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Comparing Face-to-Face and Online Bullying Prevalence, Coping Mechanisms, and Recommendations Among LGBTQ+ Youth in the Philippines

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Abstract

Bullying remains a significant threat to the psychological well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, yet limited research has directly compared the relative prevalence and salience of face-to-face and online victimization within Philippine settings. This study examined the comparative prevalence of face-to-face and online bullying among 149 LGBTQ+ youth recruited from secondary schools and universities in Regions I and III of the Philippines, alongside qualitative narratives from 95 participants describing their coping strategies and recommendations for safer institutions. A convergent mixed-methods design was used. McNemar's test was applied to paired responses (n = 98) to evaluate the within-subject difference between the two bullying contexts, supplemented by descriptive cross-tabulations across sex, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and by inductive thematic analysis of open-ended responses. Face-to-face bullying was reported by 48.3% of respondents compared with 35.6% for online bullying, a difference confirmed as statistically significant ($p < .001$). Transgender- and gay-identifying respondents reported the highest victimization rates in both contexts, and older respondents (25–34 years) reported disproportionately higher face-to-face victimization than younger respondents. Thematic analysis identified self-acceptance and identity affirmation as the predominant coping response, with formal help-seeking notably rare. Participants articulated concrete, youth-driven recommendations spanning school policy, educator allyship, peer support structures, family engagement, and digital-platform accountability. These findings extend an earlier descriptive account of this dataset (Barrera et al., 2024) by isolating the differential statistical salience of in-person victimization and centering participant-derived solutions, and suggest that anti-bullying interventions in conservative, collectivist contexts such as the Philippines should prioritize in-person institutional reform without neglecting digital safety.

Introduction

Bullying directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) youth is consistently associated with elevated risk for anxiety, depression, academic disengagement, substance use, and suicidality (Kosciw et al., 2020; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). In the Philippines, the expansion of public visibility for LGBTQ+ identities over the past decade has not been matched by commensurate gains in institutional protection. Although the Department of Education has issued gender-mainstreaming guidance and several local government units have passed SOGIE-inclusive ordinances, no comprehensive national anti-discrimination law currently exists, and enforcement of existing school-level protections remains uneven (Alampay et al., 2020; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Within this policy gap, LGBTQ+ youth continue to navigate both traditional, in-person forms of harassment and increasingly prevalent forms of harassment conducted through digital platforms.

Much of the existing literature on youth bullying treats face-to-face and online victimization as parallel but separate phenomena, with comparatively few studies formally testing whether one context is statistically more salient than the other for the same respondents (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Wright & Wachs, 2019). This distinction carries practical weight: anti-bullying resourcing in Philippine schools has

increasingly emphasized cyber-safety and online conduct policies, while the relative contribution of in-person victimization to LGBTQ+ youths' psychological burden has received comparatively less direct empirical attention in the local literature (Garcia & Reyes, 2021; Tan et al., 2022).

Bullying Against LGBTQ+ Youth in the Philippine Context

The Philippines is frequently characterized in regional comparisons as relatively tolerant of LGBTQ+ visibility, particularly in media and popular culture (UNDP & USAID, 2014). This perceived tolerance, however, coexists with substantial structural gaps in protection. A national SOGIE Equality Bill has been repeatedly filed and stalled in Congress for more than two decades, leaving anti-discrimination protection to a patchwork of local government ordinances and institution-specific policies of uneven scope and enforcement (Salazar & De Guzman, 2021). Within schools specifically, the Department of Education's gender-mainstreaming guidance provides a policy basis for inclusive practice, but implementation varies considerably by region and by individual school leadership, and several studies suggest that classroom-level enforcement of traditional gender norms continues largely unchanged in many settings (Alampay et al., 2020; Garcia & Reyes, 2021).

Within this landscape, Filipino LGBTQ+ youth navigate bullying that is frequently rooted in language and terminology specific to local SOGIESC discourse—terms such as “bakla,” “tomboy,” and related vernacular markers that can function either as neutral self-identification or as instruments of ridicule depending on context and speaker intent (Salazar & De Guzman, 2021). This linguistic dimension of victimization, documented in the companion analysis of this dataset (Barrera et al., 2024), underscores that bullying in the Philippine context is not merely a generic peer-conflict phenomenon but is frequently structured around culturally specific markers of gender non-conformity. The present study builds on this foundation by asking a narrower but practically consequential question: among the channels through which such bullying occurs, does the immediate, in-person environment or the digital environment carry the greater comparative burden for Filipino LGBTQ+ youth specifically?

Face-to-Face Versus Online Bullying in the Broader Literature

The relative salience of face-to-face versus online bullying has been examined more extensively in general, not specifically LGBTQ+, youth populations. Findings from this broader literature are mixed. Some researchers report that the rapid expansion of social media use among adolescents has elevated online victimization to a level comparable with, or in some samples exceeding, traditional bullying (Wright & Wachs, 2019). Others find that face-to-face victimization remains the more frequently reported form even among heavy social media users, particularly in school settings where physical proximity to peers is sustained throughout the day (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Among LGBTQ+-specific samples, Earnshaw et al. (2018) found that the degree to which a young person's gender expression was perceived as non-conforming predicted both face-to-face and online victimization, but did not directly

test whether the two channels differed significantly in prevalence within the same individuals—the specific comparison this study undertakes. This gap in formal within-subject statistical testing, particularly outside North American and European samples, motivates the present analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary frameworks. Meyer's (2003) minority stress model proposes that sexual and gender minority individuals experience chronic, identity-linked social stressors—including prejudice events, expectations of rejection, and internalized stigma—that accumulate over time to produce disproportionate mental health burden relative to majority populations. Herek's (2007) conceptualization of sexual stigma extends this model by distinguishing enacted stigma (overt discriminatory acts, such as face-to-face harassment), felt stigma (the anticipation of discrimination, which can shape disclosure and help-seeking behavior), and internalized stigma (the incorporation of negative societal attitudes into one's self-concept). Finally, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory situates these individual-level processes within nested environmental systems—family, school, peer group, community, and broader cultural norms—that jointly shape a young person's exposure to, and resources for coping with, victimization. Read together, these frameworks suggest that the channel through which bullying occurs (in person versus online) is not merely a logistical detail but may carry distinct implications for enacted versus felt stigma, for the ecological systems implicated in intervention, and for the resources youth draw upon to cope.

Relationship to Prior Work

The dataset analyzed in the present study is the same dataset reported in Barrera et al. (2024): identical respondent pool, identical N (149 quantitative respondents; 95 qualitative sub-sample), collected in a single data-collection wave rather than a separate or expanded sampling effort. Barrera et al. (2024) examined general bullying experiences and youth perceptions of derogatory SOGIESC-related terminology as a basis for institutional and educational policy recommendations. The present study constitutes a distinct secondary analysis of this same dataset rather than an analysis of a subset, an expanded sample, or a follow-up wave. It diverges from the 2024 publication in three respects: first, it applies a dedicated within-subject statistical comparison (McNemar's test) to formally evaluate whether face-to-face and online bullying differ in prevalence for the same individuals, rather than describing each context independently; second, it disaggregates prevalence across sex, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity subgroups to identify which populations carry the greatest comparative burden of in-person versus online victimization; and third, it foregrounds a focused thematic account of participant-generated coping strategies and policy recommendations that was not the analytic focus of the earlier publication. This relationship to prior work, including the exact correspondence in sample size, is disclosed here in the interest of transparency and is reiterated in the Method section.

Purpose and Objectives

This study sought to address three related gaps: the scarcity of Philippine-specific research directly comparing face-to-face and online bullying among LGBTQ+ youth, the limited use of formal statistical tests of within-subject differences between bullying contexts in this population, and the underrepresentation of youth-generated solutions in the design of anti-bullying interventions. Specifically, the study aimed to (a) describe the demographic and SOGIESC profile of LGBTQ+ youth respondents; (b) assess and statistically compare the prevalence of face-to-face and online bullying; (c) examine how this comparative prevalence varies by sex, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity; (d) identify the coping mechanisms LGBTQ+ youth employ in response to both bullying contexts; and (e) document youth-driven recommendations for educators, policymakers, and institutions.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently through a single survey instrument and analyzed separately before integration at the interpretation stage. The quantitative strand permitted statistical comparison of prevalence and psychological correlates across bullying contexts and demographic subgroups, while the qualitative strand allowed coping strategies and policy recommendations to be characterized in participants' own language.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

A non-probability convenience sample of 149 LGBTQ+-identifying senior high school and university students was recruited from institutions in Region I and Region III of the Philippines: Pangasinan State University (Lingayen, Asingan, Urdaneta, and Bayambang campuses), Bayambang National High School, and Tarlac State University. Convenience sampling was selected given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and practical constraints on accessing SOGIESC-diverse respondents across multiple school sites. Of the 149 quantitative respondents, 95 additionally provided open-ended qualitative responses describing their coping strategies and recommendations; these 95 narratives constitute the qualitative sub-sample. Respondent demographic characteristics are reported in the Results section (Table 1).

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended items (demographic profile, bullying prevalence by context) and open-ended items (coping strategies, recommendations). The instrument was developed by the research team and reviewed by a faculty member at Pangasinan State University for content clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness prior to administration. The

finalized instrument was distributed electronically via Google Forms to facilitate access across multiple school sites.

Data Collection Procedure

The survey was disseminated through institutional channels at each participating site. Participants accessed the questionnaire online and completed it voluntarily. An informed consent statement was presented at the start of the form, and participants could not proceed without acknowledging it.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was embedded at the start of the survey instrument, and participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. No directly identifying personal data (e.g., full names, contact details) were collected. All responses were stored securely and used solely for academic and institutional research purposes. This study was approved by the Pangasinan State University Research Ethics Committee, under University Board of Regents (BOR) Approved Resolution No. 113, Series of 2024, and was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and comparable ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to characterize the respondent profile and bullying prevalence. McNemar's test, a non-parametric procedure appropriate for paired dichotomous outcomes measured on the same individuals, was used to evaluate whether the proportion of respondents reporting face-to-face bullying differed significantly from the proportion reporting online bullying, restricted to the n = 98 respondents who provided a definitive response to both items. Cross-tabulations disaggregated by sex, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity were computed to describe how comparative prevalence varied across subgroups; given the descriptive, non-inferential purpose of these subgroup breakdowns and the resulting small cell sizes in several subgroups (e.g., transgender, n = 5), no subgroup-level significance tests were performed, and these comparisons should be interpreted as descriptive rather than confirmatory. Qualitative responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, involving familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and write-up; coded themes were subsequently quantified by frequency to indicate relative emphasis across the qualitative sub-sample.

Results

Respondent Profile

Table 1

Respondent Profile: Frequency and Percentage Distribution (N = 149)

Variable	Category	f	%
Sex	Male	72	48.32
	Female	77	51.68
	Total	149	100.00
Age	18–24	132	88.59
	25–34	17	11.41
	Total	149	100.00
Sexual orientation	Bisexual	62	41.61
	Homosexual	46	30.87
	Asexual	22	14.77
	Heterosexual	19	12.75
	Total	149	100.00
Gender identity	Not disclosed	51	34.23
	Agender	34	22.82
	Gay (“Bakla”)	28	18.79
	Non-binary	22	14.77
	Lesbian (“Tomboy”)	9	6.04
	Transgender	5	3.36
	Total	149	100.00

Note. Respondents who self-identified as heterosexual but remained in the LGBTQ+ respondent pool reported gender non-conforming or transgender identities; orientation and gender identity were treated as conceptually distinct items in the instrument.

The sample was nearly evenly split between male (48.32%) and female (51.68%) respondents and was predominantly composed of 18- to 24-year-olds (88.59%), consistent with the age range most represented in secondary and tertiary education. Bisexual (41.61%) and homosexual (30.87%) orientations were most common. Notably, more than one third of respondents (34.23%) did not disclose a specific gender identity label. Non-disclosure of this magnitude is consistent with patterns reported elsewhere in the region, where fear of judgment, internalized stigma, or distrust regarding data confidentiality have been documented as barriers to identity disclosure in survey research (Kosciw et al.,

2020; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Consistent with de Vries's (2015) argument that researchers studying gender-diverse populations should treat non-categorical or unlabeled responses as meaningful data rather than missingness to be discarded, this non-disclosure is treated here as a methodological consideration warranting interpretation, rather than a simple data-quality problem, and is revisited in the Limitations section.

Prevalence of Face-to-Face and Online Bullying

Table 2 reports the prevalence of face-to-face and online bullying for the full sample (N = 149).

Table 2

Prevalence of Face-to-Face Versus Online Bullying (N = 149)

Bullying type	Yes (f)	Yes (%)	No (f)	No response (f, %)
Face-to-face	72	48.3	26 (17.5%)	51 (34.2%)
Online	53	35.6	45 (30.2%)	51 (34.2%)

Note. The same 51 respondents (34.2%) did not provide a definitive response to either item; the remaining n = 98 respondents who answered both items form the basis of the paired comparison reported in Table 7.

Face-to-face bullying was reported by roughly one in two respondents who answered the item (48.3%), compared with roughly one in three for online bullying (35.6%). The substantial non-response rate (34.2%) on both items is itself informative: prior work on LGBTQ+ youth disclosure suggests that reluctance to report victimization experiences in survey contexts may reflect shame, fear of judgment, or distrust that responses will remain confidential (Kosciw et al., 2020; UNDP & USAID, 2014), a pattern plausibly applicable here though not directly testable with the present data.

Disaggregated Prevalence by Demographic and Identity Subgroups

To examine whether the comparative pattern of face-to-face exceeding online bullying held consistently across subgroups, prevalence was disaggregated by sex, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity. These breakdowns are descriptive; given small subgroup sizes in several categories, no inferential subgroup tests were conducted, and the percentages below should not be interpreted as established population differences.

Table 3 presents this comparison disaggregated by sex.

Table 3

Face-to-Face and Online Bullying Prevalence by Sex

Sex	n	Face-to-face (f)	Face-to-face (%)	Online (f)	Online (%)
Male	72	43	59.7	32	44.4
Female	77	29	37.7	21	27.3

Male respondents (n = 72) reported higher face-to-face (59.7%) and online (44.4%) bullying than female respondents (n = 77; 37.7% and 27.3%, respectively). This sex difference is interpreted in the Discussion.

Table 4 presents the same comparison disaggregated by age group.

Table 4

Face-to-Face and Online Bullying Prevalence by Age Group

Age group	n	Face-to-face (f)	Face-to-face (%)	Online (f)	Online (%)
25–34	17	15	88.2	8	47.1
18–24	132	57	43.2	45	34.1

Respondents aged 25–34 reported higher face-to-face bullying (88.2%) than 18- to 24-year-olds (43.2%), with a smaller gap in online bullying (47.1% vs. 34.1%). Because the 25–34 subgroup is small (n = 17), this difference is treated as descriptive; possible interpretations are taken up in the Discussion.

Table 5 presents the comparison disaggregated by sexual orientation.

Table 5

Face-to-Face and Online Bullying Prevalence by Sexual Orientation

Orientation	n	Face-to-face (f)	Face-to-face (%)	Online (f)	Online (%)
Bisexual	62	29	46.8	14	22.6
Homosexual	46	27	58.7	24	52.2
Heterosexual	19	12	63.2	10	52.6
Asexual	22	4	18.2	5	22.7

Note. See Table 1 note; respondents in this row identified as heterosexual on orientation while reporting a gender non-conforming or transgender gender identity.

Homosexual- and heterosexual-orientation respondents (the latter comprising gender non-conforming or transgender individuals; see note above) reported the highest rates of both bullying types, while asexual respondents reported the lowest. This pattern is interpreted in relation to identity visibility in the Discussion.

Table 6 presents the comparison disaggregated by gender identity.

Table 6

Face-to-Face and Online Bullying Prevalence by Gender Identity

Gender identity	n	Face-to-face (f)	Face-to-face (%)	Online (f)	Online (%)
Transgender	5	5	100.0	5	100.0
Gay (“Bakla”)	28	25	89.3	20	71.4
Non-binary	22	15	68.2	9	40.9
Lesbian (“Tomboy”)	9	6	66.7	4	44.4
Agender	34	21	61.8	15	44.1
Not disclosed	51	0	0.0	0	0.0

Transgender respondents reported the highest possible rate of victimization in both contexts (100% face-to-face, 100% online), followed by gay-identifying (“Bakla”) respondents (89.3% and 71.4%, respectively). The transgender subgroup is small (n = 5) and these proportions should not be generalized; their interpretation, together with the 0% rate among the “not disclosed” category (n = 51, an artifact of non-disclosure rather than an absence of victimization), is taken up in the Discussion and Limitations.

Synthesis of Disaggregated Findings

Across every subgroup examined, face-to-face bullying exceeded online bullying, with the gap most pronounced among older respondents and visibly gender-nonconforming identity categories. This consistency is examined further through the formal within-subject test reported next.

Statistical Comparison: Face-to-Face Versus Online Bullying (McNemar's Test)

McNemar's test was applied to the n = 98 respondents who provided a definitive (Yes/No) response to both the face-to-face and online bullying items, to formally evaluate whether the marginal proportions of face-to-face and online victimization differed within the same individuals.

Table 7

McNemar Test 2 × 2 Contingency Table (n = 98)

Face-to-face: Yes	Online: Yes	Online: No
	49	**23**
Face-to-face: No	4	22

Note. Only respondents who answered both items (n = 98) are included. Discordant cells (face-to-face yes/online no = 23; face-to-face no/online yes = 4) form the basis of the McNemar statistic.

With continuity correction, McNemar's test yielded $\chi^2(1) = 12.00$, $p < .001$ (exact $p \approx .0005$); without continuity correction, $\chi^2(1) = 13.37$, $p < .001$. As an effect-size indicator for the discordant pairs, respondents were 5.75 times more likely to report face-to-face bullying only than online bullying only (odds ratio = 23/4 = 5.75). The asymmetry in discordant pairs—23 respondents reported face-to-face bullying only, compared with 4 who reported online bullying only—drives this result and indicates that face-to-face victimization is not merely co-occurring with online victimization at similar rates but is the more frequently reported context on its own. This finding is descriptive: McNemar's test establishes that the two marginal proportions differ within this sample, but it does not, by itself, establish that exposure to one context causes differential psychological harm, given the correlational, cross-sectional nature of the data. Theoretical interpretation of this result is taken up in the Discussion.

Coping Mechanisms

Table 8 summarizes the coping mechanisms identified through thematic analysis of the qualitative responses.

Table 8

Coping Mechanisms Identified Through Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Responses (n = 95)

Theme	f	Illustrative response
Self-acceptance and confidence-building	45	“I know who I am and their words won’t change that.”
Social support (friends and family)	7	“I talk to my barkada.”
Emotional detachment / indifference	4	“I don’t mind them anymore.”
Avoidance	3	“I walk away whenever they start.”
Confrontation / reporting	2	“I report to the teacher.”
Humor / deflection; professional help-seeking	≤ 1 each	Mentioned only sporadically.

Inductive thematic analysis of the 95 qualitative narratives identified five recurring coping themes. Self-acceptance and identity affirmation was by far the most frequently reported strategy (n = 45), characterized by statements emphasizing internal validation rather than reliance on external intervention. Social support from friends or family was reported considerably less frequently (n = 7), and formal help-seeking through institutional or professional channels was rare (n ≤ 1). These patterns are interpreted in the Discussion.

Youth-Driven Recommendations

Beyond describing how they cope, participants articulated specific, practical recommendations for reducing bullying and improving institutional response. These recommendations clustered into six thematic areas, summarized in Table 9 and described narratively below.

Table 9

Thematic Summary of Participant-Generated Recommendations

Thematic area	Representative recommendations	Illustrative quotation
School policy and safe spaces	LGBTQ+-inclusive anti-bullying policy; visible "Safe Space" signage; anonymous reporting channels	"A Safe Space label is… a signal that we're allowed to exist here."
Educator allyship	SOGIESC training for teachers and guidance staff; visible allyship markers; restorative (not purely punitive) responses	"When teachers actually talk about gender and respect, it helps shut down the bullies."
Peer support structures	LGBTQ+-ally clubs; Gender-Sexuality Alliances; visibility campaigns (e.g., Pride Month activities)	"Being around people who get it makes you feel human again."
Family engagement	SOGIESC-awareness sessions for parents; active-listening guidance for families	"I wish my parents would just ask how I feel without judging."
Institutional and government support	Mandatory teacher sensitivity training; school-based LGBTQ+-competent counseling; stronger cyber-safety enforcement	"We need counselors who understand what being queer means."
Digital platform accountability	Faster hate-speech takedowns; in-app well-being nudges; partnerships with local LGBTQ+ organizations	"The block button is not enough. We need them to care when we're being attacked."

These recommendations are interpreted in relation to the existing evidence on protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Face-to-Face Bullying as the Dominant Form of Victimization

The central finding of this study is that face-to-face bullying was reported significantly more often than online bullying within the same respondents, a pattern confirmed statistically (McNemar's test, $p < .001$) and observed consistently across every demographic and identity subgroup examined. This result complicates a tacit assumption in some recent anti-bullying programming—that digital harassment represents the primary or fastest-growing threat to LGBTQ+ youth—by suggesting that, at least within this sample, in-person victimization remains the more frequently experienced form of harm. This is consistent with international findings that, notwithstanding the rise of cyberbullying, LGBTQ+ youth in many settings continue to report higher exposure to face-to-face harassment, particularly where school-based protections remain limited (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Within Herek's (2007) stigma framework, this pattern may reflect the more readily observable, enacted nature of in-person stigma relative to the comparatively diffuse and sometimes anonymous nature of online harassment; within Bronfenbrenner's

(1979) ecological framing, it points to the school and community microsystems—rather than the digital environment alone—as the proximal sites requiring intervention.

Group Differences and Theoretical Interpretation

The disaggregated findings suggest that visibility of gender expression, more than sexual orientation category per se, tracks closely with victimization risk. Transgender and gay ("Bakla")-identifying respondents reported the highest rates of both face-to-face and online bullying, a pattern consistent with recent national-sample evidence that transgender and gender-questioning adolescents face significantly elevated odds of cyberbullying victimization relative to cisgender peers (Nagata et al., 2025), and with Goffman's (1963) concept of spoiled identity and with prior Philippine and international evidence that visibly gender-nonconforming individuals face compounded discrimination (Richards et al., 2016; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Read through Meyer's (2003) minority stress model, this suggests that the youth carrying the greatest cumulative stress burden are precisely those whose identities are least able to be concealed—a population for whom coping resources may be most urgently needed and least available. The elevated face-to-face victimization reported by older respondents (25–34 years) relative to younger respondents (18–24 years) is interpreted cautiously, given the small size of the older subgroup (n = 17); it is plausibly linked to differences in the school climate these respondents encountered prior to more recent gender-mainstreaming initiatives (Garcia & Reyes, 2021), though a cohort effect of this kind cannot be confirmed without longitudinal data.

The same visibility logic extends to the sex and sexual-orientation breakdowns. Male respondents reported higher face-to-face and online victimization than female respondents, consistent with prior Philippine findings that gay and bisexual male respondents face heightened public scrutiny of non-conforming gender expression (Tan et al., 2022), and with Kosciw et al.'s (2020) finding that male-identifying LGBTQ+ youth perceived as feminine experience more frequent victimization. Similarly, homosexual- and gender-nonconforming heterosexual-identified respondents reported higher victimization than asexual respondents, consistent with Patchin and Hinduja's (2020) observation that more openly expressed LGBTQ+ identities carry elevated exposure to both online and offline harassment. Taken together, the sex, age, orientation, and gender-identity breakdowns converge on the same underlying account: it is the visibility of gender non-conformity, more than any single demographic category, that predicts comparative victimization risk in this sample, echoing Ojeda et al.'s (2023) argument that LGBTQ+ bullying research focused narrowly on sexual orientation or gender identity alone, without accounting for gender expression, risks understating who is actually most at risk.

Coping Mechanisms and the Burden of Self-Reliance

The overwhelming predominance of self-acceptance and identity affirmation as a coping strategy, relative to social support-seeking or formal help-seeking, suggests that LGBTQ+ youth in this sample are absorbing the psychological cost of bullying largely on their own, consistent with what Craig et al. (2015) describe as an intrinsic coping pattern among LGBTQ+ youth navigating environments where external support is limited. While self-affirmation is a meaningful and protective resource (Singh et al., 2011), its

dominance here is better read as a marker of limited external support than as evidence that internal coping alone is sufficient. The rarity of professional help-seeking, in particular, is consistent with previous findings that LGBTQ+ students in the Philippines often perceive school-based support systems as inattentive or unresponsive to their concerns (UNDP & USAID, 2014), and points to a concrete, addressable gap: the near-absence of accessible, LGBTQ+-competent counseling resources within the institutions sampled. De La Rosa and Sandoval (2022) similarly argue that Philippine school mental health programs must explicitly integrate SOGIESC competence into counselor training rather than assume that generic counseling skills transfer adequately to LGBTQ+ students' needs, a recommendation directly supported by the present sample's near-total avoidance of formal help-seeking channels.

From Findings to Action: Youth-Driven Recommendations

A notable strength of this study's qualitative strand is that the recommendations offered did not require external interpretation to be made actionable—participants articulated specific, implementable proposals (inclusive policy language, visible safe-space signage, educator training, peer-led organizations, family-engagement sessions, and platform-level accountability measures) that map closely onto interventions already shown to be protective in the broader literature (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2009). This convergence reinforces calls in the literature for participatory, youth-informed approaches to anti-bullying policy design, rather than top-down interventions developed without direct input from the affected population (Watson et al., 2016).

Relationship to Prior Work

As disclosed in the Introduction, this analysis draws on the same dataset reported descriptively in Barrera et al. (2024), which examined general bullying experiences and youth perceptions of derogatory SOGIESC-related terminology. The present study extends that work rather than duplicating it: it isolates the comparative, within-subject statistical difference between face-to-face and online bullying through McNemar's test, disaggregates this comparison across demographic and identity subgroups, and provides a focused account of coping mechanisms and youth-generated recommendations that were outside the scope of the earlier publication. Researchers and practitioners drawing on both publications should treat them as complementary analyses of a shared dataset rather than as independent samples.

Mapping Findings onto Ecological Systems

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is most useful here when its levels are applied explicitly rather than invoked in passing. At the microsystem level—the immediate settings of peer group, classroom, and family in which a young person directly interacts—this study's findings point clearly to the school and peer environment as the dominant site of risk: face-to-face bullying, concentrated in hallways, classrooms, and peer interactions, exceeded online victimization across every subgroup examined, and

participants' own coping strategies (self-acceptance, occasional peer disclosure) operate almost entirely within this same immediate layer. At the mesosystem level—the connections between microsystems, such as the link between home and school—the near-absence of formal help-seeking and the rarity of family-mediated support identified in the qualitative data suggest a weak mesosystem connection: home and school appear to function as largely separate, uncoordinated systems rather than as mutually reinforcing sources of protection, consistent with participants' explicit requests for parent-oriented SOGIESC programming to be run in coordination with schools rather than independently. At the exosystem level—broader structures that affect the young person indirectly, such as local government policy, media, and digital platforms—participants' recommendations regarding platform-level hate-speech accountability and local government SOGIE ordinances point to leverage points that lie outside any individual school's control but still shape the immediate risk environment. This three-level mapping is consistent with recent work explicitly applying Bronfenbrenner's framework to LGBTQ+ bullying and cyberbullying profiles, which similarly locates peer and family support at the microsystem level and broader normative beliefs at the macrosystem level as key explanatory layers (Muñoz-Fernández et al., 2025). Read this way, the present findings are not simply a list of demographic differences but a structured account of where, ecologically, intervention is likely to have the most leverage: primarily the school-based microsystem, secondarily the home–school mesosystem connection, and only then the exosystem of platform and policy accountability.

Implications for School-Based Practice

The consistency of elevated face-to-face victimization across demographic and identity subgroups suggests that school-based intervention should not be treated as a secondary complement to digital-safety programming but as the primary site of institutional response. Several concrete, low-cost practices are supported both by this study's findings and by the broader literature: explicit, written inclusion of SOGIESC categories within existing anti-bullying policy language (rather than generic non-discrimination clauses that do not name sexual orientation or gender identity); visible designation of safe-space areas or personnel, which participants in this study explicitly identified as meaningful signals of institutional commitment rather than symbolic gestures; and restorative, rather than purely punitive, responses to disclosed bullying incidents, which prior research links to improved school climate without necessarily requiring additional budgetary outlay (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020). Explicit SOGIESC-inclusive policy and visible institutional signage of this kind are also consistent with UNESCO’s (2019) cross-national finding that schools with explicit protections for LGBTQ+ students report lower rates of bullying and stronger overall school climate. Teacher-training interventions focused on SOGIESC sensitivity appear particularly well-supported, given that participants in this sample explicitly and repeatedly identified visible educator allyship as a protective factor, a pattern that converges with Watson et al.'s (2016) finding that even small, low-cost acts of allyship (e.g., correct pronoun usage, intervening when slurs are used) are associated with stronger LGBTQ+ student belonging.

Implications for Digital Safety Policy

Although face-to-face bullying emerged as the more frequently reported context in this sample, the comparatively lower—but still substantial—prevalence of online bullying (35.6%) should not be read as license to deprioritize digital-safety policy. Online and face-to-face victimization were positively associated within this sample (49 of 72 face-to-face-yes respondents also reported online victimization), suggesting that for a substantial subset of LGBTQ+ youth, the two forms of harassment co-occur and likely compound rather than substitute for one another. Participants' own recommendations regarding faster hate-speech takedown mechanisms and in-app well-being prompts are consistent with calls elsewhere in the literature for platform-level accountability measures tailored to LGBTQ+ users (Tang & Fox, 2021; Wright & Wachs, 2019). A reasonable policy implication is therefore not a reallocation of resources away from digital safety, but a rebalancing of relative institutional emphasis so that in-person, school- and community-based intervention receives commensurate priority alongside existing cyber-safety initiatives, rather than being treated as a largely solved problem relative to the digital domain.

This study's principal strength is its direct, within-subject statistical comparison of two bullying contexts among a SOGIESC-diverse Philippine youth sample, paired with a substantial qualitative component centering youth voice. Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the convenience sampling strategy, while appropriate for exploratory research, limits generalizability beyond the specific institutions and regions sampled; the sample is not nationally representative. Second, all data were self-reported through a single cross-sectional online survey, introducing the possibility of recall and social desirability bias, and precluding causal inference regarding the psychological effects of either bullying context. Third, the substantial non-response rate on the bullying-prevalence items (34.2%) and on gender-identity disclosure (34.23%) may reflect non-random patterns of disclosure avoidance that the present data cannot directly characterize; the true population prevalence of bullying or of specific gender identities in this population may therefore differ from the observed proportions. Fourth, several subgroup analyses (e.g., transgender respondents, n = 5; older age group, n = 17) involved small cell sizes, and the corresponding percentages should be treated as descriptive rather than as stable population estimates; no formal inferential tests were applied to these subgroup comparisons for this reason. Finally, the survey instrument was developed by the research team and reviewed for content validity by a single faculty reviewer rather than subjected to formal psychometric validation, which may limit measurement precision.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could productively employ probability-based or stratified sampling to improve generalizability, incorporate validated psychometric measures of bullying victimization and psychological distress to permit more precise effect estimation, and use longitudinal designs to clarify whether the age-related differences observed here reflect cohort effects, developmental effects, or both. Qualitative or mixed-methods follow-up specifically targeting the substantial subgroup of respondents who declined to disclose a gender identity label could also help clarify whether non-disclosure reflects safety concerns, identity fluidity, item-wording issues, or some combination of these, and would strengthen the evidentiary basis for the disclosure-related interpretations offered here.

Conclusion

This study found that face-to-face bullying was reported significantly more often than online bullying among LGBTQ+ youth in the Philippines, a pattern that held consistently across sex, age, sexual orientation, and gender-identity subgroups and was confirmed through a formal within-subject statistical test. Transgender- and gay-identifying respondents reported the highest victimization rates in both contexts, underscoring the heightened vulnerability associated with visible gender non-conformity. Coping with this victimization fell disproportionately on individual self-reliance, with formal help-seeking notably rare. At the same time, participants offered concrete, actionable recommendations—spanning school policy, educator allyship, peer support, family engagement, and digital accountability—that align closely with interventions already established as protective in the broader literature. Building on an earlier descriptive account of this dataset (Barrera et al., 2024), these findings suggest that anti-bullying efforts directed at LGBTQ+ youth in conservative, collectivist contexts such as the Philippines should prioritize sustained, in-person institutional reform in schools and communities, while continuing to address digital safety as a meaningful but comparatively secondary concern. Centering the voices and proposed solutions of LGBTQ+ youth themselves, rather than relying solely on top-down intervention design, remains essential to developing protections that are both responsive to lived experience and likely to be effective.

Declarations

Funding: The authors received no funding for this research.

Ethics approval: This study was approved by the Pangasinan State University Research Ethics Committee under University Board of Regents (BOR) Approved Resolution No. 113, Series of 2024, and was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and comparable ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Consent to participate: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent to publish: Not applicable.

Data availability: The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant privacy and confidentiality considerations associated with SOGIESC-identifying survey data, but de-identified, aggregated data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Clinical trial number: Not applicable.

Author Contribution

J.C.B. conceived the study, led data analysis, drafted and finalized the manuscript. C.A.P.A. contributed to instrument development, data collection, writing draft, and qualitative coding. A.G.S. contributed to data collection, ethical review coordination, writing draft and manuscript revision.

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