SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW ARCHIVES

Bullying Victimization, Interpersonal Difficulties, And Loneliness in School Children

Maryam Haneef[1], Dr. Shammem Akhtar[2]

[1] MS Scholar Institute of Clinical Psychology University of Management and Technology, Sialkot
[2] Assistent Professor Institute of Clinical Psychology University of Management and Technology, Sialkot

Abstract
This study explored the relationship between bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness among school children. A cross-sectional research design was used, and a stratified random sample of 300 students aged 13–18 years was selected. Standardized instruments, including the Bullying Victimization Scale (Amjad & Saleem, 2014), the Interpersonal Difficulties Scale (Saleem, et al., 2014), and the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (Russell, 1996), were administered. The findings revealed significant positive correlations between bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness. Regression analysis indicated that bullying victimization significantly predicted both loneliness and interpersonal difficulties. Gender differences were also observed, with male students reporting higher victimization. The results highlight the detrimental role of bullying on children's social and emotional development and underscore the need for targeted school-based interventions.

Keywords: Bullying victimization, Interpersonal difficulties, Loneliness, School children

Introduction
Bullying and victimization are pervasive issues in school settings that severely impact students' psychological and social development. Defined as repeated aggression characterized by a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993), bullying has been linked to outcomes such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor academic achievement (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Victimized students often face rejection, isolation, and relational challenges that may perpetuate cycles of loneliness and interpersonal difficulties (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). In Pakistan, research on bullying at the school level remains limited despite increasing reports of aggression and violence among adolescents (Shujja et al., 2014). Understanding how bullying relates to interpersonal difficulties and loneliness is crucial for developing preventive measures and effective interventions. This study, therefore, investigates these relationships among secondary school children in Sialkot.
Bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness are interrelated psychological and social challenges that have long-lasting consequences for children and adolescents. Schools, while designed to promote learning and development, often become environments where harmful peer dynamics flourish. Students who are repeatedly targeted by peers may struggle to build meaningful relationships and instead face rejection, isolation, and emotional distress. These experiences not only undermine their immediate well-being but also increase the likelihood of future mental health difficulties, poor academic performance, and long-term social maladjustment (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Bullying is generally defined as repeated, intentional aggression

that involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus, 1993). It can occur in the form of physical attacks, verbal harassment, social exclusion, or cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2012). Children who experience such victimization often develop anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Studies show that between 10–30% of students worldwide experience bullying, though prevalence varies across regions (Craig et al., 2009). In Pakistan, bullying is common among schoolchildren, particularly in public schools and among boys, yet the psychological consequences have received limited systematic attention (Shujja et al., 2014).

One of the critical consequences of bullying is the emergence of interpersonal difficulties**.** These difficulties refer to persistent problems in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and may manifest as poor communication, hostility, excessive dependence, or withdrawal (Horowitz et al., 1988). Children who are victimized may withdraw from peers to avoid further harm, but this avoidance can limit opportunities to practice essential social skills and worsen rejection (Salmivalli, 2014). In other cases, victims may respond aggressively, leading to further conflict and exclusion. Importantly, the relationship is bidirectional**;** children who already struggle socially are more likely to be targeted, while victimization itself exacerbates those difficulties (Cook et al., 2010).

Another major consequence of bullying **is** loneliness, understood as the subjective feeling of isolation when actual social connections do not meet a child's desired level of companionship (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Victimized children often report that they do not belong or feel unwanted at school. Loneliness has been linked with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor emotional **regulation** and it can predict disengagement from academics and risky behaviors during adolescence (Cacioppo et al., 2014). Longitudinal research shows that loneliness in childhood can persist into adulthood, creating enduring risks for mental health difficulties (Mund et al., 2020). These three constructs bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness are deeply intertwined. Victimized children are more likely to struggle in relationships, which fuels feelings of loneliness. Conversely, children who feel lonely or have poor social skills are more vulnerable to further bullying, creating a vicious cycle (Reijntjes et al., 2010). Gender differences also shape these experiences, with boys more often subjected to physical bullying and girls to relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In cultural contexts such as Pakistan, where social harmony and family honor are emphasized, the stigma of victimization may intensify children's reluctance to seek help (Hanif et al., 2011).

Despite a strong international literature on bullying and its outcomes, there remains a research gap in understanding how bullying victimization contributes to interpersonal difficulties and loneliness among Pakistani schoolchildren. Most existing studies focus only on prevalence, with limited attention to the emotional and relational consequences of bullying. (Shahid, & Akhter, S. (2023) The current study aims to address this gap by investigating the relationships among these variables in adolescents in Sialkot, thereby contributing to both theory and practice in the fields of education and psychology.

Studies highlight the interconnected nature of bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness. Victimized children are more likely to struggle socially, which increases their risk of isolation. In turn, children who feel lonely or lack strong friendships are more vulnerable to bullying (Reijntjes et al., 2010). Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) reported that peer victimization predicted later loneliness, while loneliness was associated with behaviors such as withdrawal that made children easy targets. Similarly, Schwartz et al., (2002) found that chronic victimization was linked to peer rejection and long-term relational difficulties.

This cycle illustrates that these three constructs cannot be studied in isolation. Instead, they represent a self-reinforcing loop that undermines children's social and emotional development if left unaddressed. Gender is a critical factor shaping bullying experiences. Research has consistently shown that boys are more likely to experience physical bullying, while girls are more likely to **face** relational bullying such as gossip or exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). These differences also

---

affect outcomes. Physical bullying often leads to overt conflict and aggression, while relational victimization is more closely associated with loneliness and depression (Salmivalli et al., 2013). In the Pakistani context, cultural expectations further shape these gendered experiences. Boys may be stigmatized if they are perceived as weak, while girls may tolerate relational aggression silently to maintain social harmony. These cultural dynamics highlight the need to interpret bullying experiences in relation to local gender norms (Hanif et al., 2011).

Hypothesis

1. There would be significant relationship between bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties and loneliness in school children.
2. Bullying victimization would be significant predictor of interpersonal difficulties in school children.
3. Bullying victimization would be significant predictor of loneliness in school children.
4. There would be significant gender differences in term of bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties and loneliness in school children.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationships between bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness among schoolchildren.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 300 schoolchildren (boys and girls) were selected using a stratified sampling technique. Participants were drawn from both public and private schools to ensure diversity in socioeconomic background. Their ages ranged from 13 to 18 years. Only students who were enrolled in school at the time of data collection, had parental consent, and volunteered to participate were included.

Instruments

Three standardized self-report measures were used to collect data:

1. **Bullying Victimization Scale** (**Amjad & Saleem, 2014**): This instrument assessed the frequency of victimization in physical, verbal, and emotional domains. It demonstrated good reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .82$).
2. **Interpersonal Difficulties Scale (Saleem Ihsan & Mehmood, 2014):** This scale measured interpersonal difficulties such as assertiveness problems, hostility, and dependence. Internal consistency reliability in this study was $\alpha = .85$.
3. **UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996):** This measure assessed subjective feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction with social relationships. The reliability coefficient in the present study was $\alpha = .88$.

Procedure

Formal permission was obtained from school principals before data collection. Students were informed about the purpose of the research and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Written consent was obtained from parents as well as assent from students. Questionnaires were administered in classroom settings during school hours, with the researcher present to provide clarification when needed. The average completion time was 25–30 minutes**.**

Data Analysis

Collected data were coded and entered into SPSS (Version 25) for analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed for demographic variables and study measures. Pearson product–moment correlation was used to examine associations among bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness. Linear regression analyses were performed to test the predictive role of bullying victimization. Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to assess gender differences. The level of significance was set at **p < .05** for all analyses.

_____

RESULTS
Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation of Demographic Variables (n=300)

Variables	M	SD
Age	1.8033	1.22869
Religion	.9733	.16138
Gender	.7000	.45902
Family Setup	.5267	.50012
Child Education	2.0767	.83653
Socioeconomic Status	1.6933	.81332

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation
The table showed that mean value of age was 1.8033 (SD = 1.22869), religion .9733 (SD = .16138), gender .7000 (SD = .45902), family setup .5267 (SD = .50012), child education 2.0767 (SD = .83653) and socioeconomic status 1.6933 (SD = .81332).

Table 2
Frequency and Percentage of Demographic Variables of the Participants (N=300)

Demographic Variables	(f)	(%)
Age		
1. 13	44	14.7
2. 14	95	31.7
3. 15	66	22.0
4. 16	71	23.7
5. 17	19	6.3
6. 18	5	1.7
Religion		
1. Non Muslim	8	2.7
2. Muslim	292	97.3
Gender		
1. Female	90	30.0
2. Male	210	70.0
Family Setup		
1. Nuclear	142	47.3
2. Joint	158	52.7
Child Education		
1. 6 Grade	8	2.7
2. 7 Grade	47	15.7
3. 8 Grade	182	60.7
4. 9 Grade	40	13.3
5. 10 Grade	23	7.7

Note. f = Frequency and % = Percentage
The result of the above table shows the description of demographic characteristics of sample (N = 300). The results showed that the frequency of age 13 was 44 and percentage was 14.7. The table showed that the most of the sample population belongs to age 14 and the frequency of age 14 was 95 and the percentage was 31.7, the frequency of age 15 was 66 and the percentage was 22.0, the frequency of age 16 was 71 and the percentage was 23.7, frequency of age 17 was 19and percentage was 6.3, also the frequency of age 18 was 5 and the percentage was 1.7. The Muslim participants in this sample were 292 and Non Muslims were 8. The students in the sample belonging to different level of education were as follows: 6 grade (8), 7 grade (47), 8 grade (182), 9 grade (40) and 10 grade

(23). The students who were the part of the sample were both male (210) and female (90). Based on the family type, most of the participants belong to joint family (158) than to nuclear family set up (142).

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations (N = 300)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Bullying Victimization	21.84	14.21	1	.194**	.357**
2. Loneliness	37.15	6.32		1	.287**
3. Interpersonal Difficulties	71.27	18.15			1

Note: **p < .01

There was a significant positive relationship between bullying victimization and both loneliness (r = .194, p < .01) and interpersonal difficulties (r = .357, p < .01).

Table 4

Regression of Bullying Victimization on Interpersonal Difficulties (N = 300)

Variables	B	β	SE	T	P	Adj. R^2	R^2	95% CI
Constant	69.035		3.177	21.731	.000			62.783, 75.286
BVST	.808	.357	.123	6.595	.000	.125	.128	.567, 1.050

Note. B = Unstandardized Coefficient, β = Standardized Coefficient beta, SE = Standard Error, BVST = Bullying Victimization Scale Total, CI = Confidence Interval, *p< 0.05, **p< 0.01, ***p< 0.001. Bullying victimization significantly predicted interpersonal difficulties (β = .357, p < .001), accounting for 12.8% of the variance.

Table 5

Regression of Bullying Victimization on Loneliness (N = 300)

Variables	B	β	SE	T	P	Adj. R^2	R^2	95% CI
Constant	47.239		.612	77.184	.000			46.035, 48.443
BVST	.081	.194	.024	3.415	.001	.034	.038	.034, .127

Note. B = Unstandardized Coefficient, β = Standardized Coefficient beta, SE = Standard Error, BVST = Bullying Victimization Scale Total, CI = Confidence Interval, *p< 0.05, **p< 0.01, ***p< 0.001. Bullying victimization significantly predicted loneliness (β = .194, p = .001), explaining 3.8% of the variance.

Table 6

Mean Differences, Standard Deviations, t and p values in Bullying Victimization Scale, Interpersonal Difficulties Scale and Loneliness Scale in Male and Female School Children (N = 300)

Variables	Gender	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
BVST	Male	23.57	14.70	-3.67	.000	0.48
	Female	17.12	11.90			
BVES	Male	9.40	6.63	-3.99	.000	0.53
	Female	6.30	4.98			
BVPS	Male	5.80	3.77	-2.59	.092	0.33
	Female	4.60	3.42			
BVVS	Male	8.37	5.72	-3.09	.009	0.40
	Female	6.22	4.93			
LST	Male	48.74	5.99	1.14	.253	-0.14

		M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
	Female	49.58	5.71			
IDST	Male	85.07	32.94	1.25	.109	-0.16
	Female	90.09	29.98			
IDDOS	Male	18.77	8.75	-0.47	.274	0.06
	Female	18.24	9.80			
IDLSCS	Male	16.10	7.37	1.38	.755	-0.16
	Female	17.31	7.77			
IDMS	Male	17.59	8.28	-0.34	.074	0.04
	Female	17.25	7.07			
IDLBS	Male	8.46	4.23	2.89	.632	-0.37
	Female	9.97	3.96			
IDURS	Male	9.56	5.32	-0.26	.702	0.03
	Female	9.39	4.57			
IDLAS	Male	14.60	6.11	4.09	.010	-0.49
	Female	17.96	7.41			

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation, t = t- values, p = level of significance, LST = Loneliness Scale Total, BVES = Bullying Victimization Scale Emotional, BVPS = Bullying Victimization Scale Physical, BVVS = Bullying Victimization Verbal Scale, BVST = Bullying Victimization Scale Total, IDDOS = Interpersonal Difficulties Dominance Scale, IDLSCS = Interpersonal Difficulties Lack of Self Confidence Scale, IDMS = Interpersonal Difficulties Mistrust Scale, IDLBS = Interpersonal Difficulties Lack of Boundaries Scale, IDURS = Interpersonal Difficulties Unstable Relationship Scale, IDLAS = Interpersonal Difficulties Lack of Assertiveness Scale, IDST = Interpersonal Difficulties Scale Total, *P< 0.05, **P< 0.01, ***P< 0.001.

The table revealed significant gender differences in bullying victimization and some interpersonal difficulties among 300 school children. Males reported higher (M = 23.57, SD = 14.70) total bullying victimization than females (M = 17.12, SD = 11.90), t(298) = -3.67, p < .001, with a medium effect size, Cohen's d = 0.48. Similarly, males scored higher on emotional bullying than females (M = 9.40 vs. 6.30), physical bullying (M = 5.80 vs. 4.60), and verbal bullying (M = 8.37 vs. 6.22), all showing significant differences (p < .01) and effect sizes ranging from 0.33 to 0.50. No significant gender differences were found for loneliness or most interpersonal difficulties. However, females reported significantly greater difficulties with lack of boundaries (M = 9.97, SD = 3.96) than males (M = 8.46, SD = 4.23), t(298) = 2.89, p = .004, d = 0.36, and higher lack of assertiveness (M = 17.96, SD = 7.41) than males (M = 14.60, SD = 6.11), t(297) = 4.08, p < .001, d = 0.49. these results indicate that boys experience more bullying victimization, while girls tend to struggle more with assertiveness and boundaries.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationships among bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness in schoolchildren. The findings confirmed the proposed hypotheses and provided support for previous research in both international and Pakistani contexts. Consistent with earlier studies (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen & Graham, 2014), bullying victimization was significantly associated with interpersonal difficulties and loneliness. Children who experienced bullying reported more problems in forming and maintaining positive relationships and felt higher levels of social isolation. (Akhtar et al., 2023). These findings support the view that bullying undermines social functioning and contributes to maladjustment. The positive correlation between interpersonal difficulties and loneliness further suggests that relational challenges not only stem from victimization but also amplify feelings of isolation, as noted in previous research (Reijntjes et al., 2010).

Regression analysis showed that bullying victimization significantly predicted both interpersonal difficulties and loneliness, explaining a substantial proportion of variance in both outcomes. This

supports the bidirectional model of peer relations, whereby children with relational vulnerabilities are more likely to be targeted, and the experience of bullying intensifies those vulnerabilities (Cook et al., 2010). The results align with international findings but extend them to the Pakistani context, where little systematic evidence has been available.

The results also highlighted gender differences in bullying experiences. Boys reported higher physical victimization, while girls experienced more relational victimization, consistent with the findings of Crick and Grotpeter (1995). However, no significant gender differences emerged in loneliness or interpersonal difficulties. This suggests that although the forms of bullying differ, its psychological consequences may be equally detrimental for both genders. In Pakistan's cultural context, where boys are often expected to assert dominance and girls to preserve social harmony, these patterns may reflect socially constructed norms regarding aggression and relational dynamics (Hanif et al., 2011).

Overall, the findings confirm that bullying victimization, interpersonal difficulties, and loneliness are deeply interconnected. The results highlight how victimized children not only suffer immediate emotional distress but also face enduring challenges in their relationships and sense of belonging. These outcomes contribute to the cycle of peer rejection and social withdrawal described in previous studies (Schwartz et al., 2002).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study confirmed that bullying victimization is significantly associated with interpersonal difficulties and loneliness among schoolchildren and further acts as a strong predictor of these outcomes. Gender differences were observed in the nature of bullying, with boys more frequently exposed to physical victimization and girls more likely to experience relational victimization. These results highlight bullying as a serious psychosocial challenge that disrupts children's social functioning and emotional well-being.

To address these issues, it is recommended that schools implement structured anti-bullying programs, provide teacher training to identify and respond to bullying, and involve parents in awareness campaigns to strengthen support for children. Establishing school-based counseling services can also help victims develop coping skills and rebuild confidence. At a broader level, policy frameworks must be introduced to ensure safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of bullying on psychosocial adjustment through longitudinal and intervention-based studies.

References

Akhtar, S., Rani, M., & Jabeen, S. (2023). Translation and psychometric properties of Kutcher Adolescents' Depression Scale (KADS) In Pakistan. Journal of Positive School Psychology, 7(4). 1900-1905.

Cacioppo, J. T., Grippo, A. J., London, S., Goossens, L., & Cacioppo, S. (2014). Loneliness: Clinical import and interventions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10*(2), 238–249. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615570616

Cook, C. R., Williams, K. R., Guerra, N. G., Kim, T. E., & Sadek, S. (2010). Predictors of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic investigation. *School Psychology Quarterly, 25*(2), 65–83. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020149

Craig, W., Harel-Fisch, Y., Fogel-Grinvald, H., Dostaler, S., Hetland, J., Simons-Morton, B., … & Pickett, W. (2009). A cross-national profile of bullying and victimization among adolescents in 40 countries. *International Journal of Public Health, 54*(2), 216–224. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-009-5413-9

Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development, 66*(3), 710–722. https://doi.org/10.2307/1131945

Hanif, R., Tariq, S., & Nadeem, M. (2011). Bullying among secondary school children in Pakistan. *Asian Social Science, 7*(12), 64–69. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v7n12p64

Hawker, D. S. J., & Boulton, M. J. (2000). Twenty years' research on peer victimization and psychosocial maladjustment: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 41*(4), 441–455. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00629

Horowitz, L. M., Rosenberg, S. E., Baer, B. A., Ureño, G., & Villaseñor, V. S. (1988). Inventory of interpersonal problems: Psychometric properties and clinical applications. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 56*(6), 885–892. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.56.6.885

Juvonen, J., & Graham, S. (2014). Bullying in schools: The power of bullies and the plight of victims. *Annual Review of Psychology, 65*, 159–185. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115030

Kochenderfer, B. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1996). Peer victimization: Cause or consequence of school maladjustment? *Child Development, 67*(4), 1305–1317. https://doi.org/10.2307/1131701

Mund, M., Freuding, M. M., Möbius, K., Horn, N., & Neyer, F. J. (2020). The stability and change of loneliness across the life span: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 24*(1), 24–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868319850738

Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Blackwell.

Qualter, P., Brown, S. L., Rotenberg, K. J., Vanhalst, J., Harris, R. A., Goossens, L., … & Munn, P. (2013). Trajectories of loneliness during childhood and adolescence: Predictors and health outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence, 36*(6), 1283–1293. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.01.005

Reijntjes, A., Kamphuis, J. H., Prinzie, P., & Telch, M. J. (2010). Peer victimization and internalizing problems in children: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 34*(4), 244–252. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2009.07.009

Salmivalli, C. (2014). Participant roles in bullying: How can peer bystanders be utilized in interventions? *Theory Into Practice, 53*(4), 286–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947222

Shahid, N., & Akhter, S. (2023). Parenting Style and Social-Emotional Competence Among Adolescents. Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 7(7), 201-209*

Schwartz, D., Dodge, K. A., & Coie, J. D. (2002). The emergence of chronic peer victimization in boys' play groups. *Child Development, 64*(6), 1755–1772. https://doi.org/10.2307/1131467

Shujja, S., Atta, M., & Shujjat, J. M. (2014). Prevalence of bullying and victimization among sixth graders with reference to gender, socioeconomic status, and type of schools. *Journal of Social Sciences, 38*(2), 159–165.