

## A study on peer victimization & social & adaptive functioning in adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

Traumatic early age experiences have been found to predict later internalizing problems. Peer Victimization is one of such experiences which may later lead to negative ramifications in the lives of young people. It is the practice among children of being a target of the hostile behavior of other children, who are not siblings and not necessarily age-mates. It can have short and long-term serious consequences on children's psychosocial adjustment. The present study aims to study peer victimization in adolescents and its effect on their social and adaptive functioning. Standardized scales were used to measure Peer Victimization and Social and Adaptive Functioning of the victimized, on a sample of 60 adolescents of which 30 were males and 30 females. The findings of the study revealed a significant negative correlation between School Performance and Physical Victimization. The results also found out that males are higher in Physical Victimization as compared to females. The study has important implications such as a need to spread awareness about peer victimization and the hazardous effects it can have on mental as well as social and adaptive functioning of adolescents. The parents, teachers and schools should participate actively to minimize the ongoing practice of victimization.

**Keywords:** *Peer Victimization, Adolescents, Trauma, Social and Adaptive Functioning*

The basic right of feeling a sense of personal safety at school is the privilege of every child, this is a necessity for optimal academic performance. According to Olweus (1994), it is the fundamental human right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation of bullying.

Peer Victimization is widely acknowledged as a serious mental health concern, which affects children and adolescents all across the globe. In India, research on peer victimization is negligible, certainly in proportion to the size of the population. However, the vast adolescent population provides us with ample opportunity to further our understanding in the field of peer victimization and the impact it has on social and adaptive functioning.

Being a peer victim includes being the repeated recipient of aggressive acts from one's peers time and again (Olweus, 2001).

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Not only is peer victimization popular, but is also connected with adjustment difficulties (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). A child who is victimized at an early age tend to have difficulties in social and adaptive functioning. It has an impact on emotional well-being of a child which in turn leads them to social isolation and loneliness.

Increased levels of peer victimization, or understandings of physical, relational, or verbal aggression from peers, are frequently reported around the transition to adolescence (Nansel et al., 2001). Although a smaller percentage of youth experience chronic and frequent victimization, many youth experiences at least occasional victimization (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009).

Peer victimization among adolescents has been the focus of attention over the last 3 decades (Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Nansel et al, 2001; Olweus, 1993; Storch et al, 2006). Defined as recurrent exposure to maladaptive patterns on the part of one or more other individuals, 20% to 30% of adolescents are chronically victimized by peers. Though peer victimization has now been considered as an unescapable part of childhood, parents, school staffs, and health professionals have recognized the effect of being victimized on a series of psychosocial adjustment problems. Policy changes within schools have remained inactive, resulting in only few improvements in the situation.

### ***Peer Victimization***

The definition of peer victimization fundamentally encompasses a component of frequency in which the peer victimization must occur (Olweus, 2010). Being a peer victim involves being the repeated recipient of aggressive acts from one's peers time and again (Olweus, 2001).

Hitting, name calling, racial slurs, spreading of rumours, social exclusion, sexual abuse, verbal abuse are examples of behaviour that constitute peer victimization.

The definition of peer victimization must not include (1) peers of similar standing arguing or fighting with one another; (2) peers who tease or poke fun at one another in a good-natured manner; or (3) a child or adolescent being the occasional recipient of an aggressive act (Andreou, 2004). As according to the above criteria, peer victimization is a continuum lying on a scale of no abuse to frequent peer abuse.

A large body of the research literature has found out that children who have been bullied or victimized are at an increased height of developing serious mental and physical health problems, including depression, poor eating habits, sleeplessness, anxiety and suicidal thoughts and behaviour (Arseneault et al. 2010; Cooper et al. 2004; Copeland et al. 2015; Holt et al. 2015). On the other hand, children involved in victimization also exhibited poor social and adaptive functioning like poor school adjustment, low in academics, and long-term consequences including antisocial personality, intimate partner violence, delinquency, suicidal thoughts and behaviour, and low self-esteem.

Originally, researchers were more inclined towards overt forms of victimization, which were regarded as either physical or verbal. Later, Crick(1999) claimed the presence of a more covert form of victimization which she discovered primarily among females that she called relational victimization, during which a child's social relationships and social standing are criticized through methods such as peer elimination.

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Subrahmanyam, Hatchel and Negriff's (2019) study discovers the relation among online and offline peer victimization, online and social support and internalizing problems. The study was conducted on a sample of 416 U.S. participants, aged between 18 and 24. Conclusions suggest that peer victimization was a stronger predictor of depressive symptoms than social anxiety. On the other hand, offline social support negatively projected internalizing problems, but online support was not significant.

### ***Physical Victimization***

Physical victimization includes how often the child has been subject to physical harm or been victimized physically such as being punched or kicked. It includes any physical assault or physical violence and may also include sexual abuse. It may include more than one abuser, and more than one victim.

### ***Verbal Victimization***

Verbal Victimization is the act of forcefully criticizing, insulting or disapproving another person. Characterized by underlying anger and hostility, it is a damaging form of communication intended to harm the self-concept of the other person and produce negative emotions in them. Verbal abuse can be displayed by anyone, such as during times of high stress or physical distress. For some people, it is a pattern of behaviour used purposely to control or manipulate others or to get revenge.

### ***Social Manipulation***

Social Manipulation is bullies manipulating social groups and situations to benefit themselves and damage their victims. A bully using social manipulation would spread some hurtful rumours about the victim. These may be false, or may contain a little truth combined with over exaggerated or fabricated details. Bullying hurts the victim and they may experience low self-esteem, loneliness and isolation, depression, and feelings of rejection and inadequacy.

### ***Attacks on Property***

It comprises of the items relating to the damage or theft of possessions with or without knowledge of the person. Examples include: stealing, causing damage to other persons property, etc.

### ***Electronic Victimization***

Also referred as cyberbullying, it is a wilful and repeated harm committed through electronic media. Among youth who cyberbullies other, 6% report regular bullying, 6% report occasional bullying, and 17% report limited bullying within the prior years of research (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007).

### ***Social Rebuff***

Maintenance of aloof silence toward another as an expression of one's anger or disapproval is termed as rebuff. Examples include: ignorance, refusal to talk, etc.

### ***Social and Adaptive Functioning***

Social and adaptive functioning is the adjustment of individual and group behaviour to uphold with the prevailing system of norms and values in a given society, class or social group and how well he handles the common stipulations in life and how independently they are compared to others of a similar age and background. Adaptive Behaviour is indexed on

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the chronological age as in a culture we have different prospects of all members of our community as they age.

Adaptive behaviour is defined as behaviour that has been learned and is performed to meet society's expectation across living settings, including the home, school, work, and other community settings (Schalock et al., 2010).

Adaptive behaviours are an indispensable module of everyday functioning and discrepancies in adaptive behaviour are associated with several neurodevelopmental disorders, including intellectual functioning.

Maltreatment from peers has been associated with feelings of humiliation and anxiety (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005), as well as more negative self-evaluations and low self-esteem (Reijntjes et al., 2010), which can add on to youths' internalizing symptoms.

Prino et al. (2019) explore whether alexithymia facilitates the association between bullying victimization and internalizing and externalizing problems. Findings showed that verbal, physical and social bullying victimization were significantly associated with internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and alexithymic symptoms. The study also found that alexithymia somewhat mediated the effect of verbal, physical, and social bullying victimization on both internalizing and externalizing problems.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of the study is to study the effect of peer victimisation on social and adaptive functioning on adolescents.

### *Hypothesis*

1. There will be no significant correlation in peer victimization & social adaptive functioning.
2. There will be no gender difference in peer victimization & social adaptive functioning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 60 adolescents (30 males and 30 females) who came under the age range of 12-18 years.

### *Measures*

The following standardized tests were used:

1. **Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale (MPVS-24):** MPVS is a 24 items scale developed by Mynard & Joseph, 2000 and few subscales adapted from Betts et al (2015) and Morrow et al (2014) and was used to measure peer victimization among adolescents. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a 3-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (more than once). Items were summed to obtain total score ranging from 0 to 32.
2. **Social and Adaptive Functioning Scale for Children and Adolescents** is a 24 items self-report scale developed by Prince, Spence, Sheffield & Donovan, 2000 is a 24 to measure the social and adaptive functioning of adolescents. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always), with a total score ranging between 24-96

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### **Procedure**

The participants were informed about the purpose of research and the questionnaire were filled through google forms. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information to elicit their honest responses without any fear or inhibitions. Standardized psychological tests were administered to participants.

### **RESULTS**

Mean, Standard Deviation, T-statistics & Correlations were worked out to find out the relation between all the variables.

**Table 1: Showing Correlation Matrix of all variables. N=60**  
**Correlation Matrix**

	Physical victimization	Social Manipulation	Verbal Victimization	Attacks on Property	Electronic Victimization	Social Rebuff	School	Peers	Family	Home duties
Physical Victimization	—									
Social Manipulation	0.314 *	—								
Verbal Victimization	0.370 **	0.624 ***	—							
Attacks on Property	0.498 ***	0.589 ***	0.439 ***	—						
Electronic Victimization	0.473 ***	0.615 ***	0.513 ***	0.346 **	—					
Social rebuff	0.278 *	0.703 ***	0.667 ***	0.520 ***	0.614 ***	—				
School Performance	-0.308 *	-0.044	0.003	0.188	-0.088	0.001	—			
Peers Relationship	-0.191	-0.170	-0.260 *	0.138	-0.063	-0.114	0.398 **	—		
Family Relationship	-0.121	-0.161	-0.195	0.211	-0.157	-0.224	0.077	0.027	—	
Home duties	0.107	0.101	0.233	0.030	0.090	0.116	0.299 *	0.031	0.019	—

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 2: Showing correlation of Total Victimization and Total Social and Adaptive Functioning**  
**Correlation Matrix**

	Total Peer Victimization	Total Social Adaptive Functioning
Total Victimization	—	
Total Social Adaptive Functioning	-0.200	—

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Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 3: Showing N, Mean, SD, T-statistics of all variables.**

Group		N	Mean	SD	T-Statistics	DF	p-value
Physical Victimization	Female	30	0.667	1.30		58.0	0.007
	Male	30	2.00	-2.819			
Social Manipulation	Female	30	3.900	2.24		58.0	0.072
	Male	30	2.67	1.834			
Verbal Victimization	Female	30	3.767	2.60		58.0	0.379
	Male	30	3.13	0.886			
Attacks on Property	Female	30	3.100	2.60		58.0	0.839
	Male	30	3.23	-0.204			
Electronic Victimization	Female	30	2.067	2.88		58.0	0.846
	Male	30	2.20	-0.195			
School Performance	Female	30	2.067	2.65		58.0	0.089
	Male	30	2.20	1.731			
Peers Relationship	Female	30	17.033	2.38		58.0	0.665
	Male	30	16.57	0.436			
Family Relationship	Female	30	23.300	2.66		58.0	0.402
	Male	30	18.40	0.845			
Home duties/self-care	Female	30	17.700	2.91		58.0	0.785
	Male	30	17.43	0.274			
Social rebuff	Female	30	3.733	2.37		58.0	0.475
	Male	30	3.23	0.719			

### DISCUSSION

The results show that there is a significant negative correlation between School Performance and Physical Victimization ( $r=-0.308$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). There is a significant negative correlation between Peers Relationship and Verbal Victimization ( $r=-0.260$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Further, we also ran our data analysis to find correlation between Total Peer Victimization and Total Social and Adaptive Functioning and it was found out that ( $r=-0.200$ ) but is not significant.

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In Physical Victimization, males are higher than females ( $t=-2.819$ ) which concludes that males are more physically victimized than females. Our hypothesis that peer victimization is more common in males than females hold true for this sub scale.

In a study by Morin et. al. (2015) all forms of victimization were associated with social and adaptive adjustment problems across all classes, gender and races. Sentse et. al. (2013) suggests that having a victimized friend can increase the risk of being victimized. A study by Huitsing et. al. (2012) suggested that peer victimization was related to maladjustment in classrooms where victimization was highly centralized, and the average level of victimization was low.

### CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to study peer victimization in adolescents and its effect on their social and adaptive functioning. Standardized scales were used to measure Peer Victimization and Social and Adaptive Functioning of the victimized, on a sample of 60 adolescents of which 30 were males and 30 females. The findings of the study revealed a significant negative correlation between School Performance and Physical Victimization. The results also found out that males are higher in physical Victimization as compared to females.

Peer Victimization should not be normalized. Many of us have been a victim of the similar behaviour ourselves but have failed to report or act against it which makes the bullies carry forward this behaviour. A response communicates to the perpetrators that their actions will not be entertained and makes victims feel less powerful about their predicament. Schools and teachers must be aware of the ongoing in the school and if reported, an immediate action should take place.

Collectively, Peer Victimization is associated with both internalising and externalising problems in adolescents. Nevertheless, the effect of Peer Victimization is heterogenous and not all adolescents who underwent such victimization showed Social and Adaptive Functioning problems.

Although the sample taken for this research is small, to see the real impact that peer victimization has on social and adaptive functioning, a larger data must be collected.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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