization than students in general education. The present study shows that children with physical as well as intellectual disabilities are bullied in educational institutes.

8. In your opinion, what does bullying reflect?
139 responses
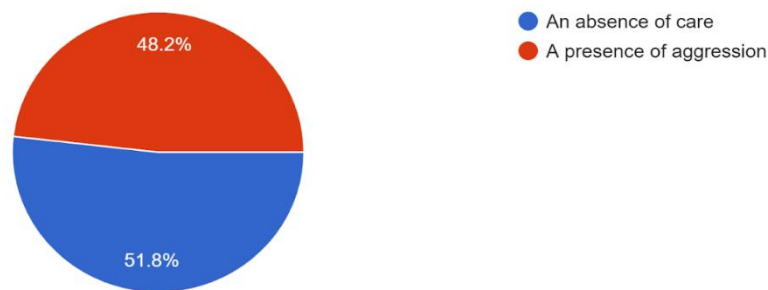
This question was asked to know what students think bullying is. To 51.8%, bullying is an absence of care while to 48.2%, bullying is a presence of aggression. There can be many reasons people bully others. The present study has found these two: an absence of care, a presence of aggression.

9. How far do you agree that reducing violence/bullying in educational institutes should be a major concern of educators, parents, and legislators?
139 responses
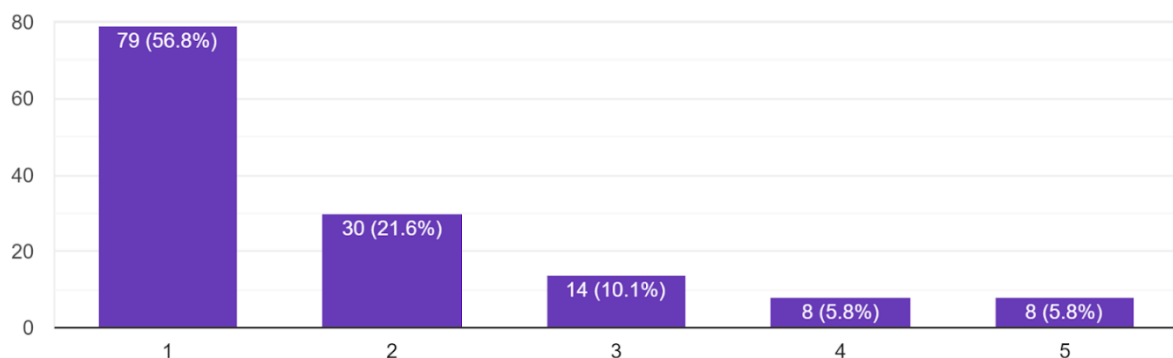
Majority of the participants agreed that reducing bullying in educational institutes should be a

major concern of educators, parents and legislators. Whitted & Dupper (2005) identified that bullying is the most common kind of low-level violence in today's schools, and it can progress to more serious forms of violence if left uncontrolled. As a result, identifying and implementing treatments and techniques to prevent or minimize bullying in schools is an important part of school violence prevention. The present study also emphasizes the need for an action to stop bullying.

10. Do you think universities in Pakistan have set rules that prohibit bullying and promote adult modeling of respectful and nonviolent behavior?
139 responses
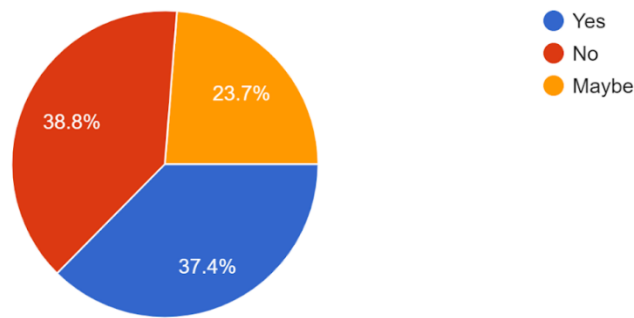
Only 37.4% of the students responded 'yes' to the questions that universities in Pakistan have set rules that prohibit bullying and promote adult modeling of respectful and nonviolent behavior. Thus, there is a need for universities to have such set of rules.

11. How far do you agree that there should be a written bullying prevention policy that is distributed to everyone in the school community?
139 responses
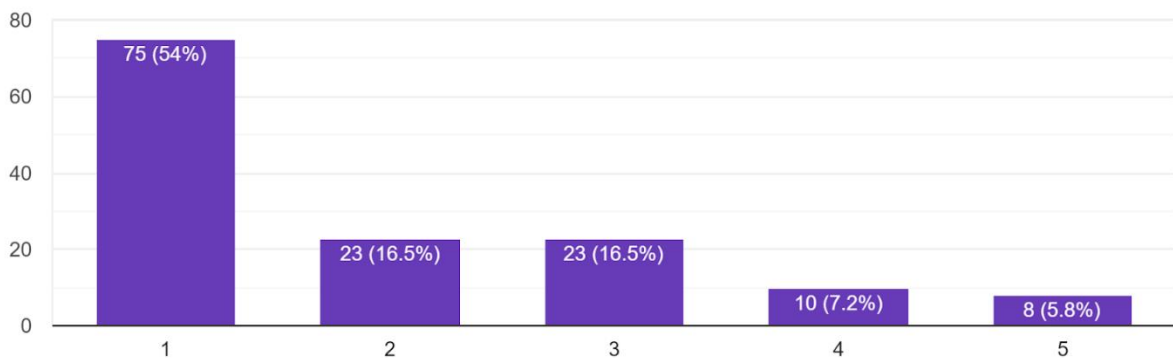
Almost all of the participants agreed that there should be a written bullying prevention policy that is distributed to everyone in the school community. Bullying is a very serious issue and it needs to be dealt with. Whitted & Dupper (2005) believe that identifying and implementing treatments and techniques to prevent or minimize bullying in schools is an important part of school violence prevention. The present study highlights this major way of dealing with bullying; a written bullying prevention policy.

12. Do you think teachers intervene in bullying incidents that occur in the classroom?
139 responses
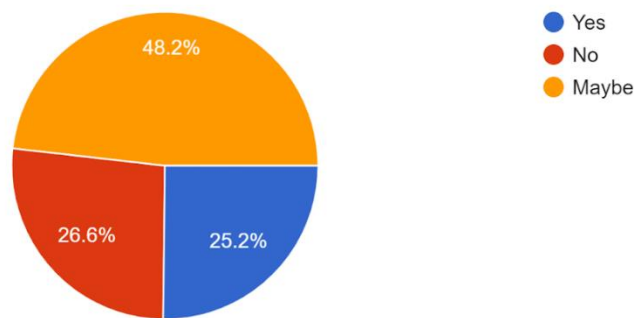
Majority of the students were found to disagree with this that teachers intervene in bullying incidents that occur in classroom. Teachers can play a major role in preventing bullying actions. Teacher is the authority in a class so he has the power to deal strictly with the students who are involved in bullying.

13. What are some of the linguistic expressions you have heard that students use to bully others? This was an open-ended question. Some of the responses collected were:

1. 'kala kawa' – for people who have a dark complexion.
2. 'Tumhara tou dimag hai hi nei' – for people with learning disabilities
3. 'Ami ko bolo complain pilaye'- For students with short height.
4. 'Tum tou bina dimag ke dunya mae aaye the'- for students with intellectual disabilities
5. 'You are a fatso'- For people who are obese.
6. "How did you get so fat?!"
7. "Tum jitna bhi parh lo mujh se aage nei ja sakte"

8. 'Why is your skin so dark?'

9. 'Latka karo, lambe hojaoge'

10. You are a very slow learner.

Thus, people use different kinds of linguistic expressions when they intend to bully others.

14. In your opinion, what could be a good strategy to prevent bullying at educational institutions? Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2019 highlighted that PE teachers and sports coaches should not only assist students in improving their physical condition, but also in developing their social skills, enhancing their personal growth and empowerment, and learning to live constructively in society. The participants of the present study also suggested different ways to prevent bullying at educational institutions. Some of which are listed as:

1. Anti-Bullying societies should be introduced to prevent bullying in educational institutions.

2. To prevent bullying at educational institutions, committees should be introduced. Also, students should be punished strictly if found guilty of such an act

3. Have new students informed the proper course of action in case they're bullied and actions to be taken against those who bully.

4. In order to prevent bullying, new policies should be introduced. Also, societies and clubs can play a very important role to prevent bullying. We should also try to be as encouraging as we can and try to use positive words and not demotivate others.

5. Bullying might be prevented in educational institutions by teaching students about bullying from an early age and by asking teachers to keep an eye out for bullying in their classes. Moreover, a no-tolerance policy regarding bullying could serve as a deterrent for bullies.

6. Adults should try and identify the cause behind someone bullying (insecurities, anger management issues) and try to encourage the victim and aggressor to talk in a controlled situation. Communication truly helps in most cases. Having an on-campus psychiatrist or counselor might also help.

7. Teaching kindness and ethics to the children at parent level might help reduce this issue.

8. A heavy fine or direct rustication

9. Showing support to victims by administration

10. Introduce Unions

The educational institutes need to think of better strategies through which they can minimize the bullying culture.

Conclusion

Language can be used to achieve different communicative purposes, some of which are positive while others are negative in nature. You can use language to appreciate, encourage and praise people. On the other hand, language can also be used to discourage and belittle people. Verbal bullying falls in the negative communicative purpose. People use language or different linguistic items to bully others. The bullying culture unfortunately is very common among the universities of Pakistan. Victims of bullying are affected badly due to the behavior of their fellows. They are unable to perform well in academics. Thus, there is a need to look for strategies through which bullying can be prevented in the educational institutes of the country. Parents, teachers and the administration together have to work on the prevention of bullying culture. There must be strict rules against the students who are involved in bullying. All the educational institutes need to promote a healthy environment where people help each other grow.

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