

Academic Bullying: A Concept Analysis via Walker and Avant's Method

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Abstract

Background: Academic bullying is a global and growing phenomenon in educational settings. Yet, there is a lack of consensus concerning the definitions of academic bullying which challenges researchers. The purpose of this analysis, therefore, was to conceptualize the concept of academic bullying, including its definitions, defining characteristics, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents.

Objectives: The purpose of this analysis, therefore, was to conceptualize the concept of academic bullying, including its definitions, defining characteristics, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents.

Methods: Walker and Avant's method of concept analysis was employed to identify the antecedents, attributes, and consequences of academic bullying. A review of existing literature on academic bullying was conducted using the electronic databases of PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Science Direct, and ProQuest, searched with the phrase of "academic bullying" in the titles of documents without a time limit. The search included all document types (article, review, editorial, letter, note, book, book chapter and dissertation) related to academic bullying published in English.

Results: In reviewing the studies, 37 documents were identified to provide information for this concept analysis. Based on the analysis undertaken, a working definition and defining attributes were formulated, along with a discussion of various model cases, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents regarding academic bullying.

Conclusion: Educational leaders can prevent or reduce faculty bullying by raising awareness, offering training, and establishing guidelines. The identification of academic bullying attributes contributes to the body of knowledge of academic bullying, reduces the ambiguity of this concept, and provides a working definition of academic bullying. Defining attributes, antecedents, and consequences can be further tested and used to develop potential interventions. Future research is needed to advance our understanding of this concept and explore interventions that could diminish its negative consequences.

Keywords: Concept Analysis; Academic Bullying; Walker and Avant; Academia

Background

Universities worldwide are recognized as scientific and intellectual establishments, with their leaders typically fostering a democratic environment and encouraging interactive relationships among faculty, staff, and students through dialogue and persuasion rather than coercion and obligation. Upon observing university culture, it becomes evident that faculty members are the central pillar of these institutions (1), to the extent that some specialists view them as the

embodiment of scientific and academic values (2). Academia can offer a wonderful career path, but the power differentials at play in the university life can turn promising careers into nightmares (3). Analyzing precise terminology and common definitions is crucial for establishing the boundaries of workplace bullying and determining what will be perceived as such within an organization (4). Academic bullying is a global and growing phenomenon in educational settings. Yet, there is a lack of consensus regarding the definitions of academic bullying which challenges researchers.

In organizations such as universities, where task-oriented expertise, autonomy, and individualism are emphasized, the specific nature of bullying is difficult to define (5). There is no universally accepted definition of bullying (6). Ferguson et al. argued that researchers have yet to reach a consensus on a clear definition of bullying, which complicates bullying research, particularly in measuring its prevalence (6). Compared to workplace bullying in other industries, academic bullying has received less attention (7). Academic bullying among faculty is a prevalent form of workplace bullying, though it has received less research attention than other types (8). A universal definition of bullying remains elusive despite researchers' efforts. Gaining international attention in the 20th century, bullying has since been recognized as a global phenomenon, prompting worldwide research (9, 10). Despite significant attention to academic bullying, a clear and satisfactory definition remains elusive. A precise understanding of academic bullying can illuminate its causative factors.

This article defines academic bullying by exploring its definitions, applications, antecedents, attributes, and consequences. Such clarity enhances understanding for caregivers and researchers. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the nature of academic bullying and the factors influencing its occurrence. While bullying occurs across all professions, its nuances among faculty have not been thoroughly examined. A detailed analysis of these characteristics can mitigate its impact on faculty and enhance understanding for effective intervention. This study aims to analyze the concept of bullying in depth using Walker and Avant's methodology.

Concept selection and aims of the analysis

Concepts serve as the foundational elements of theories, and concept analysis seeks to deconstruct a term to: (a) evaluate its components, (b) clarify vague aspects of a theory, (c) enhance understanding of the concept, and (d) ultimately establish a consistent definition to aid in its measurement (11). Although academic bullying is a global and growing phenomenon in educational settings, there is a lack of consensus with regards to the definitions of academic bullying which challenges researchers. In view of this, we undertook the current analysis to provide clarity regarding the meaning of the concept of academic bullying while gaining a more comprehensive understanding of its attributes, antecedents, and consequences. Therefore, in this study we aimed at analyzing the concept of academic bullying among faculty members.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. How is academic bullying defined in existing literature?
2. What attributes can help identify academic bullying?
3. What are the antecedents and consequences of academic bullying?
4. What working definition of academic bullying can be derived from the current evidence?

Objectives

The purpose of this analysis, therefore, was to conceptualize the concept of academic bullying, including its definitions, defining characteristics, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents.

Methods

Concept analysis method: To accurately define "bullying among faculty members," concept development methods should be employed. Concept analysis serves as a systematic approach to clarify the concept, reduce ambiguities, ensure semantic integration, and enhance its stability in relevant discussions and literature (11). The aim of concept analysis can be either clarification or the establishment of an operational definition (12). This process is a meticulous endeavor that requires a serious approach to uncover the underlying semantic elements of the concept (13). In line with our research questions, this study used Walker and Avant's (14) concept analysis method to describe and clarify the concept of academic bullying from May to June 2024.

A concept analysis is a methodology that examines a concept's function and presents its defining attributes to foster a consistent understanding of a phenomenon (11). Walker and Avant's concept analysis method includes eight steps (11) (Table 1). Walker and Avant's method helped identify all related applications of the academic bullying concept as well as determine the defining attributes, antecedents, and consequences.

Table 1. Walker and Avant's eight-step method

Steps
1. Select a concept
2. Determine the aim of analysis
3. Identify all uses of the concept
4. Determine the defining attributes
5. Construct a model case
6. Construct borderline and contrary cases
7. Identify antecedents and consequences
8. Define empirical referents

Literature search strategy: Walker and Avant recommend full utilization of all data sources to compile

a comprehensive inventory of relevant characteristics and variables (11). A systematic search was conducted in five key online databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Science Direct, and ProQuest without time limitation, using the following combined keyword: “academic bullying”. The online databases were searched for titles containing this term. No date limitation was applied in the search strategy.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Our primary goal was to identify key sources discussing academic bullying and examine its various aspects. The search was limited to documents containing the definition of academic bullying and written in English. Inclusion criteria included all document types (article, review, editorial, letter, note, book, book chapter and dissertation), written in English, and those that had discussed the attributes, antecedents, and consequences of academic bullying concept without publication limit. Only literature that had addressed “academic bullying” in the title was included. Duplicate studies and those that had not mentioned the definition of academic bullying were excluded from the final review.

Selection process: Initially, 89 document types (article, review, editorial, letter, note, book, book chapter and dissertation) were identified. Table 2 reports the search results for each database and number of findings by document type before duplication removing. After removing duplicates, the document titles were reviewed, leading to a total of 38 documents. These documents were then fully assessed against the inclusion criteria, resulting in the exclusion of 1 document. As such, 37 documents met the inclusion criteria and were included in the concept analysis; see Figure 1 for a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram of the process (15). Using inclusion criteria, 19 articles, 5 letters, 3 editorials, 3 book chapters, 1 book, 1 note, 2 reviews and 3 dissertations were identified (Table 3). We used different document types with respect to academic bullying to find more relevant results. Traditionally, the Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary was also used to define the concept of academic bullying.

Results

The concept analysis results are presented using the Walker and Avant method (11).

1. Definitions and uses of concept

The first two steps of the Walker and Avant analysis method are outlined in the Introduction. The third step involves identifying various usages of the concept (11),

accomplished through the use of dictionaries and literature.

There is no dictionary definition noted for the compound phrase “academic bullying”; therefore we started with the definitions of the words academic and bullying. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines academic as a “member (such as a professor) of an institution of learning (such as a university)” (16).

The term academic specifically refers to individuals connected with the academic institution (17). Bullying is defined as using strength or power to intimidate or harm those who are weaker (16). Bullying is intentional and aimed at a specific target to cause harm (18). Bullying is a repeated and intentional act of aggression directed at individuals viewed as less powerful (19). Bullying behaviors may involve hostile remarks, verbal attacks, threats, taunts, intimidation, belittling, eye-rolling, loud sighing, name-calling, and exclusion or refusal to offer support (20, 21). There are few definitions of academic bullying found in the literature. Therefore, incorporating the term “academic” with “bullying” clarifies the concept by specifying the environment and the individuals engaging in the behavior.

Academic bullying refers to the persistent harassment, offense, or intentional isolation of an individual within an academic environment. It encompasses a range of inappropriate behaviors, including credit abuse, violations of rules and ethical guidelines, coercive control, mental harassment, cyberbullying, mobbing, retaliation, threats, and verbal abuse (22, 23). Mahmoud et al. defined academic bullying as abusive behavior, including verbal insults, public shaming, isolation, and threats, directed by senior scientists toward vulnerable junior colleagues such as postdocs, graduate students, and lab members (24).

Table 3. Number of findings by document type after duplication removal

Document type	Frequency
Article	19
Letter	5
Review	2
Editorial	3
Note	1
Book	1
Book chapter	3
Dissertation	3
Total	37

Academic bullying refers to ongoing hostility and mistreatment from an academic superior (25). Indeed,

academic bullying refers to mistreatment in academic settings aimed at hindering the victim's academic or career advancement (26). It is also a violation of human rights within an academic setting (27).

2. Defining attributes

Walker and Avant proposed that identifying the defining cluster of attributes most commonly associated with the concept is a vital aspect of analysis. These attributes help in distinguishing the concept from other similar concepts (11). Upon reviewing the literature for this concept analysis, four key attributes consistently emerged in the depiction of academic bullying:

1. Competition: One of the considered attributes is the competitive nature of academia. The competitive environment in academia also drives bullying. Scientists and clinical researchers strive for prominence to enhance their academic standing and secure funding. Metrics such as the h-index gauge the overall impact and significance of research efforts. Nonetheless, these indicators can be deceptive, linking output quantity to success and potentially steering researchers towards producing a greater number of superficial studies instead of focusing on producing high-quality and impactful work (24). Additionally, within the academic realm, a culture of competition could foster negative behaviors assuming undue authorship rights or theft of intellectual property (28).

2. Superiority: Academic bullying refers to a continuous and escalating demonstration of hostile conduct and abuse by a superior in academia (28).

3. Power: It is well-documented that academic bullying, primarily fueled by power imbalances, impacts individuals in all fields and academic roles, from students to senior faculty, at various experience levels (the need for the development). It commonly originates from the misuse of power by individuals with social and positional privileges (29).

4. Behavior: Academic bullying occurs when senior scientists verbally insult, publicly shame, isolate, or threaten junior colleagues, including postdocs, graduate students, and lab members (24).

3. Model Case

A model case exemplifies the use of a concept by demonstrating all its defining attributes. These cases can be real-life examples, found in literature, or even constructed by the researcher (11). The constructed case model illustrating all attributes of academic bullying is presented here:

A.K, a 45-year-old faculty member at the school of medicine, is an assistant professor who was recently hired.

Despite her colleagues being full professors with over 12 years of experience, they frequently belittle her opinions during their monthly meetings. They often assign her their tasks and even coerce her into including their names in her research articles. A.K was ordered by her colleagues to increase her workload. They openly question her experience and knowledge in front of other faculty members, often ridiculing her. When it comes to granting allocation from the research committee, they engage in unfair competition to secure more funding, sometimes overlooking A.K. During course and educational material discussions at the start of the term, A.K is consistently excluded as her colleagues deem her inexperienced and lacking in knowledge. They assert their superiority in ranking and scientific expertise, humiliating A.K along the process. Despite the passage of time, A.K's working environment remains unchanged, devoid of friendly relationships within her department. Her colleagues have recently begun to complain about her work performance.

This model case included all four key attributes of academic bullying: competition, behavior, power, and a sense of superiority. A.K endured academic bullying from her colleagues, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, diminished confidence and self-esteem, and contemplating leaving her role as a faculty member.

4. Related case

Related cases are examples that pertain to the studied concept but lack all its defining attributes (11). Below is an example of a related case of academic bullying.

L.A is a tenured faculty member at the school of medicine. He rarely participates in group meetings and disrespects colleagues by doing so. When a national or international conference is to be held in the school, he does not participate in coordination meetings, but as soon as the conference commences, he appears and pretends to be one of the active members. This behavior frustrates and bothers B.A, his fellow faculty member.

In this example, the behaviors displayed are impolite. L.A's actions do not seem to be aimed at causing harm on purpose, and they are not as extreme as typical bullying behaviors. It is also unclear whether there is abuse of power in this related case.

5. Borderline case

Borderline cases are instances that encompass most, but not all, defining attributes of the examined concept (11).

R.A is a faculty member at the school of medicine, holding a full professor rank with a decade of experience. He currently heads the department of general medicine

and has a tenured status. Z.A, who has two years of experience but does not have tenure status, focuses on an artificial intelligence project to enhance education. However, R.A, the head of department, showed no interest and declined approval. Z.A went to R.A's office, suggesting a group discussion on the project, but R.A dismissed the idea, citing the proficiency of the two full professors within the group and deeming Z.A's project unnecessary given her junior rank.

Two attributes of academic bullying (sense of superiority and abuse of power) are highlighted in this borderline case. It illustrates abuse of power by a faculty member refusing a request of his colleague and the display of superiority by attempting to belittle someone of a lower rank or status. Other defining attributes (behavior and competition) were not observed here in this case, making this example a borderline case.

6. Contrary case

A contrary case lacks the key characteristics of the concept and instead displays attributes that are atypical of it (11). The case below represents a contrary case:

T.B, a new faculty member in the medical education department, was warmly welcomed by the four tenured associate professors in the group despite his non-tenured status, treating him as a valued colleague in their research projects. During monthly meetings, his colleagues attentively listen to him, respecting his constructive comments to promote the group's objectives. His teaching style is admired by the professors, who provide guidance and support as needed. T.B appreciates the kindness and encouragement from his colleagues, which motivates him to attend work with enthusiasm and dedication daily. Further, these positive interactions contribute to his best performance.

The case is an example of the contrary concept as it lacks any defining attributes of academic bullying.

7. Antecedents and Consequences

Antecedents: Walker & Avant define antecedents as events or incidents that must happen before a concept can occur (11). Accordingly, in the associated literature on academic bullying, common antecedents linked to academic bullying are academic culture and environment, unethical leaders, biased investigations, unaccountability, abusive behaviors, negative work-related remarks, work overload, unfair crediting, lack of transparency and legal approach, feelings of superiority, unreasonable work-related demands, gender, imbalance of power, illiteracy, academic experience, competitive nature of academia, institution punishments, online

space, marginalization, substantial financial burdens, and COVID-19 pandemic (1, 3, 24, 28-43).

Consequences: Consequences are considered the outcome of the antecedents and the defining attributes (11). Some of the consequences of academic bullying include slowing the evolution of science, harming self-esteem, promotion and professional credentials, as well as validity of academia, physical and mental well-being, reducing academic workforce, organizational commitment, confidence, sense of freedom, effective mentorship and advice, and motivation, hindering the progress of star scientists and scientific integrity, enhancing the file drawer problem, undue authorship rights, negative job attitudes, dissatisfaction, anxiety, stress, burnout, depression, workplace retaliation, toxic work environment, negative effect on education, theft of intellectual property, withdraw from situations, economic and social inequities, isolation, poorer performance, inducing feelings of fear, anguish, suicidal thinking, frustration, powerlessness and inferiority, and finally threatening one's professional trajectory (1, 3, 28-32, 34, 35, 44).

8. Empirical referents

Walker and Avant define empirical referents as the ultimate outcomes of a concept, serving as tools to identify or evaluate its defining characteristics or attributes (11).

Despite some studies on academic bullying, a review of the literature by the authors reveals no universally accepted measurement tool for academic bullying. The Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), created by Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers, is frequently used to assess bullying, specifically among teachers over the past six months. This 22-item questionnaire employs a five-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "daily." It assesses three dimensions: personal bullying (items 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, and 20), work-related bullying (items 1, 3, 14, 16, 18, 19, and 21), and physically intimidating bullying (items 8, 9, and 22) (45). A study by Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers validated the NAQ-R as an effective measure of workplace bullying exposure. The Pearson product-moment correlation was high ($r = .96$). The average score for the three NAQ-R sub-factors, including work-related bullying, was 14.51, with a standard deviation of 5.04. The correlation for the validity of self-labeling questions was also strong ($r = 0.54$). Additionally, the NAQ-R's 22 items demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90 (45).

To gain a more profound insight into academic bullying, use of qualitative research might be a fitting approach to capture faculty members' encounters with this behavior. Further, faculty members' narratives could help describe the experience, perspectives, and significance of this phenomenon.

9. Working Definition

Expanding on the current definitions and evidence relating to academic bullying, the following description would serve as the working and operational definition for this concept analysis. This working definition can assist in identifying academic bullying within an academic setting:

Academic bullying is defined as an atypical behavior that arises from the misuse of power, work experience, academic ranking, tenured status, political relationships, and unsafe academic competition against colleagues in the academic setting, potentially resulting in emotional, psychological, social, and sometimes physical problems. In a nutshell, it is a battle of power and fame in academic settings for the wrong reasons.

Discussion

Academic bullying is a phenomenon that requires more attention and consideration due to its negative impact on faculty members, academic structure, and students. Recognizing academic bullying in educational environments raises awareness of its presence and can empower the faculty to stand against this issue. This concept analysis utilized Walker and Avant's method to identify defining attributes, antecedents, consequences, and empirical references of academic bullying, offering a clearer understanding of the term. Based on our findings, we propose a working definition of academic bullying (11). Academic intimidation among faculty members is a widespread problem in higher education institutions, with different types recognized including purposeful isolation, hindrance of career progression, and settling personal scores (46). Moreover, at an academic organizational level, bullying cultures foster a toxic work environment, which may negatively affect recruitment, scientific integrity, educational quality and knowledge dissemination and the reputation of the academic research sphere (36). Academic bullying is prevalent in fields such as science and medicine. This detrimental behavior undermines individuals' dignity and professional integrity. To effectively address and eradicate these harmful incidents, systematic study and comprehensive reform are essential (28).

In addressing academic bullying's negative impacts and the elements of escalation in academic bullying, a multi-faceted and multi-agency approach should be taken for addressing academic bullying. This involves proposing institutional and policy recommendations to ensure universities adhere to human rights standards and adequately safeguard academics from attacks (32, 44). Bullying, a severe form of mistreatment, occurs when someone in a position of authority intentionally subjects a target to persistent negative behaviors. In academic medicine, such bullying aims to hinder the target's professional development. While there is ample literature on addressing various forms of mistreatment, research specifically on bullying among academic medical faculty members remains limited (47). Academic administrators and authorities should instruct faculty members on methods to avert and lessen academic bullying. They should also assist individuals facing academic bullying through guiding responding to and reporting such incidents. Establishing collaborative and coordinated action among all stakeholders interested in and capable of influencing academic bullying is uniquely positioned to effectively tackle the underlying causes of this escalating problem, thereby enabling everyone to excel and progress (36). In addition to the structural elements of academia, the culture within an academic department significantly impacts bullying rates. Recognizing the broader systemic factors that influence departmental dynamics allows for thoughtful responses to bullying. Ultimately, this understanding provides guidance on how to cultivate a more inclusive and engaged departmental culture, thereby reducing instances of bullying (48). Academia can provide a rewarding career path, but the power dynamics inherent in university settings can sometimes turn promising careers into nightmares. Academic bullying is a long-standing, serious issue that affects individuals in various positions across all branches of science (3). Academic bullying and harassment severely impact both individuals and institutions, often going unreported. Perpetrators and bystanders ignore misconduct due to psychological factors influenced by their hierarchical positions. Institutions must counteract this deliberate ignorance by researching the prevalence, causes, and consequences of such behavior. This knowledge can help develop effective, evidence-based interventions, enabling institutions to manage and prevent misconduct more effectively (49).

Both qualitative and quantitative research are essential for comprehending academic bullying and its effects on teaching, learning, research processes, as well as faculty members' practice quality and safety. Usage of a mixed method study can enhance the development of the academic bullying concept, resulting in a more well-defined and relevant working definition for future studies and investigate the extent to which antecedents contribute to its incidents in academic setting.

Limitations: This concept analysis provided a comprehensive review of the literature, but two limitations were found. Firstly, all reviewed documents were only in English. Therefore, further research is needed to explore literature on academic bullying in other languages. Secondly, the concept analysis only included a literature review from select research databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and the Web of Science, Science Direct, and ProQuest. Thus, a more comprehensive analysis should involve reviewing research from other educational databases as well.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the concept of academic bullying is a developing phenomenon in academic setting in recent years, though there is no clear and precise definition of this concept. Applying Walker and Avant's (11) method, we found that academic bullying is a concept that emerged as negative interpersonal interactions among individuals or groups that have educational roles within an academic setting where power imbalances often lead to intentional harm toward others. As the work environment continues in dictatorial and hostile manner, the concept of academic bullying becomes critical. Academic bullying is a developing phenomenon in academic settings, indicating that faculty members should recognize it when it occurs among their colleagues. Using Walker and Avant's concept analysis method (11), this study provides readers with comprehensive information on the attributes, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents of academic bullying. Therefore, this concept analysis paves the way for further research to make academic bullying concept more understandable as well as advise strategies and interventions to diminish its occurrences and adverse impacts. A working definition was created to offer opportunities specifically for faculty members to be aware of academic bullying in academic settings and distinguish its possible antecedents plus consequences and take legal steps to mitigate it in work environment.

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Table 2. Search results for each database and number of findings by document type before duplication removal

Database	Document type by frequency								Total
	Article	Letter	Review	Editorial	Note	Book	Book chapter	Dissertation	
PubMed	10	4	2	2	-	-	-	-	18
Scopus	14	4	2	3	1	1	3	-	28
Web of science	14	3	2	2	1	-	-	-	22
Science direct	2	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	3
ProQuest	10	3	1	1	-	-	-	3	18
Total									89

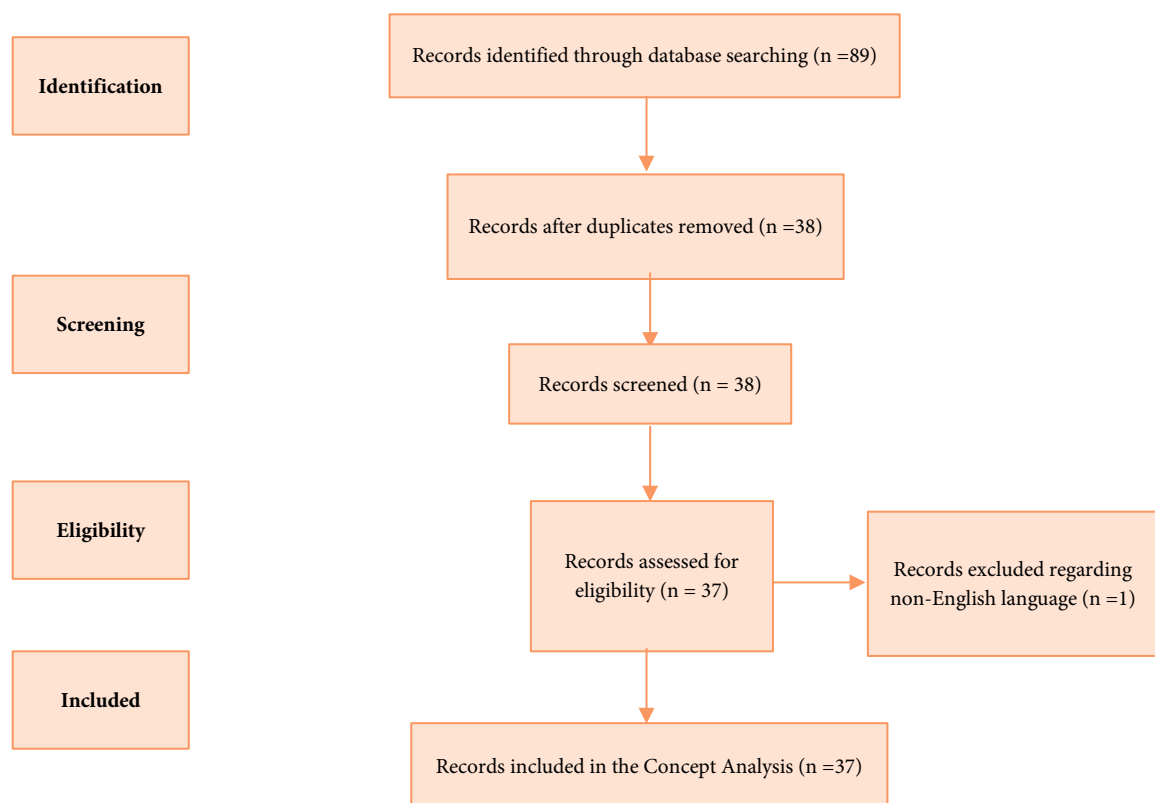


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009)