INTERNALIZING BEHAVIORS AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF ADOLESCENTS FACING PEER VICTIMIZATION

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the moderating role of conflict management strategies in adolescent peer victimization and psychological adjustment (internalizing behaviors). Adolescence is a critical developmental stage, and peer victimization during this period can have long-lasting negative effects on psychological well-being. A sample of 500 adolescents from different educational institutions in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, with an age range of 10-19 years, was collected through a convenient sampling technique. The data was collected using self-reported measures, such as the Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale Relationships by Joseph and Stockton (2018), Resolving Conflicts in Relationships (RCR) by Thayer (2008), and the Youth Internalizing Behavior Screener (YIBS) by Aslam (2020). The results of the study showed significant associations between the study variables. Peer victimization was positively associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Furthermore, male adolescents scored higher on physical and verbal victimization than female adolescents. This finding highlights the need for gender-specific interventions to address peer victimization among adolescents. Importantly, the study found that conflict resolution strategies played a significant moderating role between peer victimization and psychological adjustment, with solution-oriented strategies serving as a protective factor, while non-confrontational strategies have a negative impact. This means that adolescents who tend to use solution-oriented strategies, as opposed to non-confrontational strategies, resolve conflicts in their relationships are less likely to experience negative psychological adjustments, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety; as a result of peer victimization

Keywords: Peer Victimization, Conflict Management Strategies, Internalizing Behaviors, Adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Peer victimization is a general term that covers a variety of purposeful harming behaviors, which includes bullying, cyberbullying, peer harassment, peer assault, and intimidation susceptibility (Olweus, 2010; Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2015). It is widespread across

cultures, countries, and schools, with around 20% of students ages 12-18 reporting experiencing bullying at school (Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2015; Seldin & Yanez, 2019).

Research suggests that there may be stark gender differences in victimization and bullying, with 94% of boys and 85% of girls reporting victimization, and 66% of girls and 85% of boys reporting being complicit in bullying their fellow students various types of adolescent victimization, such as psychological bullying, direct or indirect aggression, verbal abuse, and unkind taunting, as well as unfavorable messages and gestures, and isolation among peers and segregation (Haahr-Pedersen et al., 2020; Collier et al., 2013).

Internalizing behaviors in adolescents and adults begins from an early stage in a person's life. Psychosocial adjustment in childhood often refers to adaptability and performance in several key domains, primarily categorized as home and school; it reflects a person's ability to cope with environmental challenges, peer connections, and overall intellectual and interpersonal competence (PAPADOPOULOS, 2020). Peer interactions are a crucial factor in a child's psychological functioning and overall well-being, both in the present and in the future (Levitan et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2019). Being socially accepted and making friends is linked to better adaptation, personal well-being, improved academic achievement, high self-esteem, and a positive and supportive group experience (Samara et al., 2020).As reported in various researches majority of the students, particularly newbies, are subjected to verbal and physical harassment by teams of abusers (Smokowski et al., 2019).

Research on peer aggression and humiliation at school has mostly focused on determining the effects of being the target of such behavior as any form of violence appears to have a negative impact on the victim's life (Zeng et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2021; Cañas et al., 2020). The three main signs of emotional maladjustment are commonly seen as loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Durna et al., 2022). Several studies have found that certain personal characteristics and the ability to express and control one's emotions may be indicators of victimization and cyber victimization while causing various forms of maladjustment (Buchanan & McDougall, 2021) and increasing internalized problems during early childhood (Christina et al., 2021; Estévez et al., 2019; Brendgen et al., 2021). This further emphasizes the importance of conflict management in internalized behavior that may negatively impact the lives of adolescents.

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of adolescence, and young people have plenty of practice in dealing with conflicts, particularly with their peers of the same gender and age, as well as family members (He et al., 2019; Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020). As individuals go through adolescence, their social environment expands to include more opposite-sex acquaintances and interactions, including friendly and romantic interactions which increases the likelihood of conflict (Mayeux & Kleiser, 2020). However, most research on teenage conflict has focused on same-gender interactions or has not distinguished between same-gender and cross-gender interactions (Weissel, 2021; Miranda-Mendizabal et al., 2019).

The use and impact of constructive problem-solving strategies by teenagers and parents is thought to change during adolescence for various reasons (Mastrotheodoros et al.,

2020). Many theorists argue that adolescence brings about increased use of a more mature approach to conflict resolution that involves greater compromise (Masood et al., 2022; Dost-Gözkan 2019).
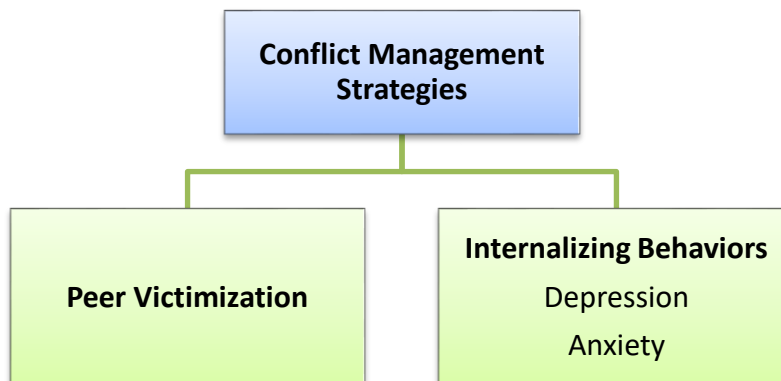
Peer victimization can cause psychological problems in adolescents, but effective dispute-resolution methods can help. Adolescents who use solution-oriented tactics, such as displaying empathy, tend to handle disagreements well and improve their peer relationships, which can benefit their psychological adjustment (Öztürk Çopur & Kubilay, 2022; Schoeps et al., 2020; Fredrick et al., 2022). However, because peer victimization is characterized by a power imbalance, it can be difficult for victims to resolve issues with their aggressors. Using control/direct conflict or avoidance/withdrawal strategies can exacerbate conflicts and promote bullying behaviors, leading to further victimization and greater psychological problems (Eggum et al., 2022; Rambaran et al., 2019). Based on the research it can be evidenced that conflict management strategies may be effective in dispute resolution methods however it is important to identify and isolate solution-oriented tactics.

Theoretical Framework

Prolonged or severe stress has negative impacts on wellbeing (Nelson et al., 2020) and is linked to psychological, behavioral, and physical health problems. Peer victimization also leads to emotional, psychological, and social maladjustment (ZAVATSKYI et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2019).

The transactional paradigm of coping with stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman is the primary theoretical basis for the present study. The "dual-concern" concept by Blake and Mouton, later reinterpreted by others, serves as the foundation for conflict management research and defines five conflict management styles: integrating, avoiding, dominating, obliging, and compromising (De Dreu et al., 2000; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993).

Conceptual Framework

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        │ Conflict Management  │
        │     Strategies       │
        └──────────┬───────────┘
           ┌───────┴────────┐
┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐
│                  │  │ Internalizing Behaviors│
│ Peer Victimization│  │      Depression        │
│                  │  │       Anxiety          │
└──────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘
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Rationale

The prevalence of peer victimization among adolescents has increased in recent decades (Arseneault, 2017). Studies have shown that chronic victimization can affect brain development (Quinlan et al., 2020) and the highest prevalence occurs during middle school or early adolescence (Espelage & Swearer, 2009). This phenomenon of peer victimization is a significant stressor that can have detrimental effects on the psychological and physical well-being of students (Schacter, 2021; van Geel et al., 2021). The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between peer victimization, internalizing behaviors, and conflict management strategies among adolescents. Adolescence is a time of significant development and growth, during which individuals may be particularly vulnerable to peer victimization (Espelage & Swearer, 2009; Schacter, 2021). Conflict management strategies play an essential role in the adjustment and coping mechanisms of victimized youth and adolescents (Wang et al., 2020). Despite the growing body of research on peer victimization, and its impact on academic performance in Pakistan, there remains a gap in understanding the specific conflict management strategies that adolescents use to overcome the anxiety and depression that can result from victimization.

METHOD

Objectives

The objectives of this research include:

1. To find the association between peer victimization, conflict Management and psychological adjustment

2. To explore the moderating effect of conflict management strategies on the association between peer victimization and Internalizing Behaviors among adolescents.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses of the current study are:

1. There is a positive relationship between peer victimization and Internalizing Behaviors (anxiety and depression) among adolescents.

2. Conflict management strategies will function as a moderator between peer victimization and psychological adjustment among adolescents.

Participants

Non-probability convenient sampling was used to collect data. Data was collected from 500 adolescents comprising 249 males and 251 females from different schools, colleges and universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Adolescents' ages range from 10-19 (WHO, 2020).

Inclusion Criteria

Adolescents who were going to any institute of Islamabad and Rawalpindi were included. Participants who were willing and committed to participating in the research were included.

Operational definitions

Peer Victimization

Peer victimization involves the repeated and systematic abuse of power by one or more peers over a period in purposeful attempts to injure or inflict discomfort (Olweus, 2010).

Conflict Management

Conflict Management refers to the process geared toward reaching an agreement in a dispute, debate, or any other form of conflict between two or more parties (Putnam, 1983; Thayer, 2008).

Psychological Adjustment

The psychological adjustment refers to one's subjective sense of distress and the degree to which they function in daily life (Arslan, 2017).

Instruments

Demographic information

It will include Gender, Age, family system and socio-economic status.

The multidimensional peer victimization scale

An instrument is a self-report tool that assesses six factors: physical victimization, verbal victimization, social manipulation, attacks on property, electronic victimization, and social rebuff. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for physical victimization is 0.78, for verbal victimization is 0.78, for social manipulation is 0.81, for attacks on property is 0.79, for electronic victimization is 0.81, and for social rebuff is 0.84. Respondents are asked to rate their experiences on a four-point scale, with options ranging from 0 (not at all) to 2 (more than once). (Joseph & Stockton, 2018)

Resolving Conflict in Relationships (RCR)

It is a self-reported scale used to measure conflict management. It consists of 29 items and has three sub-scales: non-confrontation, solution-orientation, and control. Respondents are asked to select a response on a five-point rating scale, with possible answers ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very often). The scale has been found to have good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .79 for non-confrontation, .83 for solution-orientation, and .76 for control. (Thayer, 2008)

Youth Internalizing Behavior Screener

It is designed to measure internal problems of psychological adjustment, specifically anxiety and depression. It consists of 10 items and has two sub-scales: anxiety and depression. Respondents are asked to rate on a four-point rating scale, with possible answers ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). The scale has been found

to have good reliability, with an internal consistency reliability coefficient of .75 to .90. For the subscale of anxiety, the coefficient is .75 to .84, and for depression is .79 to .84. (Arslan, 2020)

RESULTS

Table 1

Moderating effects of conflict resolution strategies (Non-Confrontation) on the relationship between peer victimization and psychological adjustment (internalizing behavior) among adolescents (N=500)

		Internalizing Behavior		
			95% CI	
Predictors	B	t	LL	UL
Constant	29.12	254.2***	28.90	29.35
PV	.14	3.88***	.06	.21
NC	.79	2.99***	.02	.13
PV*NC	.02	1.96*	.00	.03
R²	.05			
ΔR	.01			
F	8.42			
ΔF	3.87			

***p<.000, **p<.01, *p<.05

Note PV=Peer Victimization, NC= Non-Confrontation

Tables 14 displays that conflict management strategy (Non confrontation) is a significant moderator for peer victimization and psychological adjustment (Internalizing behavior). Further, table 14 reports that interaction between peer victimization and non-confrontation conflict management strategy serves as a positively significant predictor for psychological adjustment (internalizing behavior).
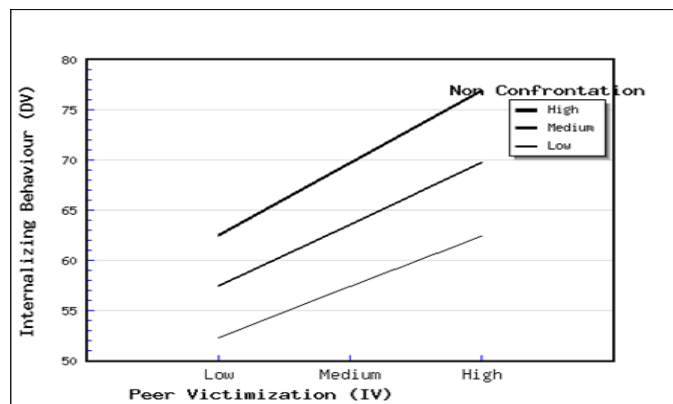

Figure 2: Graphical representation of moderating effect of conflict resolution strategies (non-confrontation) between peer victimization and internalizing behaviors

Figure 2 indicates that if the adolescent is high on peer victimization and non-confrontation strategy then he/she also has high internalizing behaviors.

Table 2

Moderating effects of conflict resolution strategies (Solution Oriented) on the relationship between peer victimization and psychological adjustment (internalizing behavior) among adolescents (N=500)

	Internalizing Behavior			
			95% CI	
Predictors	B	t	LL	UL
Constant	29.03	274.3***	28.83	29.24
PV	.18	5.65***	.11	.24
SO	.21	8.74***	.16	.26
PV*SO	-.04	-6.40***	-.05	-.03
R^2	.20			
ΔR	.06			
F	42.17			
ΔF	41.00			

***p<.000, **p<.01, *p<.05

Note PV=Peer Victimization, SO=Solution Oriented

Tables 15 displays that conflict management strategy (solution oriented) is a significant moderator for peer victimization and psychological adjustment (Internalizing behavior). Further, table 15 reports that interaction between peer victimization and solution oriented conflict management strategy serves as a negatively significant predictor for psychological adjustment (internalizing behavior).
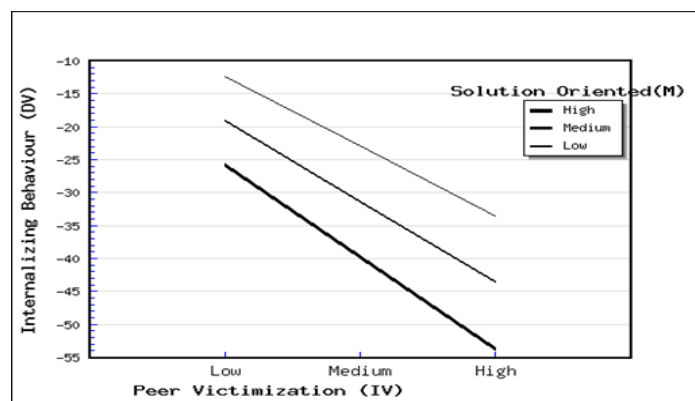

Figure 3: Graphical representation of moderating effect of conflict resolution strategies (solution-oriented) between peer victimization and internalizing behaviors

Figure 3 indicates that if the adolescent is high on peer victimization and solution-oriented strategy then he/she has low internalizing behaviors**.**

DISCUSSION

The aim of the research is to explore peer victimization, internalizing behaviors, and conflict management strategies of adolescents. The study posits that there is a positive relationship between peer victimization, anxiety, and depression among adolescents. This hypothesis is supported by previous research, such as a study conducted by Forbes et al. in 2019, which found that individuals who reported experiencing peer victimization throughout their school life were more likely to experience anxiety or depression in later ages. Additionally, studies have found that peer victimization predicted increases in internalizing difficulties over time, and internalizing problems also predicted a higher risk of peer victimization over time (Christina et al., 2021). These findings suggest that there may be a vicious cycle in which bullied adolescents not only experience internalizing anguish but may also become targets due to how they handle these symptoms.

In addition to the effects of traditional forms of peer victimization, researchers have also begun to investigate the effects of cyberbullying and hostility that occurs online and through electronic media. For example, several studies find that psychological maladjustment is high in participants with a history of peer victimization, and that youth with social anxiety may be particularly impacted by cyber victimization as they may rely more on computer-mediated communication (Cañas et al., 2020; Buchanan & McDougall, 2021). While another study corroborated that social skills both online as well as offline mediate between peer victimization and self-worth, which means that they will experience lowered psychological adjustment (Resnik & Bellmore, 2019). As such with the growing use of social media platforms and online identities, it is important to take into consideration both online and offline conflict management strategies used by adolescents to create interventions for reducing peer victimization behavior.

It was also hypothesized that conflict resolution strategies may act as a moderator between peer victimization and psychological adjustment among adolescents. Results of moderation analysis support this hypothesis and are in line with previous research, such as a study by Wang et al. (2020) which found that peer victimization is negatively correlated with depression for adolescents who are high on solution orientation strategy and positively associated with internalizing behavior for adolescents who are high on non-confrontation. Adolescents who use a solution-oriented strategy in response to bullying are less likely to experience psychological difficulties, whereas non-confrontation may act as an exacerbating factor.

This finding is further supported by a study by Gardner (2019) which found that solution-focused coping strategies were positively associated with psychological well-being among adolescents who were victims of bullying, whereas avoidance coping strategies were negatively associated with psychological well-being. Additionally, a study by Erath et al. (2019) found that active coping strategies, such as problem-solving and seeking social support, were effective in reducing the negative psychological effects of peer victimization among adolescents.

CONCLUSION

The current study focused on understanding the underlying causes of psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression during adolescence, a crucial period for the development of these disorders. The findings indicate that peer victimization is a modifiable risk factor for poor psychological adjustment, with frequent victimization linked to an increased risk of depression and anxiety. The study also found that solution-oriented coping strategies were negatively associated with anxiety and depression and that there is a difference in peer victimization among adolescents based on gender, with male adolescents experiencing more physical and verbal victimization than female adolescents. The study's findings also revealed that conflict management strategies play a moderating role in the association between peer victimization and psychological adjustment, providing important insights into the impact of peer victimization on adolescent psychological adjustment and the role of coping strategies in mitigating negative effects.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study in question had several limitations, including a small sample size that limited the diversity of the sample and constrained the generalizability of the findings. It was also limited by a lack of Pakistan-related literature on the subject and data only collected from two cities. The study's variables were measured by self-reported measures, which may introduce subjective biases, and personality factors were ignored. Additionally, the study was limited by funding and resources, which reduced replicability and generalizability. However, it has the advantage of allowing for a more in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon in a specific population, which can be useful for future large-scale research.

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