

## The Psychological Triad: Investigating the Association between Bullying, Self-Esteem, and Depression in Secondary Education

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**Abstract:** Bullying is a prevalent issue in educational settings, negatively affecting students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and social interactions. This study examines the relationship between bullying, self-esteem, and depression among secondary school students, with a particular focus on verbal bullying. Using a quantitative correlational research design, data were collected from female students enrolled in grades 9 and 10 in Lahore, Pakistan. Standardized assessment tools, including the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Beck Depression Inventory, were utilized to measure the prevalence of bullying, levels of self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between bullying and depression ( $r = 0.727$ ), indicating that students who experience bullying are more likely to develop depressive symptoms. Additionally, a strong inverse relationship between self-esteem and depression ( $r = 0.882$ ) suggests that low self-esteem exacerbates mental health challenges. The study underscores the urgent need for anti-bullying policies, mental health support programs, and self-esteem-building interventions to create a safer and more supportive school environment. Future research should explore longitudinal effects and the efficacy of intervention strategies in mitigating bullying-related psychological distress.

**Keywords:** Psychological Triad, Self-Esteem, Bullying, Depression, Education



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## Introduction

Bullying has always been a problem in all societies. Bullying happens in both wealthy and developing countries. Bullying has detrimental effects on wellness, making it a serious public health issue that many higher education students must deal with. Bullying can take many different forms, including violent behaviors that are verbal, physical, or psychological in nature. Behaviors intended to sabotage relationships can also be classified as bullying.

Bullying can be defined as the deliberate and ongoing misuse of authority in social situations through repeated verbal, physical, and/or social acts with the intention of harming someone's physical, social, or mental health. It could involve someone or something abusing their power, real or perceived, over one or more individuals who are incapable of defending themselves (Tight, 2023). Self-esteem is a subjective assessment of one's value that can range from low to high. People with low self-esteem frequently feel unworthy, whereas people with high self-esteem are proud of who they are. Self-evaluation, self-appraisal, self-acceptance, and sense of self-worth are frequently used synonyms for self-esteem. For over a century, self-esteem has been a major psychological topic. Self-esteem has been the subject of thousands of books and articles written by psychologists, and the general public seems to be just as interested. This heightened attention stems, in part, from early findings that self-esteem promotes critical life outcomes such as academic success, social acceptance, and physical health (Neff et al., 2007). In contrast to the substantial number of studies showing a relationship between peer victimization and both anxiety and depression, very few have considered

variables related to victims' perceptions of themselves, such as shame and self-esteem, when seeking to elucidate the mechanisms underpinning the psychosocial impact of bullying victimization (Balluerka et al., [2023](#)). Bullying experiences in teenagers can lead to maladjusted development, such as low self-esteem, which increases the risk of having bullying experiences (Mullan et al., [2023](#)).

Depression rates in young people have grown dramatically over the last decade, particularly among females, which is concerning given that adolescence is a period of rapid social, emotional, and cognitive growth as well as significant life upheavals. Depression recurrence in young individuals, the onset of other mental diseases, and long-term impairments in interpersonal, social, educational, and occupational functioning are all negative effects of depression (Thapar et al. [2012](#)). Bullying is a significant psychosocial issue that harms victims and increases the likelihood of developing psychiatric issues and psychopathological symptoms throughout childhood, adolescence, and maturity (Stadler et al., [2010](#)).

This study aims to examine the prevalence of bullying, assess the levels of self-esteem, and explore the relationships between bullying, self-esteem, and depression among secondary school students. By addressing these interconnected issues, the research seeks to provide valuable insights that can inform strategies to enhance students' well-being and create a positive educational atmosphere.

According to justice psychology, this kind of behavior transgresses social norms and rules, as well as the personal rights of those who have been harmed and the concepts and standards of justice (such as interpersonal justice). Furthermore, victims of innocent cyberbullying endure severe consequences from online attacks that they do not deserve; in contrast, those who engage in cyberbullying typically go unpunished despite their crimes being committed against them. As a result, there may be a correlation between cyberbullying and individual differences in the belief that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Donat et al., [2023](#)).

Bullying at schools and universities is on the rise, according to several studies. Bullying has been a significant issue impeding students' ability to achieve their academic and psychological goals because it has been progressively on the rise among university students (Al-Rashdan, [2020](#)). There are several theoretical theories that try to explain the connection between depression and peer victimization. Depressive symptoms hinder young people's social development and cause problems in peer relationships, according to the symptoms-driven paradigm. The first study to empirically support this theory is that of Kochel and Rafferty ([2020](#)), who show that social helplessness influences the association between depressed symptoms and future victimization by peers. The relationship between peer victimization and depressive symptoms is the main focus of interpersonal risk models. Hopelessness and sadness can result from maladaptive behaviors in response to unpleasant life experiences, according to the despair theory of depression. Therefore, for instance, a child who attributes a bad experience, like being bullied, to their own incapacity to handle social situations and feels destined to be a victim may avoid social situations and suffer from depression and indifference due to pessimism. Peer victimization and depression have been linked in transactional models (Stadler et al. 2010). The long-term study carried out by Bottino et al. ([2015](#)) identified self-esteem as a potential mediator and examined the relationship between bullying victimization—including both traditional and cyberbullying—and future depressive symptoms in children. 4043 Chinese elementary school students in grades three and four, ages nine to twelve, were included in the sample. The findings demonstrated that children with higher levels of initial victimization from both traditional and cyberbullying exhibited lower initial levels of subsequent self-esteem and more depressive symptoms. Additionally, children who had experienced subsequent increase in traditional and cyberbullying victimization over time also developed subsequent depressive symptoms as well as a subsequent decrease in self-esteem with passage of time. Another study conducted by Dervishi et al. ([2019](#)) on 284 teenagers with age group of 13-18 years established a positive significant relationship between the frequency of victimization and increase in depression which means that the children who have experienced more bullying, experience more depressive symptoms. This relationship is seen irrespective of gender, age and academic performance.

The research contains two basic explanatory explanations for the association between poor self-esteem and depression. In contrast to the vulnerability model, which asserts that low self-esteem is a causative risk factor for depression, the scar model suggests that low self-esteem is a consequence of depression rather than a cause of it,



as depressive episodes can cause permanent damage to an individual's self-concept. Due to the possibility of simultaneous occurrence of the processes outlined in both models, it is imperative to emphasize that they are not mutually exclusive (Stadler et al., 2010). The more direct forms of traditional bullying, such as verbal bullying that occurs in person, share traits with the more direct forms of cyberbullying, such as sending insulting texts via SMS or making prank calls, while the more indirect forms of bullying, such as spreading rumors, have more in common with bullying that occurs on social media. Observed that although evidence indicates that bullying can have serious consequences in all forms, victims viewed physical and verbal bullying as more severe than relational and cyberbullying (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021).

### Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the level of bullying among secondary school students.
2. To identify the level of self-esteem among secondary school students.
3. To find out the relationship between bullying, self-esteem and depression among secondary school students.

### Conceptual Framework



### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to explore the statistical relationships between bullying, self-esteem, and depression in a sample of female secondary school students. This design allows for the analysis of associations between variables without manipulation. The target population comprised girls secondary school students enrolled in grades 9 and 10 within Lahore district. This group, typically aged between 14 and 18 years, was selected due to its increased vulnerability to bullying and its potential impact on psychological well-being. Multistage sampling technique was used. At first stage, randomly select one tehsil out of 10 tehsils of Lahore. Lahore cantt. selected, there were total number of secondary schools 25. Five schools were selected randomly. There were total number of 9th and 10th grade were 338. All 338 students were selected as a sample of the study.

The following standardized tools were used to collect data:

#### Bullying Assessment

A validated bullying questionnaire (e.g., the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire) was used to measure the prevalence, frequency, and types of bullying experienced by female students.

#### Self-Esteem Measurement

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used to assess levels of self-esteem. This Likert-scale-based tool contains 10 items with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem.

#### Depression Measurement

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was employed to assess the severity of depressive symptoms. This reliable tool categorizes depression into mild, moderate, or severe levels based on scores.

### Results

The data indicates a high prevalence of bullying behaviors among participants, with mean scores consistently above 4.3, reflecting frequent or strong agreement with the described experiences. Behaviors such as mocking participants by repeating their words ( $M = 4.76$ ,  $SD = 0.429$ ), deliberate physical aggression like throwing objects ( $M = 4.76$ ,  $SD =$

0.429), and posting pictures online without permission (M = 4.74, SD = 0.441) were reported most frequently. These findings highlight both verbal and physical bullying, as well as significant issues with cyberbullying. Social exclusion behaviors, such as turning backs when approached (M = 4.55, SD = 0.561) and attempts to harm relationships with friends (M = 4.37, SD = 0.833), were also notable. While teasing to provoke anger (M = 4.50, SD = 0.575) and sharing personal information online without consent (M = 4.54, SD = 0.499) were prevalent, the standard deviations suggest moderate variability in participants' experiences. Notably, mocking beliefs (M = 4.31, SD = 1.00) showed the greatest variability, indicating that not all participants experienced this behavior equally. Overall, the data underscores the widespread nature of bullying, particularly in digital contexts, and calls for targeted interventions to address both physical and online forms of harassment. The consistency of responses further highlights the need for systemic measures to mitigate these behaviors. Participants' self-perceptions and attitudes toward themselves, with mean scores ranging from 3.79 to 4.63 across the items. Participants generally reported positive self-perceptions, as indicated by high mean scores for statements such as "I certainly feel useless at times" (M = 4.63, SD = 0.483) and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (M = 4.58, SD = 0.646), suggesting strong disagreement with these negative self-assessments. Similarly, high agreement was observed for positive statements like "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" (M = 4.33, SD = 0.726) and "I am able to do things as well as most other people" (M = 4.32, SD = 0.626), indicating a general sense of competence and self-worth.

However, lower mean scores for items such as "I wish I could have more respect for myself" (M = 3.84, SD = 0.902) and "I take a positive attitude toward myself" (M = 3.79, SD = 0.919) suggest some participants may struggle with self-esteem. The item "I feel that I'm a person of worth" (M = 3.95, SD = 0.926) further indicates moderate self-worth among respondents, though variability in responses points to differing levels of self-perception. Additionally, responses to "All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure" (M = 4.02, SD = 0.772) reflect a stronger rejection of this notion, but not as consistently as other positive statements. Overall, the findings indicate a predominantly positive self-view among participants, with some variability in confidence and self-respect. These insights highlight areas where self-esteem interventions may be beneficial.

**Table 1**  
Relationship between Bullying, Self-Esteem and Depression

Correlations		Bullying	Self-efficacy	depression
Bullying	Pearson Correlation	1	.593**	.727**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	301	301	301
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.593**	1	.882**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	301	301	301
depression	Pearson Correlation	.727**	.882**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	301	301	301

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis reveals significant and meaningful relationships between bullying, self-efficacy, and depression. A strong positive correlation between bullying and depression (r = 0.727) indicates that higher experiences of bullying are closely associated with increased levels of depression, highlighting the severe psychological impact of bullying. Additionally, there is a moderate positive correlation between bullying and self-efficacy (r = 0.593), suggesting that as bullying experiences increase, individuals' confidence in their ability to handle tasks and challenges effectively diminishes. The relationship between self-efficacy and depression is particularly strong (r = 0.882), showing that lower self-efficacy is closely linked to higher levels of depression. These findings underscore the interconnected nature of these variables, with bullying negatively influencing mental health both directly, by increasing depressive symptoms, and indirectly, by undermining self-efficacy. The results highlight the importance of



addressing bullying through targeted interventions, which could help reduce depression and improve self-efficacy, ultimately enhancing individuals' overall well-being.

## Discussion and Conclusion

According to the study's findings, bullying has a substantial and connected effect on students' mental health, especially when it comes to its correlation with depression and low self-esteem. The substantial positive association between depression and bullying ( $r = 0.727$ ) is consistent with earlier studies showing the detrimental effects of bullying on mental health (Stadler et al. 2010; Thapar et al., 2012). Students who experience verbal, social, or cyber bullying may be significantly more likely to experience depressive symptoms, such as sadness, hopelessness, and social disengagement.

Self-esteem and depression have an inverse relationship ( $r = 0.882$ ) that is equally significant, suggesting that higher depressive symptoms are strongly correlated with lower levels of self-esteem. This conclusion is corroborated by the vulnerability model of depression, which postulates that low self-esteem precedes depressive episodes (Neff et al., 2007; Peñate et al., 2020). Moreover, research by Balluerka et al. (2023) and Mullan et al. (2023) show how being the victim of bullying can lower self-esteem, which raises vulnerability to mental health issues.

It's interesting to note that although the data indicates a positive relationship between bullying and self-efficacy ( $r = 0.593$ ), the interpretation tends to suggest that as bullying increases, students' confidence in their capacity to handle social and academic difficulties declines. This supports Wang et al. (2018) findings, who state that peer victimization erodes students' self-esteem and drive, making it more difficult for them to manage stress.

Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) contend that bullying in the modern era is evolving toward rudeness and online harassment, which are more difficult to identify and frequently more detrimental to psychological health. This study's prevalence of verbal and cyberbullying supports their findings. Furthermore, Bottino et al. (2015) discovered that bullying not only directly causes depressive symptoms but also acts as a mediator by gradually lowering self-esteem. These findings highlight the relationship between bullying, mental health, and self-perception. Transactional models of peer victimization are consistent with them (Stadler et al., 2010), which contend that victimization and psychological reaction have a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. In order to maintain depressive states and lower their self-esteem, victims may internalize unpleasant experiences.

The results substantiate those of Donat et al. (2023), which investigated the psychological foundations of cyberbullying and highlighted how victims' reactions are moderated by empathy and perceptions of justice. Bullying may have even more severe psychological effects that go unreported in a place like Pakistan, where there are strong social pressures and stigmas associated with mental health (Mukhtar et al., 2023; Choudhry et al., 2023).

These results highlight the need for all-encompassing anti-bullying strategies that prioritize students' emotional growth and psychological health in addition to disciplinary measures from an educational perspective. Integrating peer support networks, counseling services, and school-wide awareness campaigns can serve as restorative and preventative measures (Samara et al., 2021; Sivaraman et al., 2019).

This study highlights the pervasive issue of bullying and its far-reaching impact on self-esteem and depression among secondary school students. The data underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address both the immediate effects of bullying and its long-term consequences on mental health. By fostering a supportive school environment, implementing anti-bullying measures, and promoting self-esteem, stakeholders can significantly improve students' overall well-being. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of these interventions to ensure sustainable and effective solutions to combat bullying.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate the impact of bullying and improve students' well-being:

1. Schools must implement comprehensive anti-bullying programs that address both physical and cyberbullying. This includes clear policies, awareness campaigns, and the integration of reporting mechanisms for students.



2. Establishing on-campus counseling and mental health resources is essential. Providing students with access to trained professionals can help address depressive symptoms and emotional distress early on.
3. Initiatives that promote self-confidence, such as workshops, peer support groups, and activities that foster a sense of achievement, can be instrumental in enhancing students' self-esteem.
4. Schools should engage parents through workshops and communication channels to raise awareness of the signs of bullying and the importance of emotional support at home.
5. Equipping teachers with the skills to identify and intervene in bullying situations can significantly improve outcomes. Training should also emphasize fostering an inclusive and supportive classroom environment.



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