

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding Verbal Bullying in Meranaw: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Guidance Office Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines verbal bullying expressed in the Meranaw language through a psycholinguistic lens, drawing on documented narratives from the Guidance Office of Mindanao State University–Integrated Laboratory School (MSU-ILS), Marawi City. Meranaw refers to both the language and the ethnolinguistic group predominantly residing in Lanao del Sur, whose cultural values particularly *maratabat* (honor) shape interpersonal communication. The study aimed to identify (1) documented narratives of verbal bullying, (2) linguistic and emotive features of Meranaw bullying expressions, (3) underlying psychological forces influencing both bullies and the bullied, and (4) the psychological consequences of these experiences. Using a narrative case study design, data were triangulated from Guidance Office archives (2017–2022), in-depth interviews with students and parents, focus group discussions with teachers, and key informant interviews with psychologists and linguists. Psycholinguistic analysis focused on lexical choice, emotive meaning, and culturally embedded interpretations of verbal expressions. Findings reveal that Meranaw verbal bullying commonly manifests through name-calling and culturally loaded insults targeting physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and ethnic or religious identity, resulting in strong emotional responses such as shame, humiliation, and insecurity. Psychological forces driving bullying include narcissistic tendencies, displacement, and peer pressure, while bullied learners often exhibit low self-esteem and social vulnerability. A key limitation is the single-site, context-specific nature of the study, which limits generalizability. The study underscores the need for culturally responsive, language-sensitive interventions involving schools and families.

Keywords: *Emotive meaning, Meranaw language, psycholinguistics, psychological forces, verbal bullying*

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a persistent concern in educational institutions worldwide, posing significant risks to learners' psychological, emotional, and social development (Ariani et al., 2025). Global reports indicate that verbal bullying is among the most prevalent forms of peer aggression, often dismissed as harmless despite its long-term psychological consequences (UNESCO, 2019). In the Philippines, bullying continues to attract national attention due to its increasing incidence in schools and its association with mental health concerns among children and adolescents (Bacelonia, 2024). Legislative efforts, such as Republic Act No. 10627, the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, mandate that schools implement preventive and responsive measures against bullying. While these policies provide a legal framework, their effectiveness depends on culturally and contextually grounded understandings of how bullying is enacted, particularly through language (Domingo, 2019).

The Meranaw are a predominantly Muslim ethnolinguistic group residing in Lanao del Sur and surrounding areas, with Meranaw as their primary language. Central to Meranaw culture

is *maratabat*, a deeply rooted set of values that emphasizes honor, dignity, and family reputation. Language plays a critical role in maintaining or violating this sense of honor; thus, verbal insults carry profound cultural and psychological weight. In this context, verbal bullying extends beyond casual teasing and becomes a direct affront to personal and familial identity.

Despite the expanding literature on bullying in Philippine contexts, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic research has primarily focused on major languages such as Tagalog, Cebuano, and English (Elemينو and Kilag, 2025). As a result, minority languages like Meranaw remain underexplored, particularly in relation to the cognitive and pragmatic processes involved in the use of culturally embedded verbal expressions for bullying. This gap underscores the need for a psycholinguistic analysis of Meranaw verbal bullying, offering a novel contribution to understanding how language, meaning, and social power operate within minority language communities.

This study addresses this gap by examining narratives of verbal bullying documented in the Guidance Office archives of MSU-ILS. Guided by psycholinguistic and developmental theories, the study analyzes the linguistic forms, emotive meanings, and

psychological forces underlying bullying expressions, as well as their consequences for both bullies and the bullied.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on Behaviorism, Cognitive Theory, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, and Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory to explain verbal bullying from linguistic, emotional, and social perspectives. Rather than treating these theories independently, the study applies each theory to illuminate a specific dimension of verbal bullying in children.

Behaviorism guides the analysis of observable language use by explaining how repeated exposure to verbal expressions within the community reinforces bullying behaviors through imitation and conditioning. Cognitive Theory informs the

examination of how children process, interpret, and assign meaning to bullying expressions, emphasizing age-related differences in understanding intent and emotional impact. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory frames the social context of verbal bullying by situating language use within interconnected environments, such as the family, school, peer groups, and the broader cultural setting. Finally, Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory supports the analysis of emotional processing by accounting for unconscious motivations, emotional responses, and internal conflicts that may be expressed through aggressive language.

By combining these theories into a unified framework, the study provides a systematic explanation of how verbal bullying emerges from the interaction among language behavior, cognitive interpretation, emotional processing, and social context, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the study’s findings.

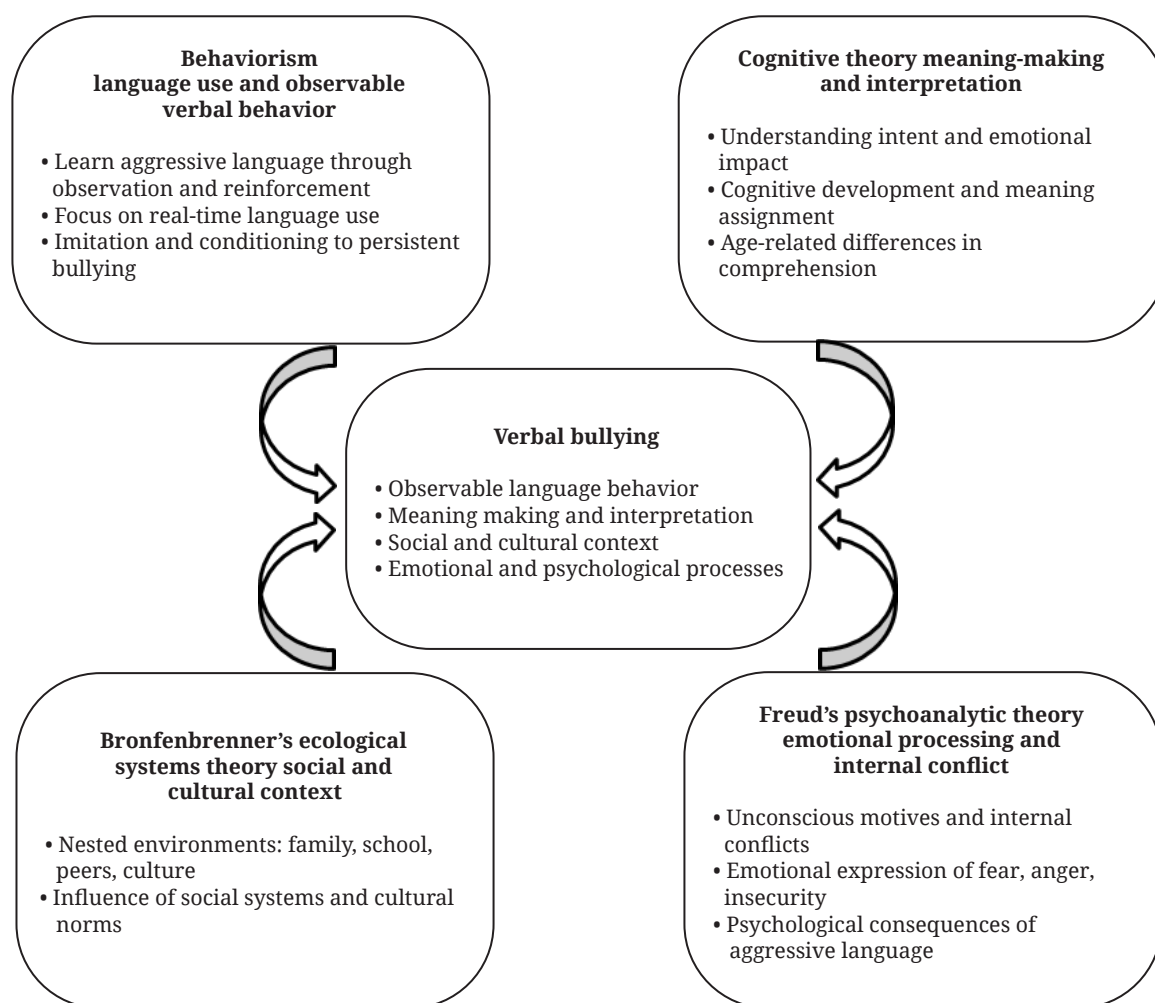


Figure 1. Integrating theoretical framework in analyzing verbal bullying.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of the study area

The study is set at Mindanao State University-Integrated Laboratory School (MSU-ILS), MSU Main Campus, Marawi City. The MSU Main Campus is located four kilometers from the city proper and is about forty (40) kilometers from Iligan City. The study is located in Marawi City, the educational center of Central Mindanao, where many institutions of higher learning

have been established and operate. The Mindanao State University (formerly known as the University of Mindanao) was formally established in Marawi City on September 1, 1961, by RA 1387, as amended.

The researcher selected the study area due to their professional affiliation with the school as a faculty member and designated guidance counsellor in the Elementary Department. As a registered guidance counsellor, the researcher observed the need to examine bullying cases within the school to develop a context-specific intervention program tailored to the study area.

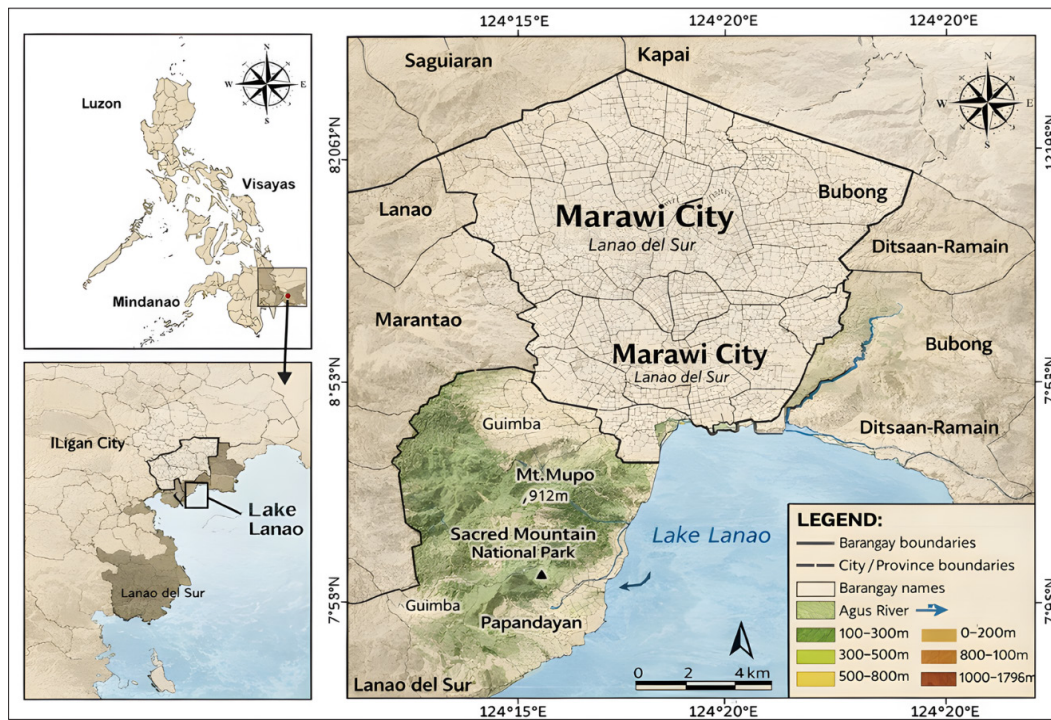


Figure 2. Map of study area.

Data collection

This study employed a qualitative narrative case study design using a psycholinguistic analytical approach to examine verbal bullying within Mindanao State University–Integrated Laboratory School (MSU-ILS). The respondents were purposively selected based on documented involvement in cases of verbal bullying handled by the MSU-ILS Guidance Office. The primary participants consisted of fifteen (15) learners, including nine identified as bullies and six (6) identified as bullied students. Archival bullying narratives from the Guidance Office served as the initial data source and guided the selection of cases for in-depth analysis.

To enrich and contextualize learners' narratives, multiple groups of informants were included in the data collection. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten (10) parents or guardians of the bullies and bullied learners to obtain detailed and authentic accounts of the learners' behavioral, emotional, and linguistic experiences at home and in school. Additionally, 14 classmates and seven subject teachers participated in discussions to provide peer- and classroom-based perspectives on the occurrence and dynamics of verbal bullying. These participants offered firsthand observations of language use, peer interaction, and the classroom context in which bullying incidents typically occurred.

Key informants were also engaged to support the interpretation and validation of findings. These included three guidance counsellors from the elementary and junior high school departments who had handled bullying cases since the establishment of the Guidance Office, as well as one faculty member from the Psychology Department of the MSU College of Social Sciences and Humanities. Their expertise contributed to validating the psychological and behavioral interpretations of the verbal bullying narratives.

Data collection was conducted using multiple qualitative methods to ensure methodological triangulation. These methods included: (1) analysis of archived bullying narratives from the MSU-ILS Guidance Office, (2) one-on-one in-depth interviews with fourteen (14) learners involved in bullying incidents and their parents or guardians, (3) focus group discussions

with seven teachers who directly witnessed the incidents, and four key informant interviews with four experts in guidance and psychology. Guided interview questions were used to maintain focus and consistency across interviews. They were reviewed and validated by a five-member panel of experts to ensure their relevance to the study objectives. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians before the interviews with learners.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a psycholinguistic framework, in which verbal bullying expressions were systematically coded and examined with respect to lexical form, emotive meaning, and contextual use within the Meranaw cultural setting. Emotional responses and psychological effects were analyzed alongside linguistic data to identify patterns linking language use, emotion, identity, and behavior. Triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple data sources, multiple informants, and expert validation, thereby enhancing the credibility, dependability, and rigor of the study's findings.

RESULTS

Narratives of bullying in the guidance office archives of MSU-ILS

The bullying narratives documented in the Guidance Office archives of Mindanao State University–Integrated Laboratory School (MSU-ILS) reveal two broad patterns of bullying behavior: direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying involves overt, observable aggressive acts directed toward a specific individual, while indirect or relational bullying involves covert actions that occur without confrontation between the bully and the bullied. These patterns align with established classifications of bullying, which include verbal, physical, relational, and cyber forms (Obregon-Cuesta et al., 2022).

Although 13 bullying cases were initially reviewed from the Guidance Office records, only eight cases were purposively selected and analyzed in this study, as they explicitly involved ver-

bal bullying. These cases contained clear and detailed accounts of spoken or language-based expressions such as name-calling, teasing, mocking, and the use of derogatory terms, making them suitable for psycholinguistic analysis. Cases that primarily involved physical or non-verbal forms of bullying, or those with insufficient linguistic detail, were excluded from the analysis.

Each of the eight selected case narratives included information on the learners' demographic profiles, the verbal expressions used, and the psychological forces and consequences experienced by both the bully and the bullied. The narratives

provided rich contextual descriptions of how verbal bullying unfolded within classroom and peer interactions, highlighting recurring themes such as power imbalance, social exclusion, and culturally influenced language use.

To ensure ethical integrity, all names in the narratives were replaced with pseudonyms to protect respondents' identities and maintain strict confidentiality. These eight verbal bullying narratives served as the empirical foundation for the subsequent psycholinguistic analysis and discussion, which are organized around the study's research questions.

Table 1. What verbal expressions in Meranaw and other languages are indicative of bullying?

Verbal expression	English translation	Description
<i>ansed</i>	Smelly armpits	A term used by Gardo to describe Henry is the expression " <i>ansed</i> " (smelly armpits). The term refers to the body odor, particularly coming from the armpit of someone. Henry has offensive body odor, so Gardo teased him about it.
<i>baluga</i>	A derogatory term used to identify somebody with darkness	The three bullies, Agaton, Caloy, and Domeng, were name-calling Basyang " <i>baluga</i> " because of her physical appearance. Basyang has a dark complexion and curly hair, so they associate her with " <i>baluga</i> ".
<i>bayot</i>	Gay	Perla hates Enteng for his annoying attention-seeking behavior, so she calls him " <i>bayot</i> ". The term seems to humiliate a man, so Perla used it to make Enteng stop his behavior.
<i>bileg</i>	Cross-eyed	Samuel called Tomas " <i>bileg</i> " or cross-eyed because he always bumped into his chair unintentionally, and Samuel found it annoying.
<i>boda</i>	Idiot	Karding used the word " <i>boda</i> " (idiot). He used it consistently, which sounded offensive to his classmates.
<i>bolkad</i>	One with big eyes	Lando teased his friend with the word " <i>bolkad</i> ," which refers to a person with big eyes. He also used it because he associated it with the family name of his friend. The family name of his classmate is Bolkia, which sounds like " <i>bolkad</i> ".
<i>datla</i>	Slut	Enteng felt insulted because of the term " <i>bayot</i> " used by Perla to him. So, he called her " <i>datla</i> " to also humiliate her in return.
<i>di phakakan</i>	Cannot eat	Agaton, Caloy, and Domeng called Basyang " <i>di phakakan</i> " because she is thin and short. They also used the term because Basyang had no money to buy any food.
<i>di psorat</i>	Won't write	Waldo's behavior showed laziness during writing lessons and answering quizzes, and activities. Most of the time, he will just sit down and act mischievously. His classmates teased him, " <i>di psorat</i> " or won't write because of that.
<i>kawlit</i>	Fat	Gardo used to body shame his classmates by calling those with chubby body shapes as " <i>kawlit</i> ," which means fat.
<i>mado</i>	Bad odor	Gardo is name-calling, Henry, as " <i>mado</i> " (bad odor) because Henry smelled stinky most of the time.
<i>sipsip</i>	Obsequious	Karding teased his female classmates with the term " <i>sipsip</i> ," or obsequious. Obsequious uses compliments to gain self-serving favor or advantage from another person. In this case, Karding accused his classmates as obsequious to their teachers because they usually complimented them and always volunteered to help them.
<i>taleng</i>	Inattentive	Karding called his classmates " <i>taleng</i> " (inattentive) for no reason. That is just his expression to call their attention.
<i>tikogas</i>	Skinny	Gardo also annoys his thin classmates by calling them " <i>tikogas</i> " (skinny), in literally means a little worthy or ungainly in appearance.

Table 1 presents the various expressions indicative of bullying, categorized by verbal means, in Meranaw and other languages. The verbal category consists of words only and does not involve actions. The expressions were "*di phakakan*", "*mado*", "*ansed*", "*kawlit*", "*bayot*", "*tikogas*", "*datla*", "*taleng*", "*boda*",

"*bolkad*", "*bileg*", and "*di psorat*". It was found that these expressions take the form of taunts, teasing, mocking, threatening friends if they have not given what they want, insulting, using inappropriate words, and name-calling, all of which fall under verbal bullying.

The verbal expressions in other languages, particularly Filipino ones, like “*baluga*” and “*sipsip*”. When someone hears “*baluga*”, their consciousness experiences a yearning to move towards “otherness”. The derogatory word is a representation of who the other thinks they are, and, therefore, it is a source of their insecurity and anxiety. “*Baluga*” connotes dark skin, short stature, kinky hair, and a primitive way of life, and this

ethnic association creates a status of subordination. Another term, “*sipsip*,” is also mentioned by the bully. “*Sipsip*” refers to the person who uses compliments to gain self-serving favor or advantage from another person. In this case, the bullies used these terms to make his or her classmates feel intimidated and unsettled.

Table 3. What linguistic and emotive features characterize these expressions?

Emotive features	Verbal expression	Descriptive meaning
Irritated	<i>ansed</i>	Untidy
Shame		No proper hygiene
Humiliated	<i>bayot</i>	Gay
		A person who likes the same sex
Angry	<i>bileg</i>	Cross-eyed
Insulted	<i>boda</i>	Dullard
Embarrassed	<i>bolkad</i>	One with big eyes
Insulted	<i>datla</i>	Slut
Embarrassed	<i>di phakakan</i>	Thin and short
		Poor
Disturbed	<i>di psorat</i>	Lazy
Embarrassed	<i>kaolit</i>	Fat
		Eat too much
		Heavy
Humiliated	<i>mado</i>	Stinky
		No proper hygiene
Insulted	<i>taleng</i>	Inattentive
Belittled		Careless
		No presence of mind
Belittled	<i>tikogas</i>	Skinny
		Cannot eat
		Poor
Insecure	<i>baluga</i>	Ugliness
Annoyed	<i>sipsip</i>	Obsequious
Misjudged		Take advantage

Table 3 presents the emotive features of the linguistic component, the verbal expressions in Meranaw and other languages, and their descriptive meanings. The first column disclosed the linguistic component of the verbal expressions, particularly their emotive features. The expressive features were the emotions the bullied felt upon hearing the expression. The

second column refers to the expressions uttered by the bully, as discussed in Table 1, and the third column provides a concise description of each expression. The emotive features are irritated, ashamed, humiliated, angry, insulted, embarrassed, disturbed, belittled, insecure, annoyed, and misjudged.

Table 4. Psychological forces underlie bullying behavior among bullies.

Psychological forces personal	Interpersonal
lack of self-awareness (identity confusion)	neglected child due to birth order (middle child)
feelings of vengeance	peer pressure
attention-seeking behavior	intentional insults through name-calling
desire for power and control	spoiled as the eldest child
narcissistic tendencies	poor interpersonal relationships
superiority complex	family pressure
boastful and irritable personality	threatening harm and extortion
self-esteem	manipulation
envy	low socio-economic status
outgoing	mocking with an intent to humiliate
needs praise and attention	discriminatory toward non-Meranaw
conduct disorder	
displacement	
feminine demeanor	

Table 4 discloses the psychological forces on the part of the bully. The top three psychological forces in the area of personal development were: at the last rank is displacement, conduct disorder, and at the top rank are narcissistic tendencies. Displacement is one of the psychological forces of bullying behavior. According to Cherry (2022), if an individual redirects his or her negative emotion from a primary cause to a less damaging recipient, he or she is using a psychological defence mechanism called displacement. In the case of bullying, bullies tend to bully their mates to retransmit their emotions that could be obtained from family issues and complications at home. This is consistent with the study of Valdebenito, Ttofi, Eisner, and

Gaffney (2017), who discussed that the natural consequences of bullying create embarrassment, threat, terror, and emotional anxiety, which are disparagingly damaging.

The top of the list of psychological forces that led to the development of utterances and gestures of bullying is narcissistic tendencies. There are similar psychological approaches that narcissists and bullies follow in how they create and defend their personalities. Another psychological force in the area of interpersonal development is that the bully tends to have poor interpersonal relationships with others. They fail to communicate properly and to respond appropriately. They frequently act differently, which leads to bullying behavior.

The next psychological force, and believed to be one of the most extensive causes of bullying, is discrimination based on race and religion. Discrimination is when you deal with another person unjustly, centered on something about them that's distinct to you or your group, or at least something you believe to be different. In the case of MSU-ILS, the bully is a Meranaw who believes in Islam, and he bullied his classmate, who is a Christian believer. The top psychological force is low socioeconomic status. Individuals with low household income and/or low educational attainment may be defined as having low socioeconomic status (SES). The top of the list of psychological forces that led to the development of utterances and gestures of bullying is narcissistic tendencies. There are similar psychological approaches that are being followed by narcissists and bullies in how they create and defend their personalities. Another psychological force from the area of

interpersonal development is that the bully tends to have a poor interpersonal relationship with other people. He or she fails to communicate properly and to respond appropriately. He or she frequently acts differently, which leads to bullying behavior. The next psychological force, and believed to be one of the extensive causes of bullying, is discrimination based on race and religion. Discrimination is when you deal with another person unjustly, centered on something about them that's distinct to you or your group, or at least something you believe to be different. In the case of MSU-ILS, the bully is a Meranaw who believes in Islam, and he bullied his classmate who is a Christian believer. The top psychological force is low socio-economic status. Individuals with low household income and/or low educational performance may be defined as persons who have low socio-economic status (SES).

Table 5. Psychological forces underlie bullying behavior among the bullied.

Psychological forces personal	Interpersonal
Distinctive physical appearance	Poor interpersonal relationships with peers
Lack of communication and social skills	Lack of support from family
Low self-esteem	Low socio-economic status
Physical deficiency (body odor)	No sense of belongingness
Low perceived self-efficacy	Pampered as the youngest child
Aloof	No social circle of friends
Weak physical health	Racial/religious minority
Assertive	Vulnerable family
Anger management issues	

Table 4 discloses the psychological forces that led these students to be bullied by their classmates in terms of personal development. One psychological force is the attribute of the bullied to have low social skills. There are many advantages to social skills in a person's life. It respects a person's interpersonal rights, facilitates problem-solving, and expedites a person's social life. The bullied learners who are timid, unconfident, nervous, and passive invite rejection from peers because they represent poor social skills that hamper the formation and safeguarding of friendships. Another psychological force, and also one of the most well-known causes of bullying, is the distinctive physical appearance of the bullied child. The top-ranked psychological force on the part of the bullied is their low self-esteem. Gordon (2021) found that kids who are withdrawn, worried, or passive are more likely to be bullied than those who are

outgoing and confident. In reality, if a child lacks self-esteem, they may invite kids who bully others.

Table 5 further displays the psychological factors that lead these students to be bullied by their classmates. In the third rank is the low socioeconomic status of the bullied learners. The next psychological force that falls into the area of interpersonal development of the bullied is the family issues that they experience in their own home. They could be pampered and/or neglected by parents, lack support from family, and come from a vulnerable family. These family characteristics are psychological forces that make the learner feel weak and helpless, leaving them vulnerable to bullying by their classmates. The first rank in this variable is racial and or religious minority, which is found by the bullies as weak, excluded, and easy targets of bullying.

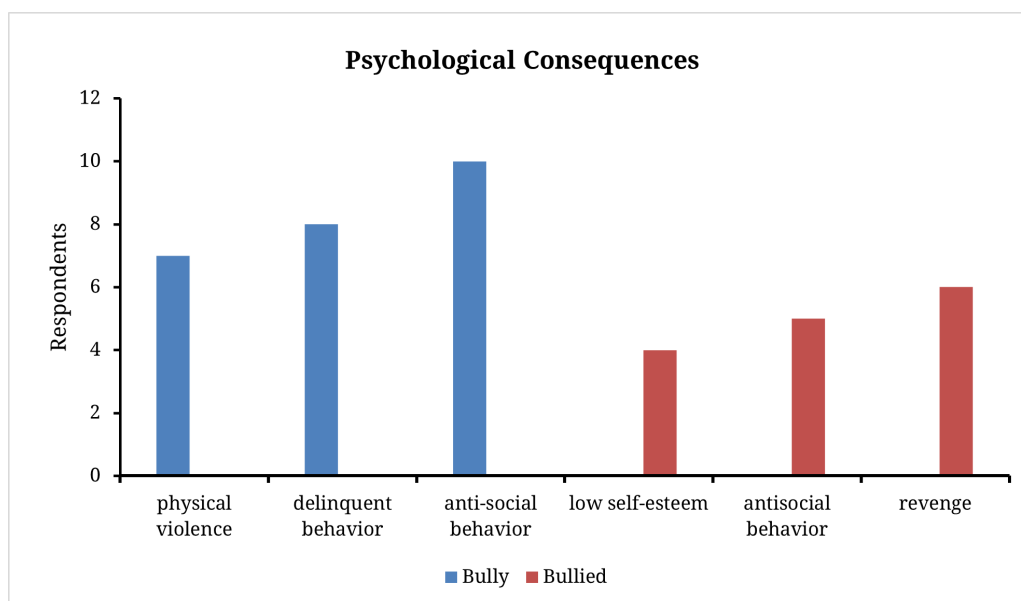


Figure 3. Psychological consequences result from experiences of verbal bullying.

Figure 3 (bar graph in blue) exhibits the psychological consequences on the part of the bully. A psychological consequence that the bully felt or experienced was physical violence. When the situation involves causing pain or attempting to result in physical injury, it is called physical violence. Delinquent behavior is another psychological consequence for bullies. A learner who displays persistent behavioral issues is likely to be a delinquent. Oftentimes, these learners exhibit low self-esteem, conduct disorder, low self-control, and mental disorder, and perform unsatisfactorily in their academics. The first on the list is the development of anti-social behaviors. According to Morin (2020), anti-social people are egotistical and careless individuals who cannot sympathize, contravene public norms and principles, and show disrespect for others' human rights. Because they are exceptionally relaxed and need immediate pleasure, they can effortlessly perpetrate bullying.

Figure 3 (red bar graph) shows the psychological consequences experienced by the bullied. These are low self-esteem, aggression, fear of possible harm from others, physical violence, fewer peer friends, distrust, hostility, attributions towards Meranaws, hatred, and revenge. Moreover, a psychological consequence of bullying is hostility towards the Meranaws. Bullied students because of their race and ethnic affiliation felt hostile in dealing with their Meranaw classmates. Bullying develops anti-social behavior, especially among bullied children. The encounter may result in the person detaching from social interaction with others, as they fail to develop confidence in their ability to handle these connections and cease trusting others to acknowledge them as they are (Woda, 2019). The most significant psychological consequence observed in this study is the strong sense of revenge felt by bullied children towards their bullies. Some teens who have been bullied look for ways to retaliate or to seek revenge.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that verbal bullying among Meranaw learners is not merely an expression of individual aggression but a culturally and linguistically embedded practice. While previous studies associate verbal violence with traits such as narcissism and heightened anger (Man, 2022), the present study shows that these traits are enacted through culturally meaningful language. In the Meranaw context, name-calling and mockery—identified in the results as the most frequent forms of verbal bullying—carry deeper implications because they directly challenge *maratabat* (honor) and family reputation. Unlike generic insults, Meranaw derogatory expressions function as symbolic attacks on identity, reinforcing social hierarchies within peer groups. This finding aligns with Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics, which posits that language reflects shared cultural conceptualizations and values (Sharifian, 2017).

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the study reveals that repeated exposure to culturally loaded verbal insults shapes how bullied learners process meaning and construct self-identity. Consistent with Cognitive Theory, children internalize the negative labels embedded in repeated verbal aggression, which leads to lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and reduced academic engagement. This supports earlier findings that verbal bullying undermines motivation and performance (Viuni, 2019). The internalization process observed in the narratives reflects how language operates not only as communication but as a cognitive mechanism that influences emotional regulation and self-perception (Shi and Gao, 2025). Unlike general forms of ridicule, Meranaw verbal bullying is intensified by cultural meanings attached to words, amplifying psychological harm.

A significant contribution of this study is the identification of cultural disidentification as a response to verbal bullying. Some learners deliberately avoided using the Meranaw language or expressing cultural identity to protect themselves from ridicule. This behavior illustrates how bullying affects linguistic choice and cultural affiliation, supporting Weinstein et al. (2021), who argued that language-based bullying can lead to cultural alienation. Within the Meranaw context, avoiding one's language represents not just a coping strategy but a disruption of cultural continuity. This finding deepens existing literature by showing how bullying influences both linguistic behavior and cultural identity formation.

Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the results show that interactions across multiple systems shape verbal bullying. At the microsystem level, peer dynamics and family environments influence both bullying behavior and vulnerability (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Narratives revealed that patterns of verbal aggression often mirrored family communication styles, suggesting that children may learn and reproduce aggressive language through observation, consistent with Behaviorist principles (Skinner, 1953). At the macrosystem level, socioeconomic status, religious identity, and cultural norms shaped who became targets and how bullying was linguistically expressed. Learners from minority religious backgrounds or low socioeconomic status were more frequently targeted, reinforcing findings by Campbell et al. (2019) and Khanna (2013) on systemic inequalities and discrimination.

The study further shows that vulnerability to verbal bullying among Meranaw learners is closely tied to psychological traits such as submissiveness, anxiety, social withdrawal, and low self-esteem. These characteristics were frequently exploited through language, with insults and mockery strategically aimed to emphasize weakness. This aligns with Abidoye (2021), who noted that visible insecurity increases the likelihood of victimization. Importantly, the Meranaw linguistic context intensifies this vulnerability, as insults often invoke culturally sensitive themes of honor, belonging, and worth, making the emotional impact more severe than that of generic verbal aggression.

In several narratives, victim responses included rumination and desires for revenge, highlighting the emotional consequences of sustained verbal bullying (Wang et al., 2024). Wang et al. (2019) conceptualization of revenge as a defense mechanism is evident in how some learners internalize anger before expressing it indirectly or cognitively. Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory helps explain these responses as manifestations of suppressed aggression and unresolved emotional conflict. The cultural acceptability or restraint of retaliation within Meranaw society further shapes how these impulses are managed, supporting Grobbink et al. (2015), who emphasized cultural variation in revenge-related behavior.

Overall, this study demonstrates that verbal bullying among Meranaw learners emerges from the interaction of linguistic features, cultural meanings, and psychological processes. Behaviorism explains how aggressive language is learned and reinforced, Cognitive Theory clarifies how repeated verbal abuse reshapes thought patterns and self-concept, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory situates bullying within layered social contexts, and Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory illuminates underlying emotional drives and responses. By grounding these theories in Meranaw-specific linguistic and cultural evidence, the study advances understanding of verbal bullying as a culturally situated psycholinguistic phenomenon rather than a universal behavioral issue.

Practical implications

1. Guidance Programs

Schools should implement culturally sensitive guidance programs that address both psychological and social dimensions of bullying. Programs can include workshops on emotional regulation, coping strategies, and building social skills for vulnerable learners. Peer support initiatives can reinforce positive interactions, while counseling sessions can help students navigate identity challenges, including issues of cultural disidentification, low self-esteem, and family-related vulnerabilities.

2. Language-Aware Interventions

Interventions should specifically target the linguistic aspects of bullying. Teachers and counsellors can be trained to recognize culturally loaded insults and derogatory expressions, particularly those that threaten *maratabat* or other key cultural values. Classroom activities can promote respectful communication, language awareness, and constructive conflict resolution, while curricula can integrate discussions on the social and emotional impact of words. By addressing both the form and meaning of verbal expressions, language-aware interventions reduce the perpetuation of culturally mediated bullying and enhance social cohesion.

By linking specific verbal expressions, cultural norms, and psychological forces to these four theoretical perspectives, this study demonstrates how verbal bullying in the Meranaw context is a culturally and linguistically embedded phenomenon. Integrating these insights into both guidance programs and language-focused interventions provides a holistic approach to reducing bullying and fostering safer, more inclusive educational environments.

The findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive guidance programs that address the psychological and social dimensions of verbal bullying among Meranaw learners. Interventions should incorporate emotional regulation, self-esteem building, and coping strategies that recognize the cultural importance of *maratabat* and identity. Grounded in Behaviorism, Cognitive Theory, and Psychoanalytic Theory, guidance services can address both observable behaviors and internalized emotional distress through counselling, peer support, and skills-based activities.

Language-aware interventions are essential in addressing culturally mediated verbal bullying. Teachers and counselors should be trained to identify culturally loaded expressions that threaten *maratabat* and social belonging. Classroom activities and school policies that promote respectful language use and awareness of the emotional impact of words can help disrupt harmful verbal patterns and foster inclusive school environments. By integrating culturally informed guidance and language-focused strategies, schools can more effectively reduce verbal bullying and support the emotional, social, and academic well-being of Meranaw learners.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of bullying and its potentially detrimental effects on a child's psychological, emotional, and social development. Although bullying can manifest in various forms, it is crucial to acknowledge that each child's response is unique, shaped by their individual personality, resilience, and support systems. This highlights the importance of early recognition and intervention by parents, guardians, and educators to ensure that children

receive the support and guidance they need when faced with such challenges.

Furthermore, the school environment itself—including its culture, policies, and social dynamics—must be carefully examined. A strong sense of school identification, in which students feel valued and respected, is essential for mitigating bullying behaviors. This research highlights the importance of cultivating a supportive, inclusive school climate that affirms student identity and well-being. In doing so, schools not only reduce bullying prevalence but also enhance students' overall engagement, sense of belonging, and academic success.

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DECLARATION

Informed consent statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. The research procedures were approved by the university's ethics review board to minimize any potential harm.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest, whether financial or non-financial, related to this manuscript. No affiliations, funding sources, or personal relationships influenced the conduct, analysis, or reporting of the research.

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