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Middle school students' perceptions of peer bullying: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study examined middle school students' perceptions of peer bullying using qualitative methods.
Background: Peer bullying is a significant social problem that negatively affects children's physical, emotional, and social development. While many studies have explored its prevalence and consequences, most rely on quantitative data. Qualitative research is needed to capture students' lived experiences and to better understand the complex nature of bullying.
Methods: A qualitative descriptive design supported by phenomenological elements was used with 27 middle school students between February and April 2025. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analyzed manually using thematic analysis.
Results: Four themes and 14 sub-themes were identified: Four themes and 14 sub-themes were identified: Types of Bullying (verbal, physical, psychological, and cyberbullying), Perceived Positive Meaning (academic achievement, social reputation, and empathy), Perceived Negative Meaning (impairment in social interaction, aggression, and feelings of revenge), and Coping with Bullying (raising awareness, peer support, collaboration with teachers, and sharing with family).
Conclusions: Bullying occurred in verbal, psychological, physical, and cyber forms, causing negative effects such as social difficulties and aggression. Some students reported positive outcomes, including increased empathy and academic achievement. Awareness, teacher support, and family involvement were important in coping with bullying.
Implications for nursing and health policy: School nurses and mental health professionals should take an active role in recognizing and preventing peer bullying. Implementing school-based awareness and support programs can strengthen students' coping skills and promote safer school environments.
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What is already known on this topic?

Peer bullying is a common social problem during childhood and adolescence that negatively affects physical, emotional, and social development. It occurs in various forms, including verbal, physical, psychological, and cyberbullying, and can impact not only victims but also perpetrators and bystanders. Previous research has documented that bullying is associated with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, social isolation, and aggressive behavior. While numerous studies have examined the prevalence and consequences of bullying, most rely on quantitative methods and statistical analyses, with relatively few qualitative studies exploring students' perceptions, experiences, and emotional responses. Existing qualitative research has often focused on teachers' and parents' perspectives rather than directly on adolescents' lived experiences.

What this study adds

This study provides an in-depth understanding of middle school students' perceptions and experiences of peer bullying from a qualitative perspective. It highlights the emotional and social impacts of bullying on victims, perpetrators, and bystanders and identifies both positive outcomes, such as increased empathy and academic motivation, and negative consequences, including social difficulties, aggression, and feelings of revenge. The study also emphasizes the importance of awareness, teacher support, and family involvement in coping with bullying, offering insights for school-based interventions and mental health policy.

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How this study might affect research, practice or policy

The findings underscore the need for school-based programs that actively prevent and address peer bullying. For practice, school nurses, teachers, and mental health professionals can use these insights to develop targeted interventions and support strategies. For research, the study highlights the value of qualitative approaches in exploring students' lived experiences and encourages further in-depth studies on bullying. At the policy level, the results can inform guidelines and initiatives to promote safer and more supportive school environments.

Peer bullying is a pervasive social problem that negatively affects children's and adolescents' physical, emotional, and social development (Moreno et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2022). It involves repeated harmful behaviors—physical, verbal, social, or digital—targeted at peers, with lasting consequences for victims, perpetrators, and witnesses (Roques et al., 2022; Smith & Caron, 2023; Ybarra et al., 2019). Middle school is a particularly sensitive period, as students navigate complex social relationships and identity formation, increasing their vulnerability to peer aggression (Musu et al., 2019). Despite extensive quantitative research on the prevalence and outcomes of bullying (Arseneault, 2018; Ossa et al., 2019; Pan, 2023; Smith et al., 2021), little is known about how students experience and interpret bullying, particularly within specific cultural contexts (Stahel et al., 2024). Specifically, few studies have captured students' own perspectives, highlighting the need for qualitative inquiry to understand their subjective experiences.

In Türkiye, national surveys indicate high rates of school bullying, influenced by hierarchical classroom structures, competitive academic environments, and strong social norms regarding peer inclusion and conformity (TurkStat, 2023). However, qualitative insights into middle school students' perceptions and emotional responses remain limited, and most qualitative studies have relied on teachers and parents rather than students themselves (Benli & Özdemir, 2024; Celik et al., 2023; Ekşi & Türk-Kurtça, 2021; Francis et al., 2022; Horton & Lyng, 2022; Karabulut et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding these subjective experiences is crucial for designing culturally sensitive interventions and school policies.

Qualitative approaches, including phenomenological perspectives, are often used to explore lived experiences, as they focus on individuals' viewpoints and the meanings they assign to events (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Although this study does not fully rely on a phenomenological methodology, such perspectives support the descriptive design by providing a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of peer bullying. The study is grounded in developmental psychology, which emphasizes social and identity development during adolescence (Erikson, 1959), and in social learning theory, which explains how aggressive behaviors can be learned through observation (Bandura, 1969). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to illuminate the dynamics of bullying within its cultural context and to inform evidence-based, contextually grounded prevention and support strategies. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question:

1. What types of experiences and perceptions do middle school students have regarding peer bullying?

Methods

This study was reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist, which guides the transparent reporting of qualitative studies (Tong et al., 2007).

Study design

This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive research design to examine middle school students' perceptions of peer bullying by adhering closely to participants' statements and limiting theoretical abstraction. While the study's fundamental methodological approach was descriptive, certain phenomenological elements were also used to reveal the meanings attributed to students' lived experiences and perceptions of bullying (Creswell & Poth, 2016). However, the study did not rely entirely on a phenomenological framework from an ontological or epistemological perspective. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach was adopted for data analysis, ensuring that patterns of meaning within the participants' narratives were systematically identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis, in line with the descriptive design, provided researchers with the opportunity to interpret students' experiences of bullying, their perceptions, and their coping processes in a flexible and in-depth manner.

Research team and reflexivity

The research team consisted of three researchers. The first author was a doctoral candidate in psychiatric nursing and had conducted studies in the field of child and adolescent mental health. She had also completed coursework and gained experience in qualitative research. The other authors (A.K.U. and A.S.T.) were experienced in qualitative research and had completed their doctoral studies in psychiatric nursing and public health nursing, respectively. Both authors had published international articles on the subject. There was no prior relationship between the researchers and the participants before the study began. Throughout the research process, the researchers engaged in reflexivity to examine how their own experiences and subjectivities might influence data analysis and interpretation and to develop strategies to minimize these potential effects (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexivity was conducted in accordance with thematic analysis practices (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Throughout the study, the researchers actively reflected on how their professional backgrounds, experiences, and assumptions could influence coding process and theme development. The three researchers conducted coding independently and then discussed their interpretations, taking different perspectives into account. This process ensured that multiple viewpoints were considered and enhanced the consistency of the identified themes. Ethical sensitivity was prioritized during the data collection process, and participants were not subjected to any pressure or guidance. Informed consent was obtained from the parents and participants, and it was clearly stated that participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary, that participants could withdraw from the interview at any time, and that they had no obligations.

Study group

This study did not adopt a phenomenological design but was conducted within the framework of a qualitative descriptive approach using thematic analysis. The research sample was determined using criterion sampling, a purposive sampling technique, to ensure the selection of participants most suitable for the research purpose and capable of providing rich information (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This approach was suitable for contributing to the emergence of meaningful patterns during the thematic analysis of participants' experiences of peer bullying. Purposive sampling allows for in-depth examination in information-rich situations. In qualitative research, data saturation is considered the primary indicator for determining sample size. Systematic reviews indicate that saturation can be achieved with a limited number of interviews (9–17) or focus group discussions (4–8) among relatively homogeneous participant groups with narrow research objectives (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, the sample size was not calculated in advance; data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, and the saturation point was determined by monitoring the themes and codes that emerged during the process. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes related to peer bullying emerged from the participants' accounts. Accordingly, the study was completed with 27 middle school students. The inclusion criteria were (a) being a middle school student, (b) having experienced peer bullying

role of a bully, victim, or bystander, and (c) being willing to participate and share experiences. Students whose parents did not provide written informed consent and those identified by the school guidance unit as experiencing severe emotional distress were excluded from the study.

Data collection

Initially, the sociodemographic characteristics and peer bullying–related attributes of middle school students were identified through a Personal Information Form developed by the researchers based on the relevant literature (Celik et al., 2023; Ekşi & Türk-Kurtça, 2021; Horton & Lyng, 2022). This form included items on age, gender, grade level, experience of peer bullying at school, and the role assumed in the bullying process (bully, victim, or bystander). The primary data of this study were collected through individual interviews using a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers in line with previous studies (Benli & Özdemir, 2024; Celik et al., 2023; Ekşi & Türk-Kurtça, 2021; Francis et al., 2022; Horton & Lyng, 2022; Moreno et al., 2021; Smith & Caron, 2023). The semi-structured interview form consisted of five open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed information about students' perceptions and experiences of peer bullying. Participants were encouraged to freely share their experiences, and follow-up questions were used to ensure that their narratives emerged naturally, thereby preserving phenomenological depth. To ensure content validity, the questions were reviewed and refined based on feedback obtained from three subject-matter experts in the field (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). The open-ended questions included in the semi-structured interview form were as follows: *"What comes to your mind when you hear the words bullying or peer bullying?" In your opinion, what kinds of situations can be considered bullying?", "Have you ever witnessed a friend being bullied (for example, being beaten, mocked, threatened, or excluded)?" "If you have witnessed such a situation, how did you feel, what did you think, and what did you experience?" "Have you ever been exposed to peer bullying (for example, being beaten, mocked, threatened, or excluded)? If you experienced this situation, how did you feel, what did you think afterward, and what did you experience?" "Have you ever bullied a friend? If so, how did this make you feel, what did you think afterward, and what did you experience?" "In your opinion, what measures should be taken to prevent peer bullying, and what should be taught to young people in this regard?"*

To assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the interview questions, a pilot study was conducted with two students. Based on feedback received from students during the pilot interviews, the wording of some questions was simplified, difficult terms were explained, and the order of some questions was rearranged to improve logical flow. Following the pilot interviews, the questions were revised accordingly, and the students' views on peer bullying obtained during the pilot stage were excluded in the main study data. Prior to the interviews, both the students and their parents were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and written informed consent was obtained. The interviews were initiated upon receipt of informed consent. The interviews were conducted by the lead researcher, who had prior experience in qualitative research, using a semi-structured interview form. This approach was chosen to ensure consistency in the interviews. Furthermore, having all interviews conducted by a single researcher increased standardization in the data collection process and enabled a more comprehensive evaluation of the experiences shared by participants. As the researcher was trained in interview techniques, the interviews with 27 participants were conducted in a manageable manner; interview recordings were reviewed repeatedly, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the data. However, having a single interviewer also carries the potential for interviewer bias. To minimize this risk, a pilot study was conducted prior to data collection, resulting in a standardized semi-structured interview form. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and that this would not result in any negative consequences. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and private room within the school environment to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. Each individual interview was conducted by the researcher with middle school students who had experienced peer bullying as a bully, victim, or bystander between February and April 2025. The interviews lasted an average of 45 min. At the end of the data collection process, the researchers summarized participants' responses, confirmed the accuracy of the comments with them, and asked whether there was anything they wished to add or correct. Participants were also explicitly informed that they could review and make corrections to the interview transcripts upon request. However, since no participant requested a transcript, no additional interviews were necessary. During the interviews, the researcher maintained a flexible and open-ended approach, minimizing subjectivity and encouraging participants to express their experiences freely.

Each interview began with an exploration of the concept of peer bullying to ensure that both the participant and the researcher were focused on the same phenomenon. Students were asked to describe the emotions, thoughts, and experiences they had when engaging in, being exposed to, or witnessing peer bullying, as well as to share their views on the prevention of peer bullying (Polat, 2022). Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the accuracy of the transcriptions was verified to ensure data integrity (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data analysis

The sociodemographic data of the participants were analyzed digitally and presented as numbers and percentages, providing contextual information to interpret students' experiences within their cultural and school environment. The qualitative data were analyzed manually using the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarisation; 2) coding; 3) generating initial themes; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; 6) writing up. (1) In the first stage, each interview transcript was read several times by three researchers experienced in qualitative research in order to evaluate and interpret the data. During this process, the researchers took preliminary notes on noteworthy statements, recurring ideas, and patterns related to the study's purpose. (2) In the second stage, the participants' statements were coded, and the meaning of each code and the types of statements grouped under each code were determined. For example, statements describing verbal bullying by classmates were coded as "Verbal Bullying," while statements about bullying on social media or digital platforms were coded as "Cyberbullying." For example, "Constantly using bad words, making fun of someone, or saying things that make them feel bad is what I consider peer bullying." (F-19, Bully), "Someone wrote horrible things under my photo and sent it to the school's Instagram page. I was so embarrassed." (M-22, Victim). (3) In the third stage, common patterns of meaning were created based on the codes, which were then organized into possible themes and subthemes. For example, verbal bullying and cyberbullying were grouped under the theme of bullying. (4) The researchers evaluated the thematic consistency of the themes, merging or removing some themes. (5) At this stage, to increase reliability, each researcher conducted the coding independently. The independently created code lists were then compared in joint meetings. Where necessary, the codes were reorganized by the researchers to reach consensus. (6) Finally, agreement was achieved among the researchers regarding the final themes and sub-themes (Table 1). Quotations from participants were used to support the findings, with identifiers indicating the participant's gender, number, and role in the peer bullying process (e.g., M-1, Bully; F-2, Victim; M-3, Bystander) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

Trustworthiness of the data

In this study, the reliability of the data was ensured in accordance with the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability,

Table 1
Middle school students' perceptions of peer bullying ($n = 27$).

Theme	Sub-theme	Quotations	Number of Participants (n)	Percentage (%)	Participant Roles
Types of Bullying	Verbal Bullying	*"My classmate talks to me by yelling in front of everyone, threatens me, and constantly points out my mistakes. I think this counts as peer bullying." (F-7, Victim)* *"If someone keeps giving me nicknames or humiliating me while saying 'it's just a joke,' I think that's peer bullying." (M-13, Bystander)* *"Constantly using bad words, making fun of someone, or saying things that make them feel bad is what I consider peer bullying." (F-19, Bully)*	6	22.22	2 Victim, 2 Bystander, 1 Bully, 1 Victim/Bystander
	Physical Bullying	*"My deskmate sometimes kicks or slaps me and always tries to hurt me. Just because he's bigger than me, does that give him the right to bully me?" (M-4, Victim)* *"When we play football in the schoolyard, if my friends deliberately push me hard to the ground, I feel that I'm being bullied—and it scares me." (F-11, Bystander)*	4	14.81	3 Victim, 1 Bystander
	Psychological Bullying	*"My classmates always leave me alone and never include me in their games, and that makes me constantly sad… I think this is also a kind of bullying." (F-8, Victim/Bystander)* *"They act like I don't exist, as if I'm invisible. And yet, I went to that birthday party too. I even brought a gift…" (M-27, Victim)*	9	33.33	5 Victim, 2 Bystander, 2 Victim/Bystander
	Cyberbullying	*"They keep sending me nasty messages on social media—sometimes I don't even want to look at my phone. I don't even know who they are…" (F-15, Victim/Bystander)* *"My friends and I had a WhatsApp group. We didn't add one of our close friends so that we could talk about her. When she saw she wasn't included, she got upset." (M-20, Bystander)* *"Someone wrote horrible things over my photo and sent it to the school's Instagram page. I was so embarrassed." (M-22, Victim)*	4	14.81	2 Victim, 1 Bystander, 1 Victim/Bystander
Perceived Positive Meaning	Academic Achievement	*"When I felt lonely, I focused on my classes and exams. That helped improve my grades." (F-23, Victim/Bystander)* *"To avoid dealing with the negative consequences of bullying, I spent my free time studying. It made me feel better about myself." (F-25, Victim)*	2	7.40	1 Victim, 1 Victim/Bystander
	Social Reputation	*"I act tough toward some of my classmates so that the others take me more seriously. It gives me a sense of power." (F-10, Bully)* *"When I make fun of someone, everyone laughs and focuses on me. I like it. Everyone even respects me." (M-12, Bully/Bystander)*	3	11.11	2 Bully, 1 Bully/Bystander
	Empathy	*"In a group project assigned by our teacher, one of the girls was excluded by the others. When I put myself in her place, I realized how hard it must be to feel alone, so I went and sat next to her." (F-18, Bully/Victim/Bystander)* *"Even though he hadn't done anything to me, I shared his photo on Instagram so others would make fun of him because he was short. When I saw how sad he was, I felt really sorry and understood how he must have felt." (F-21, Bully/Victim)* *"Last year, there was a chubby boy in our class. I used to bully him and make fun of him every chance I got. But later, I thought about how hurt I would be if someone treated me that way. Now, I don't want to hurt anyone anymore." (M-26, Bully)*	11	40.74	6 Bully, 4 Victim, 1 Bully/Victim
Perceived Negative Meaning	Impairment in Social Interaction	*"During breaks, I want to play and spend time with my friends, but I'm afraid they won't want me around, so I just read a book alone." (M-3, Victim)* *"They keep making fun of me and treating me as if I'm not good enough. Now I feel worthless. Even when I'm confident, it seems like I can't do anything right. I don't want to talk to anyone anymore." (M-5, Victim/Bystander)* *"When they make fun of my clothes or push me around, I feel like everyone is looking at me with judgment. That's why I avoid being in crowded places." (F-6, Victim)*	8	29.62	5 Victim, 3 Victim/Bystander
	Aggression	*"If they answer me after I mock them, I don't see a problem with kicking them. I wait for them after school." (M-14, Bully/Bystander)* *"I act tough and sometimes push the younger kids who use the same school bus to scare them. Otherwise they won't take me seriously." (F-18, Bully/Victim/Bystander)*	4	14.81	2 Bully, 1 Bully/Bystander, 1 Bully/Victim/Bystander
	Feelings of Revenge	*"Last week they made fun of me in front of everyone in class. They told me to sit at the very back. They called me 'four-eyes' (I wear glasses). I've been very sad since that day. But one day I'll show them the power of 'four-eyes.'" (M-2, Victim)* *"They even excluded me from my favourite activity… I'll take away the thing they love the most. When the time comes…" (M-4, Victim)* *"For a long time they left me out and went out together, having fun. They constantly share my photos on social media and make fun of my clothes. I stayed silent because I knew answering would make things worse. But enough is enough! Now I'm thinking of sharing their pictures. Let them feel what I felt."(F-13, Victim/Bystander)*	3	11.11	2 Victim, 1 Victim/Bystander
Coping with Bullying	Raising Awareness	*"I think we should be given more information about peer bullying, because people need to understand that it's not only physical—it can hurt emotionally too." (F-25, Victim)* *"If training sessions about bullying were organized, fewer children might experience it and more could get the support they need." (F-21, Bully/Victim)*	6	22.22	5 Victim, 1 Bully/Victim
	Peer Support	*"They always made fun of how thin I was. One of my friends came to me and said, 'You don't have to put up with this—I'll stand by you.' At first, I was surprised. But when I went home, I realized how important that moment was. Since that day, we've always supported each other." (F-16, Victim)* *"When I face difficult situations, my friends help me. I feel that I'm not alone." (F-18, Bully/Victim/Bystander)* *"Our teacher divided us into groups of five and gave us an assignment. My coloring pencils were in bad shape, so my group members excluded me. But one friend gave me her nice pencil and said, 'You can use this—it's important that you take part in the activity.' That made me braver." (F-24, Victim/Bystander)*	5	18.51	3 Victim, 1 Victim/Bystander, 1 Bully/Victim/Bystander
	Collaboration with Teachers	*"The trainee teachers once held an awareness activity about cyberbullying. We made posters together. I think our teacher could also organize such activities for us so we don't*	8	29.62	6 Victim, 2 Victim/Bystander

Table 1 (continued)

Theme	Sub-theme	Quotations	Number of Participants (n)	Percentage (%)	Participant Roles
		forget about bullying." (F-7, Victim) *"Our school counselor intervened immediately when she saw a student pulling another student's hair during the break. It was an effective solution because that student never dared to do it again." (F-17, Victim/Bystander)* *"If our teacher teaches us the right behaviors to adopt against bullying, a safe classroom environment can be created." (M-22, Victim)*			
	Sharing with Family	*"When I told my mother that I was being bullied, she said, 'These are childish things, it'll pass. Just focus on your studies,' and dismissed it. If she had supported me, I would have felt stronger and more confident."(M-3, Victim)* *"After school, a boy broke my bike. I told my family, and the next day they came to school and informed my teacher. Yes, my bike was gone, but I felt safer."(F-6, Victim)* *"There's a girl in our class who's always excluded. If I told my mom or dad that I was being left out, they'd immediately look for a solution. I think peer bullying should definitely be shared with family." (F-11, Bystander)*	3	11.11	2 Victim, 1 Bystander

confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was ensured by conducting member checking with participants at the end of each interview, pilot-testing the interview guide, and comparing the emerging themes with the relevant literature. Dependability was supported by independent coding by multiple researchers and by reaching consensus through discussions of coding differences. Confirmability was preserved by documenting coding sessions and maintaining an audit trail. Transferability was ensured by clearly defining the sample selection criteria and the characteristics of the participants. Furthermore, to increase methodological rigor, the study process was reviewed by an independent expert from design to data presentation. These procedures also minimized potential effects arising from the use of a single interviewer and ensured consistency across interviews.

Ethical considerations

Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the KTO Karatay University Non-Drug and Non-Medical Device Research Ethics Committee (Date: January 30, 2025; Approval No: 2025/012), as well as institutional permission from Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin Middle School (Ref. No: 81576613–10.06.02-E.1563890). Participating students and their parents were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, procedures, and privacy policies, and written informed consent was obtained. In the study, rigorous ethical measures were implemented to minimize psychological risks, as participants discussed potentially sensitive experiences related to peer bullying. Participants were explicitly informed that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time, skip questions they did not wish to answer, and withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in a private and supportive setting, and students were informed that they could contact the school counseling service if they felt uncomfortable. Although no direct psychological intervention was provided by the researchers, participants were informed about available counseling services and were encouraged to use them if needed. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were protected, and the data were used solely for research purposes. This approach made it possible to investigate students' experiences in a safe and ethically responsible manner and ensured that the potential benefits of the research were balanced with the protection of participants' well-being. In addition, audio recordings and interview transcripts were securely stored in a locked cabinet and on a password-protected computer.

Results

In this section, data obtained from individual interviews with 27 middle school students were analyzed using thematic analysis and are presented as themes. Participants shared diverse experiences and perceptions according to their roles as bullies, victims, or bystanders. Many students reported experiencing multiple roles simultaneously (e.g., both bully and victim); therefore, findings were interpreted not only in relation to single roles but also within the context of overlapping roles, reflecting the complexity of their lived experiences.

Importantly, participants' narratives were examined within their cultural and school context, highlighting how societal norms, peer expectations, and family values shaped their perceptions, emotional responses, and coping strategies related to peer bullying. For example, students in victim roles described feelings of isolation, fear, and mistrust, whereas those who experienced multiple roles reported heightened self-awareness and reflection on their behavior. Some students stated that witnessing or engaging in bullying prompted them to develop empathy, assertiveness, or adaptive coping strategies, demonstrating how negative experiences could contribute to personal growth. These accounts reveal not only the behavioral manifestations of bullying but also the deep emotional and social meanings that students attach to their experiences, emphasizing the nuanced and contextually grounded nature of peer bullying in middle school.

A total of 27 middle school students participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 12.48 ± 0.93 years. Of the participants, 44.4 % ($n = 12$) were male and 55.6 % ($n = 15$) were female. In terms of grade distribution, 33.3 % ($n = 9$) were in the 6th grade, 37.0 % ($n = 10$) were in the 7th grade, and 29.6 % ($n = 8$) were in the 8th grade. The majority of participants (81.5 %, $n = 22$) reported having experienced bullying, while 18.5 % ($n = 5$) indicated that they had no experience with bullying. When the roles associated with bullying were examined, 14.8 % ($n = 4$) were identified as bullies, 33.3 % (n = 9) as victims, 11.1 % ($n = 3$) as bystanders, 3.7 % (n = 1) as both bully and victim, 7.4 % (n = 2) as both bully and bystander, 25.9 % ($n = 7$) as both victim and bystander, and 3.7 % (n = 1) as bully, victim, and bystander.

Based on the qualitative data obtained from middle school students, four main themes and fourteen sub-themes were identified. The themes, sub-themes, supporting participant quotations, numbers of participants, and corresponding percentages are presented in Table 1.

Theme: Types of Bullying

The main theme, "Types of Bullying," reflects how the middle school students participating in this study defined peer bullying and described the various forms in which they experienced or observed it. This theme consists of four sub-themes: verbal bullying, physical bullying, psychological bullying, and cyberbullying. During the interviews, students occupying the roles of bully, victim, and bystander shared a range of experiences and expressions that could be categorized under these sub-themes.

Sub-theme: Verbal Bullying

The expressions within the verbal bullying sub-theme encompass behaviors such as insults, mockery, and threats—acts that the bully directs toward the victim through direct verbal communication and that are often clearly observable by others. Statements classified under this sub-theme were expressed by six middle school students representing all three roles (victim, bully, and bystander). A noteworthy finding is that one female student, who identified herself as both a bully and a victim, also defined peer bullying in a way that aligned with this sub-theme. Another student, who had experienced bullying as a victim, provided specific examples of verbal assaults to which she had been subjected. A bystander emphasized that verbal bullying often occurs under the guise of humor and stressed that such behaviors should not be disregarded. Overall, the students' narratives illustrate that verbal bullying manifests through mocking, yelling, threatening, and name-calling, leaving negative psychological effects on both victims and witnesses.

"My classmate talks to me by yelling in front of everyone, threatens me, and constantly points out my mistakes. I think this counts as peer bullying." (F-7, Victim).

"If someone keeps giving me nicknames or humiliating me while saying 'it's just a joke,' I think that's peer bullying." (M-13, Bystander).

"Constantly using bad words, making fun of someone, or saying things that make them feel bad is what I consider peer bullying." (F-19, Bully).

Sub-theme: Physical Bullying

Within this sub-theme, it was observed that bullies aimed to inflict harm on victims through physical force. Statements related to physical bullying were expressed by four middle school students, three of whom were victims and one of whom was a bystander. Students in the victim role described being subjected to behaviors such as pushing, kicking, and hitting by physically stronger peers, emphasizing that power imbalance plays a decisive role in physical bullying. The bystander student reported that such incidents generally occurred in unsupervised areas of the school and that weaker students were often targeted. These findings reveal that physical bullying involves direct bodily harm, is characterized by a clear asymmetry of power between the bully and the victim, and has adverse emotional and psychological effects on both those who experience it and those who witness it.

"My deskmate sometimes kicks or slaps me and always tries to hurt me. Just because he's bigger than me, does that give him the right to bully me?" (M-4, Victim)

"When we play football in the schoolyard, if my friends deliberately push me hard to the ground, I feel that I'm being bullied—and it scares me." (F-11, Bystander)

Sub-theme: Psychological Bullying

As a result of the individual interviews, nine middle school students expressed experiences that reflected psychological bullying. Of these students, five were victims, two were bystanders, and two had experienced both victim and bystander roles. Students in the victim role reported that behaviors such as exclusion, mockery, gossip, and being ignored caused significant emotional distress, leading to feelings of loneliness and insecurity. They emphasized that intentional exclusion and reputation-damaging behaviors affected them deeply and often left them feeling isolated. Students who had experienced both victim and bystander roles highlighted that such experiences emotionally affected not only the victims but also those who witnessed them. In particular, they emphasized that exclusion could leave long-lasting emotional scars. The students' narratives demonstrated that psychological bullying resulted in emotional and cognitive harm for both victims and witnesses. Furthermore, compared with other types of bullying, this form tended to be more covert, manipulative, and difficult to detect, making its effects more complex and enduring.

"My classmates always leave me alone and never include me in their games, and that makes me constantly sad… I think this is also a kind of bullying." (F-8, Victim/Bystander)

"They act like I don't exist, as if I'm invisible. And yet, I went to that birthday party too. I even brought a gift…" (M-27, Victim)

Sub-theme: Cyberbullying

Statements reflecting cyberbullying, expressed by four middle school students, revealed that bullies often engaged in continuous and persistent online bullying behaviors, frequently through anonymous identities. Among these students, two were victims, one was a bystander, and one had experienced both victim and bystander roles. Students in the victim role reported being subjected to ongoing and disturbing attacks via social media platforms, the internet, and messaging applications. They emphasized that, unlike physical bullying, cyberbullying could occur at any time, making it difficult to escape due to its constant and pervasive nature. The bystander described witnessing peers being subjected to cyberbullying in online settings and noted that such behaviors often manifested as forms of social exclusion. The student who experienced both victim and bystander roles stated that both they and others were targeted by anonymous individuals. Overall, the students' narratives indicated that bullies deliberately engaged in harmful and intimidating behaviors through digital platforms, including the internet, social media, messaging applications, and online games.

"They keep sending me nasty messages on social media—sometimes I don't even want to look at my phone. I don't even know who they are…" (F-15, Victim/Bystander)

"My friends and I had a WhatsApp group. We didn't add one of our close friends so that we could talk about her. When she saw she wasn't included, she got upset." (M-20, Bystander)

"Someone wrote horrible things over my photo and sent it to the school's Instagram page. I was so embarrassed." (M-22, Victim)

Theme: Perceived Positive Meaning

Within this main theme, middle school students expressed that they had developed effective coping strategies related to their experiences with peer bullying. Although peer bullying had the potential to cause serious negative consequences, some students reported having emerged from the experience stronger, more resilient, and more self-aware. During the individual interviews, students shared statements corresponding to three sub-themes under "Perceived Positive Meaning": academic achievement, social reputation, and empathy.

Sub-theme: Academic Achievement

Under this sub-theme, students who had experienced victim or bystander roles demonstrated that they were able to improve their academic performance by developing personal coping strategies in response to peer bullying. Statements related to this sub-theme were expressed by two middle school students—one in the victim role and another who had experienced both victim and bystander roles. The student who had experienced both roles indicated that they tried to compensate for their negative experiences by focusing on studying, whereas the student in the victim role described studying as a form of emotional relief and empowerment that helped mitigate the adverse effects of bullying. These findings suggest that individual coping mechanisms developed in response to bullying can have positive effects on students' academic engagement and performance, serving as a constructive outlet for resilience.

"When I felt lonely, I focused on my classes and exams. That helped improve my grades." (F-23, Victim/Bystander).

"To avoid dealing with the negative consequences of bullying, I spent my free time studying. It made me feel better about myself." (F-25, Victim).

Sub-theme: Social Reputation

Under this sub-theme, it was observed that three students who experienced the bully role engaged in bullying behaviors with the aim of gaining social prestige and expressed a sense of pride in doing so. These students described bullying as a way to gain power, respect, and attention among their peers. In addition, one student who had experienced both bully and bystander roles stated that bullying behaviors served as a means of social acceptance and visibility. These findings indicate that bullying among students can function as a social strategy for achieving higher status and demonstrating dominance within peer groups.

"I act tough toward some of my classmates so that the others take me more seriously. It gives me a sense of power." (F-10, Bully).

"When I make fun of someone, everyone laughs and focuses on me. I like it. Everyone even respects me." (M-12, Bully/Bystander).

Sub-theme: Empathy

Analysis of this sub-theme revealed expressions from 11 students, six of whom had experienced the bully role, four the victim role, and one had experienced all three roles—bully, victim, and bystander. Students who had experienced the bully role generally reported that their empathy skills developed after witnessing the emotional reactions of their victims, whereas those in the victim role stated that they primarily experienced feelings of empathy following supportive and understanding behaviors from their peers.

"In a group project assigned by our teacher, one of the girls was excluded by the others. When I put myself in her place, I realized how hard it must be to feel alone, so I went and sat next to her." (F-18, Bully/Victim/Bystander).

"Even though he hadn't done anything to me, I shared his photo on Instagram so others would make fun of him because he was short. When I saw how sad he was, I felt really sorry and understood how he must have felt." (F-21, Bully/Victim).

"Last year, there was a chubby boy in our class. I used to bully him and make fun of him every chance I got. But later, I thought about how hurt I would be if someone treated me that way. Now, I don't want to hurt anyone anymore." (M-26, Bully).

Theme: Perceived Negative Meaning

Peer bullying was perceived by the participating middle school students as a phenomenon that created short- or long-term negative effects on their quality of life. During the individual interviews, students shared statements categorized under three sub-themes within the main theme "Perceived Negative Meaning": impairment in social interaction, aggression, and feelings of revenge.

Sub-theme: Impairment in Social Interaction

Eight students who had experienced victim or bystander roles reported feelings of fear of being judged, ridiculed, or rejected in the school environment following bullying experiences. As a result, these students tended to withdraw from social interactions, avoid group activities, and struggle to express their emotions openly. Students described peer bullying as an emotionally damaging experience that often stemmed from differences in appearance, abilities, or personality traits, leading to thoughts such as "I'm not good enough" and diminishing their self-confidence. Among these students, five were victims, while three had experienced both victim and bystander roles. The findings indicate that peer bullying led to social withdrawal, anxiety, and feelings of exclusion among victims, while those who experienced both victim and bystander roles reported a loss of self-confidence and social isolation. Overall, the results suggest that peer bullying left lasting negative effects on students' emotional and social development.

"During breaks, I want to play and spend time with my friends, but I'm afraid they won't want me around, so I just read a book alone." (M-3, Victim)

"They keep making fun of me and treating me as if I'm not good enough. Now I feel worthless. Even when I'm confident, it seems like I can't do anything right. I don't want to talk to anyone anymore." (M-5, Victim/Bystander).

"When they make fun of my clothes or push me around, I feel like everyone is looking at me with judgment. That's why I avoid being in crowded places." (F-6, Victim).

Sub-theme: Aggression

Under this sub-theme, students in the bully role were observed to display angry and hostile behaviors aimed at asserting dominance and establishing power over their peers, and at times resorted to physical violence. Statements related to this sub-theme were obtained from four students: two who were solely in the bully role, one who had experienced both bully and bystander roles, and one who had experienced bully, victim, and bystander roles. The accounts indicated that the aggressive behaviors—often expressed as anger responses—primarily served to intimidate others or to defend the bully's social position.

"If they answer me after I mock them, I don't see a problem with kicking them. I wait for them after school." (M-14, Bully/Bystander).

"I act tough and sometimes push the younger kids who use the same school bus to scare them. Otherwise they won't take me seriously." (F-18, Bully/Victim/Bystander)

Sub-theme: Feelings of Revenge

During the individual interviews, three students who had experienced victim or bystander roles reported strong feelings of revenge arising from perceived injustices during the bullying process. Of these students, two were victims and one had experienced both victim and bystander roles. Participants stated that these negative experiences affected both their emotional states and social relationships, describing themselves as filled with anger, hurt, and, at times, hostility. Victimized students spoke of a desire to become stronger and to retaliate following bullying episodes, while the student who had experienced both victim and bystander roles explained that feelings of pressure and helplessness had been transformed into a desire for revenge.

"Last week they made fun of me in front of everyone in class. They told me to sit at the very back. They called me 'four-eyes' (I wear glasses). I've been very sad since that day. But one day I'll show them the power of 'four-eyes.'" (M-2, Victim)

"They even excluded me from my favourite activity… I'll take away the thing they love the most. When the time comes…" (M-4, Victim)

"For a long time they left me out and went out together, having fun. They constantly share my photos on social media and make fun of my clothes. I stayed silent because I knew answering would make things worse. But enough is enough! Now I'm thinking of sharing their pictures. Let them feel what I felt."(F-13, Victim/Bystander).

Theme: Coping with Bullying

Several middle school students participating in the study expressed that various strategies were effective in preventing and managing peer bullying. They emphasized that sharing their experiences, seeking support from friends or teachers, and talking with their families about what they went through helped alleviate the negative effects of bullying. Participants highlighted that these strategies were important both for protecting themselves and for preventing the recurrence of bullying behavior.

Sub-theme: Raising Awareness

Statements within this sub-theme were shared by six middle school students, five of whom had experienced the victim role and one who had experienced both bully and victim roles. The students underscored the importance of educational interventions and awareness programs to prevent bullying behaviors and strengthen coping skills. Participants believed that increasing awareness through training and information sessions could lead to more conscious and effective responses to bullying. Those who had been victims—or had experienced multiple roles—emphasized the need to understand the multidimensional impact of peer bullying and viewed education as an effective solution for fostering empathy and prevention.

"I think we should be given more information about peer bullying, because people need to understand that it's not only physical—it can hurt emotionally too." (F-25, Victim)

"If training sessions about bullying were organized, fewer children might experience it and more could get the support they need." (F-21, Bully/Victim).

Sub-theme: Peer Support

Middle school students stated that peer support played a crucial role in helping them cope with the negative effects of bullying, making them feel safer, socially empowered, and more capable of healing emotionally through mutual understanding. Five students emphasized that their friendship groups served as a key protective mechanism against bullying and that they had drawn strength from one another during challenging times. Among these participants, three were victims, one had experienced both victim and bystander roles, and one had experienced bully, victim, and bystander roles. The students highlighted the protective and empowering impact of peer relationships, noting that such support helped them overcome the difficulties of the bullying process and restore self-confidence.

"They always made fun of how thin I was. One of my friends came to me and said, 'You don't have to put up with this—I'll stand by you.' At first, I was surprised. But when I went home, I realized how important that moment was. Since that day, we've always supported each other." (F-16, Victim)

"When I face difficult situations, my friends help me. I feel that I'm not alone." (F-18, Bully/Victim/Bystander)

"Our teacher divided us into groups of five and gave us an assignment. My coloring pencils were in bad shape, so my group members excluded me. But one friend gave me her nice pencil and said, 'You can use this—it's important that you take part in the activity.' That made me braver." (F-24, Victim/Bystander)

Sub-theme: Collaboration with Teachers

Eight middle school students emphasized that teachers played a critical role in both preventing peer bullying and helping students cope with its negative effects. Among these participants, six were victims and two had experienced both victim and bystander roles. Students noted that creating a safer school environment, enhancing student interaction, recognizing early signs of bullying, and establishing classroom rules against bullying were important strategies for strengthening student–teacher collaboration. They further highlighted that awareness activities, prompt interventions, and teachers' guidance were crucial for maintaining a secure and supportive learning atmosphere.

"The trainee teachers once held an awareness activity about cyberbullying. We made posters together. I think our teacher could also organize such activities for us so we don't forget about bullying." (F-7, Victim)

"Our school counselor intervened immediately when she saw a student pulling another student's hair during the break. It was an effective solution because that student never dared to do it again." (F-17, Victim/Bystander).

"If our teacher teaches us the right behaviors to adopt against bullying, a safe classroom environment can be created." (M-22, Victim).

Sub-theme: Sharing with Family

In individual interviews, three middle school students who had experienced victim or bystander roles reported that sharing their bullying experiences with family members made them feel safer and helped them cope with the negative outcomes of bullying. Among these students, two were victims and one was a bystander. One student in the victim role stated that when she told her mother about the bullying she had experienced, her concerns were dismissed, leaving her feeling powerless and unsupported. In contrast, another victim explained that when he informed his family about his damaged bicycle, his parents intervened by reporting the incident to the teacher, which made him feel protected and reassured. The bystander student emphasized that sharing bullying experiences with family members was an effective way to find solutions and prevent further harm.

"When I told my mother that I was being bullied, she said, 'These are childish things, it'll pass. Just focus on your studies,' and dismissed it. If she had supported me, I would have felt stronger and more confident."(M-3, Victim)

"After school, a boy broke my bike. I told my family, and the next day they came to school and informed my teacher. Yes, my bike was gone, but I felt safer."(F-6, Victim)

"There's a girl in our class who's always excluded. If I told my mom or dad that I was being left out, they'd immediately look for a solution. I think peer bullying should definitely be shared with family." (F-11, Bystander)

Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore middle school students' perceptions of peer bullying by examining their lived experiences in the roles of bully, victim, and bystander. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the findings were presented under four main themes that captured both the subjective meaning-making of students and the culturally and school-contextualized factors influencing their experiences. These themes provided insight into students' emotions, coping strategies, and interpretations of peer bullying, reflecting the complexity of their experiences across multiple overlapping roles.

Theme: Types of Bullying

The participating middle school students described peer bullying in four distinct forms: verbal, physical, psychological, and cyber bullying. These categories were particularly pronounced among students in the victim role, whereas bystanders tended to emphasize psychological and cyberbullying. Some students also reported experiencing multiple roles simultaneously, noting that they had assumed both bully and victim roles at different times. These findings align with prior research; for instance, AlBuhairan et al. (2016) identified verbal, physical, sexual, psychosocial, and cyberbullying in a qualitative study conducted in Saudi Arabia, while Salavera et al. (2021) categorized bullying behaviors as physical, verbal, social, and psychological, confirming the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon.

However, the present study also highlighted context-specific nuances. Victims emphasized forms of bullying that impacted them most deeply, whereas bullies highlighted behaviors associated with social dominance or peer recognition, reflecting culturally embedded social norms and peer expectations in the school context. Furthermore, students' conceptualizations of bullying appeared to be influenced by their personal experiences, prior histories, and cultural understandings of acceptable peer behavior (Celik et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2021; Ybarra et al., 2019). This culturally contextualized perspective may

help explain why certain forms of bullying were more salient to students in different roles. Moreover, the variation in emphasis on specific bullying types illustrates a subjective meaning-making process, whereby students interpret and prioritize experiences in ways that are personally and culturally meaningful (Benli & Özdemir, 2024; Francis et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of integrating cultural context when examining peer bullying and interpreting qualitative data, providing insights beyond generalized categorizations reported in previous studies.

Theme: Perceived Positive Meaning

Some middle school students in the study reported that experiencing or witnessing peer bullying led them to focus more on their studies, which they perceived as contributing to both academic engagement and personal resilience. Students in victim and bystander roles described this as a coping strategy to manage the negative emotional impact of bullying, rather than an inherent positive outcome. Although this finding may appear to conflict with the broader literature, which generally shows that peer bullying negatively affects academic achievement (Kibriya et al., 2016; Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022; Olweus, 1987; Park et al., 2017; Samara et al., 2021), it can be interpreted as a resilience-based adaptation. In other words, some students appeared to transform adverse experiences into opportunities for personal growth, self-improvement, and adaptive coping strategies, with these processes being shaped by the cultural and school context. This highlights the central role of subjective meaning-making in students' lived experiences and their culturally embedded strategies for navigating peer relationships.

Some students who had taken on the bully role expressed that their harsh or mocking behaviors attracted attention in social contexts, allowing them to gain a sense of power and social prestige. This aligns with findings from Van der Ploeg et al. (2020), who emphasized that bullying can serve as a strategy for achieving popularity and social dominance, and with Yelboğa and Koçak (2019), who noted that traits such as the desire to exert control and the need for recognition drive individuals toward bullying behaviors. However, the present study added context-specific insights: in the cultural and school environment of the participants, peer attention, acceptance, and social positioning carried significant value, which may have intensified the perceived benefits of bullying behaviors. These findings highlight that middle school students may engage in bullying not only as an individual choice but also as a socially and culturally informed strategy to maintain or enhance status within their peer groups, illustrating the importance of examining bullying through a culturally contextualized lens.

Several students reported that experiences with peer bullying contributed to the development of empathy. Students who had previously assumed the bully role noted that their empathic awareness often emerged after witnessing victims' emotional reactions, suggesting a process of moral reflection and perspective-taking triggered by the consequences of their actions. While the broader literature generally reports a negative correlation between bullying and empathy (Chu et al., 2025; Stavrinides et al., 2010), the present findings indicated that some students in the bully role may develop increased sensitivity and empathy, possibly influenced by the immediate social context and peer reactions within their school environment. Similarly, students in the victim role described empathy growth through supportive peer interactions. This culturally and contextually grounded perspective highlights that empathy development in adolescents may be shaped by social norms, school climate, and relational dynamics, offering a nuanced understanding of how peer interactions mediate moral and emotional growth (Ringdal et al., 2021; Salavera et al., 2021; Shaheen et al., 2019). Notably, a student who experienced bully, victim, and bystander roles simultaneously reported enhanced empathic skills, suggesting that navigating multiple social roles may have provided unique opportunities for perspective-taking and moral reflection within culturally embedded peer environments.

Theme: Perceived Negative Meaning

Within the scope of this study, middle school students perceived peer bullying as a negative phenomenon due to its associations with disruption in social interaction, aggression, and feelings of revenge. The sub-theme of disruption in social interaction was particularly emphasized by students in the victim and victim/bystander roles, reflecting tendencies toward social withdrawal and avoidance. These experiences align with prior research indicating that bullying is associated with anxiety, social isolation, loneliness, and exclusion (Arseneault, 2018; Ossa et al., 2019; Pan, 2023). Importantly, the present study highlighted context-specific nuances: in the cultural and school environment of the participants, social relationships and peer acceptance carried significant value, which may have amplified the negative impact of bullying on students' interactions. Thus, the findings illustrate how culturally embedded social norms shape students' perceptions and behavioral responses to peer bullying, offering a contextually grounded understanding that complements previous qualitative and quantitative studies.

Expressions classified under the "feelings of revenge" sub-theme were also articulated by students in the victim and victim/bystander roles. For these students, the desire for revenge was perceived as a coping attempt, though largely ineffective in addressing the sense of powerlessness. While Watson et al. (2021) note that revenge can yield both positive and negative outcomes, the participants in this study predominantly perceived it as maladaptive. This finding provides a culturally nuanced insight: in the participants' school context, where social cohesion and reputation are valued, the experience of revenge may be constrained by social norms and fear of further social sanction. Compared with existing qualitative studies, this study contributed unique evidence that students' interpretations of revenge were shaped not only by individual emotional responses but also by culturally embedded peer expectations and relational dynamics.

As a result of the individual interviews, some middle school students expressed statements that were evaluated under the aggression subtheme. Students in the bully role interpreted peer bullying mostly as a means of gaining approval from their social environment, achieving status, or demonstrating power. This finding is also consistent with existing studies showing that bullying is in reciprocal interaction with aggressive behaviors (Smith & Caron, 2023; Teng et al., 2022). It has been stated that for adolescent students, being accepted within peer groups and having an advantageous position in power relations are important needs (Musu et al., 2019; Spadafora et al., 2022). In this context, it can be considered that students in the bully role in this study may have perceived peer bullying as a form of aggression aimed at seeking approval from their social environment or demonstrating power. In addition, it was observed that students in the victim and victim/bystander roles also exhibited aggressive tendencies. This situation reveals that bullying is not limited to bullies alone and that victims may also develop aggressive reactions for the purpose of self-defense or regaining control (Roques et al., 2022; Smith & Caron, 2023; Pan, 2023). Therefore, peer bullying should be addressed as a complex social process in which all roles—bully, victim, and bystander—interact (Ekşi & Türk-Kurtça, 2021).

Theme: Coping with Bullying

Middle school students stated that raising awareness, peer support, collaboration with teachers, and sharing with family were effective strategies in coping with peer bullying. According to the results of a meta-analysis conducted by Gaffney et al. (2019), bullying prevention and intervention programs implemented in Greece led to a 40 % reduction in bullying behaviors within the school environment. Similarly, a quasi-experimental study conducted in Türkiye found that following a

peer bullying awareness training program, third- and fourth-grade students showed positive changes in their perceptions of peer bullying (Kutlu & Karaca, 2021). In the present study, students in victim and bully/victim roles may have believed that raising awareness helped them understand the harms of bullying, adopt appropriate behavioral models, and become more sensitive to these issues. These perceptions may have been influenced by the cultural and school context, where social norms and peer relationships were highly valued.

Students who took on the bully, victim, or bystander roles in this study also believed that peer support was an effective factor in coping with peer bullying. Students who experienced different roles emphasized that peer support played both a protective and restorative role during the bullying process. In particular, students in the victim role stated that even a simple supportive behavior from a friend alleviated feelings of loneliness and strengthened their sense of belonging. A phenomenological study conducted with middle school students similarly revealed that students were able to better manage the peer bullying process through the support of peers, family, and teachers (Karabulut et al., 2023). Another study also found that support from family and friends served as a protective factor in coping with peer bullying (Samara et al., 2020). Günay and Can (2018) concluded that a peer support program was effective in developing coping skills against bullying. In this study as well, middle school students may have realized through peer support that they were not alone in this process, and this sense of solidarity may have helped them feel more valued and empowered while coping with peer bullying. In the cultural context of this study, peer support may also have reinforced students' sense of solidarity and empowerment during negative experiences.

Students in the victim and victim/bystander roles also emphasized that teachers played a crucial role in combating peer bullying through both preventive and intervention-based approaches. Students stated that timely and decisive interventions by teachers who provided social and emotional support were effective in preventing peer bullying. A study by Longobardi et al. (2018) indicated that teachers who establish warm and supportive relationships with their students serve as a protective buffer against the negative consequences of peer bullying. In a study conducted by Burger et al. (2022), the effects of teacher interventions on students' bully, victim, and defender roles were examined, and it was emphasized that various strategies—such as disciplinary actions, group discussions, mediation, and even non-intervention approaches—could be effective in addressing peer bullying during early adolescence. In this context, teacher support appeared to play a crucial role in preventing peer bullying and minimizing its negative outcomes (Smith et al., 2021; Üstün & Şenyer, 2024). In this context, teacher support appears to play a crucial role in preventing peer bullying and minimizing its negative outcomes (Smith et al., 2021; Üstün & Şenyer, 2024). Accordingly, middle school students in the victim and victim/bystander roles may have perceived collaboration with a supportive teacher as a means of creating a safer and more solution-oriented school environment for addressing peer bullying within their cultural and school context. In addition, the fact that statements related to the subtheme of collaboration with teachers were expressed only by students in the victim and victim/bystander roles may suggest that these students perceived the teacher's preventive and interventionist presence as a source of security in response to the injustice or victimization they experienced or observed. The absence of any remarks from students in the bully role regarding this sub-theme may be due to the perception of the teacher's supervisory role as a threat that limited their sense of power.

In this study, students who experienced the victim or bystander roles emphasized the importance of family support in coping with peer bullying. They stated that sharing the bullying experience with their families made them feel stronger and more self-confident. On the other hand, when a victim's feelings were ignored by family members, this led to feelings of helplessness and worthlessness in the student. Karakuş et al. (2023) reported that as family support decreased, the likelihood of being either a bully or a victim increased. Similarly, a study conducted by Lee et al. (2022) with a sample of 11,094 adolescents found that as family and peer support decreased, the incidence of exposure to bullying increased. In this context, middle school students in the victim or bystander roles in the present study may have felt safe within a supportive family environment and thus been able to cope more effectively with the negative consequences of peer bullying (Celik et al., 2023). In the cultural context of Türkiye, family is often seen as the primary and most reliable support system, which may explain why students in the bully role did not mention it, possibly due to their awareness that such behaviors would not be approved. Furthermore, the fact that statements related to the family support subtheme were expressed only by students in the victim or bystander roles may indicate that family is perceived as the closest and most reliable source of support in the face of victimization and feelings of powerlessness. The absence of any statements from students in the bully role regarding this sub-theme may suggest that they avoided discussing their bullying behaviors with their families, as they were aware that such behaviors would not be approved or supported by their parents (Roques et al., 2022).

Strengths and limitations

Although this study explored middle school students' perceptions and experiences of peer bullying from a qualitative perspective, several limitations should be noted. First, the qualitative research design, which allows for in-depth data collection, limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study results were obtained from students attending a single school in a specific geographical region, which restricts the applicability of the findings to other cultural, socioeconomic, and educational contexts.

In addition, the study focused solely on students' perspectives without incorporating the views of other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, or school administrators. However, as peer bullying is a multidimensional phenomenon, exploring the perspectives of these groups could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the bullying process. Accordingly, future studies examining teachers' and parents' perceptions and intervention strategies may offer a more holistic viewpoint. Another limitation is that participants' roles (bully, victim, bystander) were identified solely based on student self-report, without triangulation from teachers or parents. This may limit the validity of role classification. Nevertheless, self-report was chosen to capture students' subjective experiences and perceptions of peer interactions, which are central to understanding peer bullying from the students' perspective.

Member checking was limited to verbal summaries during interviews; although participants were offered the opportunity to review and correct their interview transcripts, none requested this. While this may slightly limit the credibility of the findings, the researchers ensured accuracy by summarizing participants' responses during each session and encouraging clarification or additions, thereby supporting the trustworthiness of the data.

The data in this study were collected through individual interviews, which may have been influenced by factors such as students' self-expression styles and social desirability bias. Furthermore, sensitive or negative experiences may not have been shared in full detail, leading to partial or biased information. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of students' bullying experiences, it is suggested that alternative data collection methods, such as daily journals and longitudinal follow-up studies, be employed. Additionally, focus group interviews could provide a more time- and resource-efficient approach.

The absence of qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo or MAXQDA in the qualitative analysis process of the study, and the fact that coding was carried out manually, constitute a significant limitation in terms of the systematic nature and auditability of the analysis process. However, various measures were taken to ensure the rigor, transparency, and reproducibility of the manual thematic analysis: All

interview transcripts were read several times by researchers experienced in qualitative research, detailed coding notes and comments were kept, the coding process was conducted independently by multiple researchers, and any differences that arose were discussed until consensus was reached. Furthermore, all coding meetings were documented, and participant quotes were used to support the findings. These procedures ensured that the manual analysis process maintained its methodological rigor compared to software-assisted approaches.

Finally, as peer bullying is a dynamic process, students' perceptions may change over time. Thus, to better understand the long-term psychosocial effects of peer bullying experiences, it is recommended that longitudinal studies and mixed-method designs combining quantitative and qualitative approaches be conducted in future research.

Implications to practice

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that school-based educational programs for preventing peer bullying be expanded to reflect students' actual experiences, such as the importance of peer, teacher, and family support highlighted by participants. Teachers should be encouraged to provide timely social and emotional interventions, as students in victim and victim/bystander roles reported that they felt safer and more empowered when supported by attentive educators. Similarly, families should be involved in awareness and support initiatives, as participants indicated that sharing bullying experiences with family members strengthened coping and a sense of self-worth. School nurses, child and adolescent mental health nurses, and community mental health professionals can play an active role by identifying students at risk, conducting mental health assessments, and providing follow-up care, thereby directly addressing the emotional and social consequences described by the students. Furthermore, preventive strategies and counseling services should be tailored to students' sociocultural contexts, reflecting their lived experiences, and educational policies should emphasize proactive, evidence-based interventions. Future quantitative and qualitative research should continue to explore the causes, coping mechanisms, and long-term impacts of peer bullying across diverse cultural and school settings, ensuring that findings remain grounded in students' own perspectives.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine middle school students' perceptions of peer bullying in depth using qualitative methods. As a result of the study, it was found that peer bullying was experienced in four main forms—verbal, physical, psychological, and cyber—and that students may take on the roles of bully, victim, bystander, or a combination of these roles throughout the process. Students particularly drew attention to psychological bullying, emphasizing that it often caused long-term emotional effects and frequently continued without being noticed.

Participants stated that their experiences with peer bullying had a significant impact on their individual and social lives, and students in the victim and bystander roles frequently experienced negative outcomes such as disruption in social interaction. In addition, some victims displayed retaliatory tendencies in response to the bullying they experienced, while some students in the bully role exhibited aggressive behaviors motivated by a desire to frighten others or assert dominance. It was also observed that victims sometimes developed feelings of revenge as a delayed emotional response to the bullying experience.

On the other hand, some students transformed the peer bullying experience into a constructive process of personal development, reporting positive outcomes such as improved empathy and emotional awareness. It was determined that some students in the bully role became aware of the negative consequences of their bullying behaviors during the bullying process and consequently experienced feelings of remorse. This sense of remorse helped them understand how victims were emotionally affected, thereby enhancing their empathic skills. In contrast, some students in the bully role engaged in bullying behaviors to gain acceptance within their social circles or to project a strong personal image, thus perceiving peer bullying positively as a means of gaining social prestige. Similarly, some victim students used academic achievement as a motivational tool to cope with the negative effects of bullying, and for this reason, they also perceived peer bullying as a factor that contributed positively to their personal development.

In terms of coping strategies, students frequently emphasized that raising awareness and collaboration with teachers were effective in combating peer bullying. They highlighted the need for greater awareness and education on bullying to increase understanding and develop appropriate coping mechanisms, emphasizing that teachers played a critical role in this process. At this point, it was observed that only students in the victim or bystander roles shared their peer bullying experiences with teachers or family members as a means of seeking emotional security and support, whereas students in the bully role did not disclose such experiences to either family members or teachers. In addition, the presence of family support during the peer bullying process was considered by some students in the victim role as a factor that enhanced self-confidence.

Information

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Esra Ünal Çelik: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Arzu Koçak Uyaroğlu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Alime Selçuk Tosun:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical considerations

Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the KTO Karatay University Non-Drug and Non-Medical Device Research Ethics Committee (Date: January 30, 2025; Approval No: 2025/012), as well as institutional permission from Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin Middle School (Ref. No: 81576613–10.06.02-E.1563890). At the beginning of the research process, written informed consent was obtained from both the middle school students who voluntarily agreed to participate and had prior experiences with peer bullying, and from their parents, using the Informed Voluntary Consent Form. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how the collected data would be used. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki to ensure respect for participant rights, privacy, and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

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Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflicts of interest are reported regarding this article.

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