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Research Paper

Parental Support and Attachment After Bullying: Psychological Correlates of Romantic Relationship Quality in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the long-term psychosocial effects of childhood bullying on adult relational outcomes, with particular focus on attachment styles, perceived partner responsiveness, remembered parental relationships, and romantic relationship quality. Anchored in attachment theory, this study involved 102 participants aged 18–25 years (n = 45 bullied; n = 57 non-bullied), recruited through purposive and snowball sampling in Kolkata, India. Group classification was based on the Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (Schäfer et al., 2004). Participants completed standardized self-report measures: the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990), Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (Reis et al., 2018), Lovebird Scale (Cloonan et al., 2023), and the Remembered Relationship with Parents Scale (Denollet et al., 2007). Independent samples t-tests revealed statistically significant differences between groups in attachment anxiety ($p < .001$), closeness ($p < .001$), dependence ($p = .003$), emotional disconnection ($p = .030$), and father alienation ($p < .001$). No significant differences were observed in perceived partner responsiveness, maternal control, or romantic mutuality. Results suggest that individuals with a history of bullying exhibit maladaptive attachment tendencies and disrupted paternal relationships, which may impair adult romantic functioning. These findings underscore the significance of paternal emotional involvement as a moderating factor in mitigating the relational impact of early peer victimization.

Keywords: *Attachment theory, Bullying, Father alienation, Parental influence, Perceived responsiveness, Romantic relationships, Young adults*

Bullying is a multifaceted and chronic phenomenon that affects emotional and psychosocial development long after childhood. Defined by Olweus (1993) as the systematic use of physical or psychological harassment, bullying involves components of physical, verbal, sexual, relational, and cyber manifestations. While traditionally associated with educational institute environments, research trends showed that its psychological scars may extend into adulthood, influencing identity, trust, and romantic relationship functioning (deLara, 2016; Sanchez, 2019). These long-term imprints are best understood through the lens of attachment theory by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978), who emphasized that early relational experiences form the core of one's internal working

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model of self and others. Collins and Read (1990) found that bullying-related humiliation and social rejection during formative years often lead to insecure attachment patterns—specifically, anxious-preoccupied and fearful-avoidant styles—both of which hinder healthy intimacy and emotional security in adult relationships.

Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) further demonstrated how these patterns predict difficulties in trust, boundary-setting, and regulation of emotional closeness. Importantly, the presence or absence of perceived parental support during the time of bullying victimization may act as a significant game changer in these outcomes. Denollet et al. (2007) developed the Remembered Relationship with Parents (RRP10) scale to measure parental alienation and control—factors closely associated with emotional health later on. When children perceive high warmth and responsiveness from parents, their capacity for emotional resilience improves, even under the strain of peer aggression (Smolderen et al., 2007). On the other hand, victim blaming—whether from family, school, or peers—can encourage and increase identity confusion, as shown by Zhang, Wang, and Hu (2023), leading to lasting intimacy avoidance and self-doubt in later life.

Cultural expectations and gender norms further complicate these experiences. For instance, boys may be pressured to suppress emotions, while girls may be expected to remain submissive, both of which can inhibit appropriate coping mechanisms (Peterson & Ray, 2006; Sanchez, 2019). These dynamics, when coupled with bullying, may lead to toxic romantic patterns that mirror early trauma (deLara, 2016).

This study was focused on how presence or absence of bully victimization may play an influencing role in attachment style, perceived partner responsiveness and perceived parental styles among young adults.

METHODS

Aim of the study

The present study aims to investigate the long-term psychological and relational impacts of childhood bullying experiences on young adults, specifically focusing on attachment-related outcomes and interpersonal functioning. The study seeks to examine whether significant differences exist between individuals with and without a history of bullying victimization in terms of perceived partner responsiveness, attachment styles, remembered parental relationships, and romantic relationship quality. Drawing on attachment theory and existing literature on peer victimization, the research aims to identify how early adverse social experiences, moderated by perceived parental support, may shape emotional closeness, dependency, anxiety in relationships, and broader romantic dynamics in adulthood. The findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of the long-term relational consequences of bullying and inform preventive and therapeutic interventions that emphasize early parental involvement and emotional regulation in bullied individuals.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the significant difference, if any, in perceived partner responsiveness between bullied and non-bullied young adults.
2. To examine the significant difference, if any, in attachment styles between bullied and non-bullied young adults.
3. To examine the significant difference, if any, in remembered parental relationships between bullied and non-bullied young adults.

4. To examine the significant difference, if any, in romantic relationship quality between bullied and non-bullied young adults.

Hypotheses of the study:

- H_{o1} There is no significant difference between Bullied and Non-Bullied individuals with respect to perceived partner responsiveness.
- H_{o2} There is no significant difference between Bullied and Non-Bullied individuals with respect to attachment style.
- H_{o3} There is no significant difference between Bullied and Non-Bullied individuals with respect to remembered parental relationship.
- H_{o4} There is no significant difference between Bullied and Non-Bullied individuals with respect to relationship quality.

Research design:

The present study employed a comparative design using quantitative research methods to examine differences between bullied and non-bullied young adults in perceived partner responsiveness, remembered parental relationship styles, attachment patterns, and romantic relationship dynamics in early adulthood.

Participants

The sampling technique for drawing the sample was Homogeneous purposive sampling and exponential non discriminative snowball sampling technique. The sample initially comprised 105 participants aged between 18 to 25 years (M-20.35, SD-3.13), out of which, 45 were victims of bullying in their formative years. All 45 were rigorously screened to meet the exclusion criteria and all of them were selected for the research. Out of them, 29 were female and 16 were male participants. Thus, the final number of bullied individuals subjected to singular or multiple forms of bullying, who participated in the present research was obtained to be n=45. Similarly, the group of participants who were not bully victims was obtained. Out of 105 participants, 57 of them were classified into this category, 3 were screened out as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Out of these 57 participants, 41 were female and the remaining 16 were male. Thus, the final number of participants with no bully victimization turned out to be n=57. Therefore, the total number of participants for the present research was obtained to be 102. Both the non-bullied and bullied individual groups were matched in sex, age and socioeconomic status. Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (Schafer et. al, 2004) was used to demarcate bullied individuals and people with no prior bullying experience.

Research inclusion & exclusion criteria:

Research Inclusion Criteria for non-bullied Group:

1.	All the participants fall between the age range of 18-25 years and are residents of Kolkata.
2.	All the participants received minimum education upto at least 12th standard and can understand and read English.
3.	Participants with Smart Phone and internet Access.
4.	Participants having knowledge and understanding about navigating Internet.
5.	Participants who have never experienced any form of bullying in their formative years.
6.	Participants belonging from middle socioeconomic status.

Exclusion Criteria for non-bullied Group:

1.	Participants who have a history of any serious, persisting severe physical disease.
2.	Participants having any kind of disability.
3.	Participants having a history of head injury and/or seizures.
4.	Participants having any history of any kind of substance abuse.
5.	Participants having any history of personal/familial psychiatric illness.
6.	Participants who actively participated in bullying peers.

Inclusion Criteria for bullied Group:

1.	All the participants fall between the age ranges of 18-25 years, and living in Kolkata.
2.	All the participants received minimum education till 12th standard
3.	Participants who can understand and read the English language.
4.	Participants who are subjected to any form of bullying in their formative years (got hit/punched or being stolen from, i.e. the physical form, called names or threatened i.e. the verbal form, had lies told about or excluded i.e. the indirect form)
5.	Participants who had been bullied for a period (brief or long period) of time.
6.	Participants who are studying or working or both.
7.	Participants belonging from middle socioeconomic status.

Exclusion Criteria for bullied Group:

1.	Participants who are associated with bullying peers of similar age.
2.	Participants who are diagnosed with any serious, persisting or recurring physical disease.
3.	Participants who have recently suffered from any kind of physical illness.
4.	Participants having any kind of disability.
5.	Participants having a history of head injury and/or seizures.
6.	Participants having any history of any kind of substance abuse.
7.	Participants having any history of psychiatric illness.
8.	Participants with other deeply significant trauma experience like sexual abuse.
9.	Participants who engaged in bullying their peers.

Tools

- **Informed Consent Form:** The participants had to provide their consent form whereby they agreed to participate in the present research, keeping their details confidential and only to be used for research purposes.
- **Information Schedule:** Keeping in view the purpose of the present research, the Information Schedule was prepared. It included socio-demographic details regarding the present research.
- **Adult attachment scale (Collins & Read, 1990):** The Adult Attachment Scale is a self-report tool developed to assess attachment styles in adult close relationships. In this study, it measures attachment patterns among individuals who were bullied or not bullied in their childhood. The scale consists of 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (Not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (Very characteristic of me). It includes three subscales, Close (comfort with intimacy), Depend (reliance on others), and Anxiety (fear of abandonment). Some items are reverse-scored. The tool demonstrates good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.78 to 0.85.
- **Perceived partner responsiveness scale:** The Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (PPRS) was developed by Reis and colleagues in 2018. In this study, the tool is used to measure the extent to which bullied and non-bullied individuals perceive their partners (romantic) as understanding and validating. The scale includes 18 self-

report items, each rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all true) to 9 (Completely true). The items reflect feelings of being listened to, accepted, and supported. Internal consistency of the PPRS is high (0.91 to 0.98).

- **Lovebird Scale:** The Lovebird Scale was developed by Cloonan et al. (2023) to assess relationship flourishing and the quality of romantic relationships beyond traditional satisfaction measures. In this study, the tool is used to compare the experience of relationship quality between bullied and non-bullied individuals. The scale consists of 26 self-report items, rated on a 7-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. It includes three subscales: Mutuality, Romance, and Disconnect. Mutuality and Romance reflect positive relationship behaviors, while Disconnect captures emotional distance and ambivalence. Several items are reverse scored. The Lovebird Scale shows excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.87 to 0.95.
- **Remembered Relationship with Parents Scale (Denollet et al., 2007):** The 10-item Remembered Relationship with Parents (RRP10) scale was developed by Denollet et al. (2007). In this research, the tool is used to assess the extent of perceived parental support in childhood among bullied and non-bullied individuals, in order to explore whether early caregiving experiences show significant differences in later attachment patterns. The scale consists of 10 self-report items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (False) to 4 (True), with items reflecting two subscales: Alienation (lack of emotional closeness and mutual understanding) and Control (overprotective or intrusive parenting). Items are scored separately for mother and father. The internal consistency is high, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.83 to 0.86.
- **Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (Schäfer et al., 2004):** The Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (RBQ) was developed by Schäfer and colleagues in 2004 to retrospectively assess bullying experiences in childhood and adolescence. In this study, the tool is used to identify and classify individuals into bullied and non-bullied groups, based on their self-reported exposure to different types of bullying—physical, verbal, and indirect—during their school years. The RBQ is a self-report measure comprising 44 items divided across primary and secondary school experiences, rated on categorical and Likert-type scales. It captures the frequency, duration, and perceived severity of bullying incidents, as well as emotional and behavioral responses. This tool enables the differentiation of participants based on the presence, type, and intensity of bullying exposure in childhood.

Procedure

Participants were selected based on Homogenous Purposive Sampling and Exponential Non Discriminative Snowball Sampling technique. The data collection was done online with Google Forms to overcome logistical challenges. The data was collected during September-October 2024. Scoring for the scales was done manually according to the respective manuals of the tools used. The statistical treatment of the scores was done using Jamovi version 2.6.44

Statistical models

The Statistical analyses used for the research were Skewness and Kurtosis, Levene's Test, Mean, Standard Deviation, and Independent t-test. Probability values were fixed to be accepted for the tests of significance which was equal to or beyond 0.05 levels. Mean, and Standard Deviation was done to show the nature of the data. The mean and standard

deviation of all the variables were calculated for the total sample and the bullied and the non-bullied groups. Independent t-test was done to determine whether bullied and non-bullied individuals differ significantly or not concerning the said variables.

RESULTS

This research aims to study the significant role of getting bullied in childhood in shaping adult romantic relationship, attachment style and perceived partner responsiveness and parental relationship among young adults aged 18-25 years in Kolkata, India.

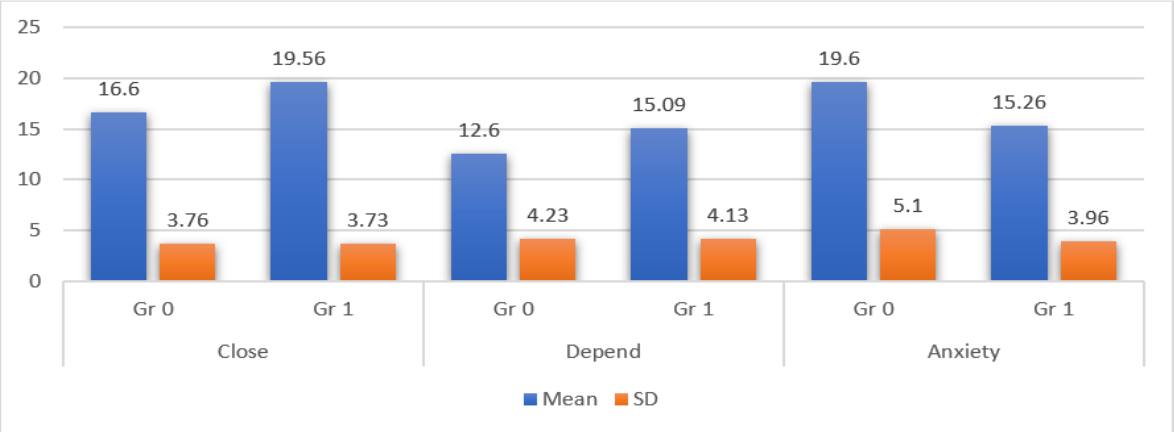
Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard deviation) were calculated with respect to the variables of the study; attachment style, perceived partner responsiveness, remembered parental relationship and romantic relationship in young adults (N=102).

Table 1: Values of Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for the variables of adult attachment (Close, Depend, Anxiety) for both bullied and non-bullied groups.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Close	**Bullied**	45	16.6	3.76	0.561
	Non bullied	57	19.56	3.73	0.494
Depend	**Bullied**	45	12.6	4.23	0.631
	Non bullied	57	15.09	4.13	0.547
Anxiety	**Bullied**	45	19.6	5.10	0.760
	Non bullied	57	15.26	3.96	0.525

This table displays the mean, standard deviation (SD), and standard error (SE) values for the adult attachment variables—Close, Depend, and Anxiety—separately for bullied and non-bullied young adults. For the Close dimension, the bullied group (n = 45) had a mean of 16.6 (SD = 3.76, SE = 0.561), while the non-bullied group (n = 57) had a higher mean of 19.56 (SD = 3.73, SE = 0.494). In the Depend dimension, the bullied group reported a mean of 12.6 (SD = 4.23, SE = 0.631), whereas the non-bullied group showed a higher mean of 15.09 (SD = 4.13, SE = 0.547). For Anxiety, the bullied group exhibited a higher mean score of 19.6 (SD = 5.10, SE = 0.760) compared to the non-bullied group, which had a mean of 15.26 (SD = 3.96, SE = 0.525).

Figure 1. Bar graph representing the mean and standard deviation scores of Adult Attachment dimensions (Close, Depend, and Anxiety) for bullied and non-bullied young adults.



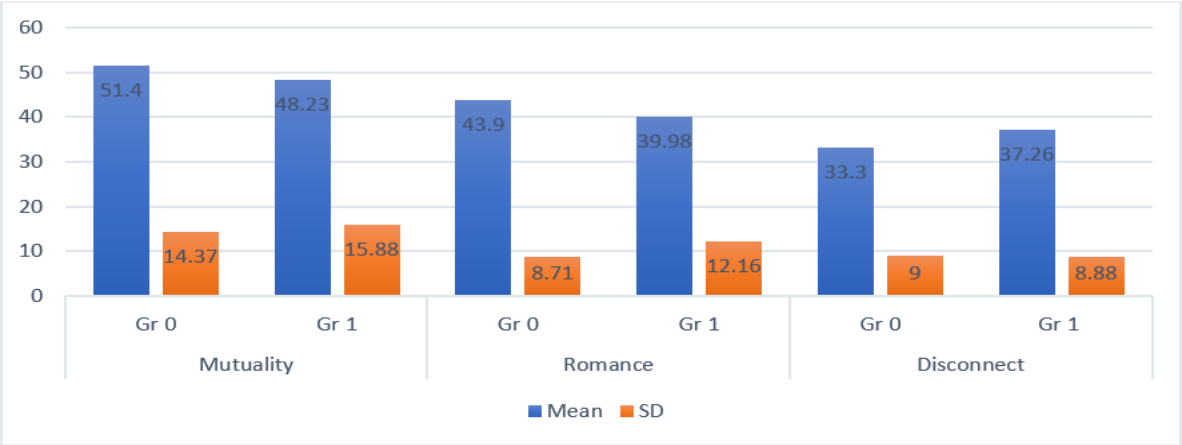
*Group 0= Bullied Group, Group 1= Non bullied Group

Table 2: Values of Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for the variables of the lovebird scale (Mutuality, Romance, Disconnect) for both bullied and non-bullied groups.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Mutuality	**Bullied**	45	51.4	14.37	2.142
	Non bullied	57	48.23	15.88	2.103
Romance	**Bullied**	45	43.9	8.71	1.299
	Non bullied	57	39.98	12.16	1.611
Disconnect	**Bullied**	45	33.3	9.00	1.342
	Non bullied	57	37.26	8.88	1.176

This table presents the mean, standard deviation (SD), and standard error (SE) values for the Lovebird Scale dimensions—Mutuality, Romance, and Disconnect—for bullied and non-bullied young adults. For Mutuality, the bullied group (n = 45) had a mean score of 51.4 (SD = 14.37, SE = 2.142), while the non-bullied group (n = 57) showed a mean of 48.23 (SD = 15.88, SE = 2.103). In the Romance dimension, bullied participants reported a mean of 43.9 (SD = 8.71, SE = 1.299), compared to a lower mean of 39.98 (SD = 12.16, SE = 1.611) among non-bullied participants. For Disconnect, the bullied group had a lower mean score of 33.3 (SD = 9.00, SE = 1.342), whereas the non-bullied group reported a higher mean of 37.26 (SD = 8.88, SE = 1.176).

Figure 2. Bar graph representing the mean and standard deviation scores of the lovebird scale (mutuality, romance, disconnect) for bullied and non-bullied young adults.



*Group 0= Bullied Group, Group 1= Non bullied Group

Table 3: Values of Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for the variables of RRP-10 (Remembered relationship with parents scale) as they are alienation and control with father and mother respectively for both bullied and non-bullied groups.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Father alienation	**Bullied**	45	12.5	4.21	0.628
	Non bullied	57	9.14	3.42	0.453
Father control	**Bullied**	45	10.6	4.92	0.734
	Non bullied	57	11.37	4.57	0.606
Mother alienation	**Bullied**	45	11.4	4.44	0.662
	Non bullied	57	10.02	4.07	0.539
Mother control	**Bullied**	45	14.0	4.64	0.692
	Non bullied	57	13.18	5.28	0.699

This table displays the mean, standard deviation (SD), and standard error (SE) values for the Remembered Relationship with Parents Scale (RRP-10), assessing alienation and control for fathers and mothers separately among bullied and non-bullied young adults. For Father Alienation, the bullied group (n = 45) reported a higher mean score (M = 12.5, SD = 4.21, SE = 0.628) than the non-bullied group (n = 57), which showed a lower mean (M = 9.14, SD = 3.42, SE = 0.453). In contrast, for Father Control, bullied participants had a mean of 10.6 (SD = 4.92, SE = 0.734), whereas non-bullied participants reported a slightly higher mean of 11.37 (SD = 4.57, SE = 0.606). Regarding maternal relationships, the bullied group showed a higher mean on Mother Alienation (M = 11.4, SD = 4.44, SE = 0.662) compared to the non-bullied group (M = 10.02, SD = 4.07, SE = 0.539). For Mother Control, the bullied group had a mean score of 14.0 (SD = 4.64, SE = 0.692), while the non-bullied group reported a slightly lower mean of 13.18 (SD = 5.28, SE = 0.699).

Figure 3. Bar graph representing the mean and standard deviation scores of the remembered relationship with parents scale (alienation & control for father and mother respectively) for bullied and non-bullied young adults.

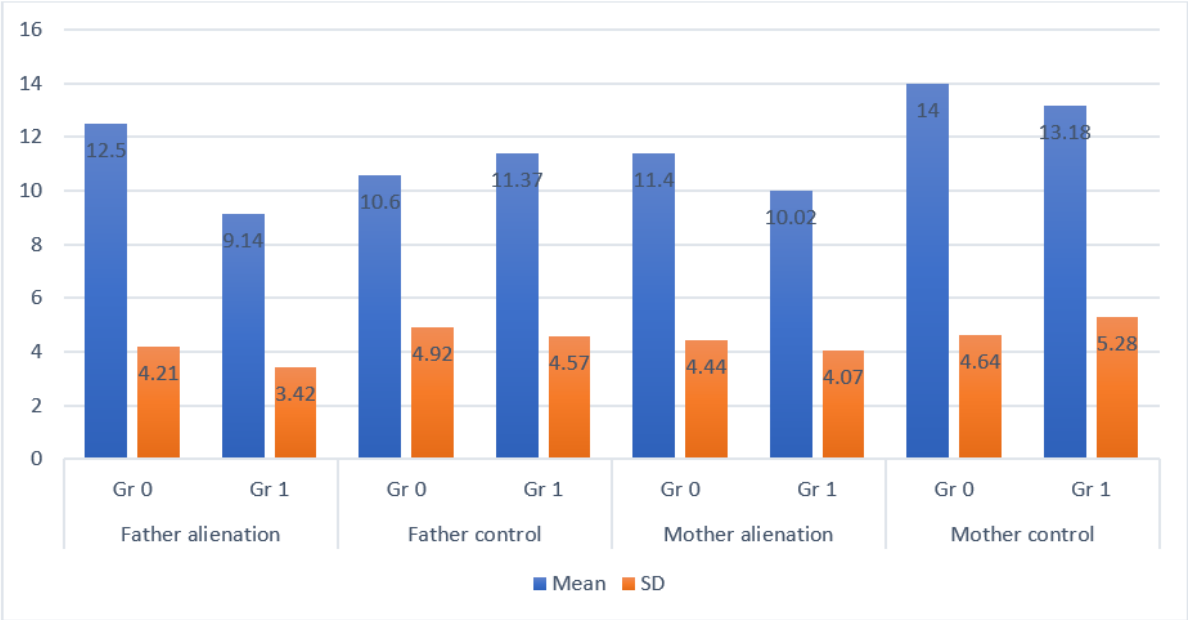


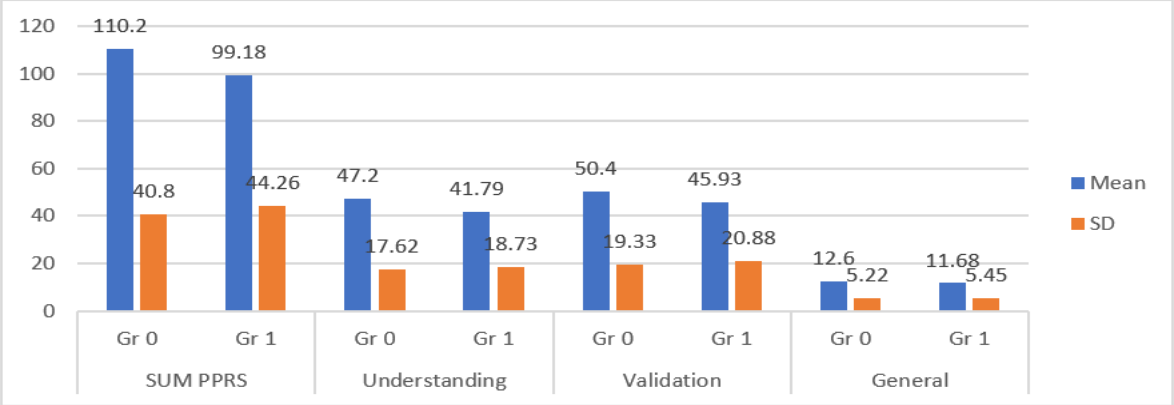
Table 4: Values of Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for the variables of Perceived partner responsiveness scale (PPRS) i.e. the whole score sum, Understanding, Validation and general items for both bullied and non-bullied groups.

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
SUM PPRS	**Bullied**	45	110.2	40.80	6.082
	Non bullied	57	99.18	44.26	5.863
Understanding	**Bullied**	45	47.2	17.62	2.627
	Non bullied	57	41.79	18.73	2.481
Validation	**Bullied**	45	50.4	19.33	2.881
	Non bullied	57	45.93	20.88	2.766
General items	**Bullied**	45	12.6	5.22	0.778
	Non bullied	57	11.68	5.45	0.721

This table presents the mean, standard deviation (SD), and standard error (SE) values for the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (PPRS) total score and its subcomponents—Understanding, Validation, and General Items—for bullied and non-bullied young adults.

For the total PPRS score, the bullied group (n = 45) reported a higher mean (M = 110.2, SD = 40.80, SE = 6.082) compared to the non-bullied group (n = 57), which showed a mean of 99.18 (SD = 44.26, SE = 5.863). On the Understanding subscale, bullied participants had a mean score of 47.2 (SD = 17.62, SE = 2.627), whereas non-bullied participants reported a lower mean of 41.79 (SD = 18.73, SE = 2.481). Similarly, for Validation, the bullied group demonstrated a higher mean (M = 50.4, SD = 19.33, SE = 2.881) than the non-bullied group (M = 45.93, SD = 20.88, SE = 2.766). For General Items, the bullied group reported a mean score of 12.6 (SD = 5.22, SE = 0.778), while the non-bullied group showed a slightly lower mean of 11.68 (SD = 5.45, SE = 0.721).

Figure 4. Bar graph representing the mean and standard deviation scores of the perceived partner responsiveness scale (sum, understanding, validation and general items) for bullied and non-bullied young adults.



*Group 0= Bullied Group, Group 1= Non bullied Group

Table 5: Independent Samples t-test Results Comparing Bullied and Non-Bullied Young Adults on Attachment, Relationship Quality, Perceived Parental Relationship, and Partner Responsiveness Variables

Variable	Test performed	Statistic	df	p
Close	**Student's t**	-3.909	100	<.001
Depend	**Student's t**	-3.043	100	0.003
Anxiety	**Student's t**	4.812[a]	100	<.001
Mutuality	**Student's t**	1.051	100	0.296
Romance	**Student's t**	1.817	100	0.072
Disconnect	**Student's t**	-2.206	100	0.030
Father alienation	**Student's t**	4.490	100	<.001
Father control	**Student's t**	-0.791	100	0.431
Mother alienation	**Student's t**	1.584	100	0.116
Mother control	**Student's t**	0.848	100	0.398
SUM PPRS	**Student's t**	1.287	100	0.201
Understanding	**Student's t**	1.474	100	0.144
Validation	**Student's t**	1.115	100	0.268
General items	**Student's t**	0.880	100	0.381

$H_a\ \mu_0 \neq \mu_1$

This table presents the results of independent samples t-tests comparing bullied and non-bullied young adults on various psychological and relational variables, including attachment styles, perceived relationship quality, parental bonding, and partner responsiveness.

Significant differences emerged in several attachment-related dimensions, with bullied individuals reporting significantly lower scores in closeness and dependability, and higher levels of attachment anxiety, suggesting greater insecurity in relationships. They also exhibited significantly higher levels of relationship disconnect and perceived alienation from their fathers. These findings imply that experiences of childhood bullying may be linked to long-term disruptions in relational trust and paternal bonds. However, no significant differences were observed in perceptions of mutuality, romantic expression, maternal control or alienation, or in aspects of partner responsiveness such as understanding, validation, and general supportive behaviors, indicating that not all domains of relational functioning are equally affected by bullying history.

The results of independent samples *t*-tests comparing young adults with and without a history of bullying on variables related to attachment, romantic relationship quality, perceived parental relationships, and partner responsiveness.

Significant group differences were observed in several attachment dimensions. For Closeness, the *t*-test yielded a value of $t(100) = -3.909$, $p < .001$, and for Dependence, $t(100) = -3.043$, $p = .003$, both indicating statistically significant differences between the groups. Anxiety showed a significant result as well, with $t(100) = 4.812$, $p < .001$.

Among the relationship quality variables from the Lovebird Scale, only Disconnect showed a statistically significant difference between groups, $t(100) = -2.206$, $p = .030$. The variables Mutuality and Romance did not reach significance, with *p*-values of .296 and .072 respectively.

Regarding the Remembered Relationship with Parents, a significant difference was found in Father Alienation, $t(100) = 4.490$, $p < .001$. However, Father Control, Mother Alienation, and Mother Control did not show statistically significant differences, with *p*-values of .431, .116, and .398 respectively.

Lastly, for the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale (PPRS) and its subcomponents, no statistically significant differences were observed between the bullied and non-bullied groups. The total PPRS score (*SUM PPRS*) had a *p*-value of .201, while Understanding, Validation, and General Items also showed non-significant *p*-values of .144, .268, and .381 respectively.

Table 6: Levene's t-test Results Comparing Bullied and Non-Bullied Young Adults on Attachment, Relationship Quality, Perceived Parental Relationship, and Partner Responsiveness Variables

Variables	F	df	df2	P
Close	0.17219	1	100	0.679
Depend	0.22234	1	100	0.638
Anxiety	4.35563	1	100	0.039
Mutuality	0.28705	1	100	0.593
Romance	2.18338	1	100	0.143
Disconnect	0.23910	1	100	0.626
Father alienation	3.67091	1	100	0.058
Father control	0.13024	1	100	0.719
Mother alienation	0.94050	1	100	0.334

Variables	F	df	df2	P
Mother control	1.19323	1	100	0.277
Sum PPRS	0.56578	1	100	0.454
Understanding	0.42354	1	100	0.517
Validation	0.53687	1	100	0.465
General items	0.00855	1	100	0.927

Note. A low p-value suggests a violation of the assumption of equal variances

Levene's test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the assumption of equal variance for anxiety. However, the standard independent samples t-test was retained for analysis. This decision was based on the fact that the sample sizes between the two groups were approximately equal, which minimizes the impact of unequal variances on Type I error rates (Zimmerman, 2004). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that Student's t-test remains robust under moderate violations of variance homogeneity when sample sizes are equal or large (Blanca et al., 2018; Lumley et al., 2002). Given these considerations, the use of Student's t-test was deemed appropriate and unlikely to distort the validity of the results. Nevertheless, the potential influence of unequal variances is acknowledged as a limitation in the interpretation of the findings.

This table displays the results of Levene's test for equality of variances between bullied and non-bullied young adults across variables measuring attachment, relationship quality, perceived parental relationships, and partner responsiveness. Levene's test assesses whether the assumption of equal variances holds for independent samples t-tests. For most variables, the p-values were well above the .05 threshold, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met. However, a significant result was observed for the *anxiety* variable ($F = 4.36$, $p = 0.039$), suggesting unequal variances between the groups for this measure. A marginal result was found for *father alienation* ($F = 3.67$, $p = 0.058$), approaching significance, which may warrant cautious interpretation. For all other variables, including closeness, dependability, mutuality, romance, disconnect, perceptions of parental control or alienation, and dimensions of partner responsiveness, the equality of variance assumption was upheld, allowing the use of standard t-test results reported earlier without adjustments for heterogeneity.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine how childhood bullying victimization influences adult attachment style, perceived parental support, perceived partner responsiveness, and romantic relationship quality. The findings signify psychological and relational consequences of early peer aggression, offering nuanced insights into the ways in which internalized schemas, shaped by parental relationships, carry forward into adulthood.

The significantly higher attachment anxiety among bullied participants aligns with prior research highlighting the long-term relational vulnerability caused by early rejection and social trauma (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Collins & Read, 1990). Consistent with Bowlby's (1969) internal working model theory, individuals who experienced bullying may develop persistent doubts about their lovability and the availability of others, fostering anxious-preoccupied or fearful-avoidant attachment styles (Ainsworth, 1978; Bogaerts et al., 2021). These findings are corroborated by Salmon et al. (2018), who found that relational victimization in adolescence was linked to heightened emotional dependency and interpersonal insecurity in later romantic relationships.

Lower scores on the Close & Depend subscales among bullied individuals further reflect impaired comfort with intimacy and difficulty relying on others—two hallmarks of insecure attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Similar patterns were observed in longitudinal studies by Copeland et al. (2013), who noted that childhood bullying predicted later social withdrawal and diminished interpersonal trust.

A particularly novel contribution of this study is the significant difference in paternal alienation between groups, suggesting that the quality of the father-child bond plays a critical moderating role in relational outcomes following bullying. Denollet et al. (2007) and Peterson and Ray (2006) emphasize the importance of emotionally available father figures, especially in buffering the psychological damage caused by peer mistreatment. Moreover, insecure paternal attachment has been linked to elevated emotional detachment and maladaptive coping strategies in romantic contexts (Smolderen et al., 2007; Bogaerts et al., 2021). The gendered expectation for men to be stoic or emotionally distant may further compound the harm when paternal support is absent (Rodriguez, Sanchez, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023).

Contrary to expectations, no statistically significant differences emerged in perceived partner responsiveness (PPRS), including feelings of understanding, validation, and emotional attunement. This finding may suggest that individuals who have experienced bullying can form relationships with responsive partners but may continue to struggle with internalized relational schemas that inhibit full emotional security (Reis et al., 2018; Cloonan et al., 2023). Previous studies also indicate that while partner behavior may be objectively positive, individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment often interpret such behavior through distorted cognitive filters shaped by past trauma (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; deLara, 2016).

Contrary to expectations, the higher scores on the disconnect subscale of the Lovebird Scale (Cloonan et al., 2023) among bullied individuals indicate a tendency toward emotional withdrawal and relational ambivalence. These results echo findings from deLara (2016), who reported that bullying survivors often replicate early rejection patterns in adult romantic relationships by either avoiding closeness or engaging in toxic dynamics. Moreover, research by Fortino Rodriguez Sanchez (2019) found that identity diffusion and emotional disconnection often follow experiences of peer exclusion and victim-blaming—particularly when such experiences were minimized or dismissed by caregivers.

This is further supported by Zhang et al. (2023), who demonstrated that victim-blaming exacerbates identity confusion, discourages disclosure, and increases the likelihood of internalized shame and intimacy avoidance. The combined effects of peer aggression and perceived familial neglect may lead to long-term disruptions in ego development, as proposed by Erikson's (1968) psychosocial model, specifically in the domains of identity vs. role confusion and intimacy vs. isolation.

The interplay between bullying and parental responsiveness is particularly salient in collectivist cultural contexts like India, where family support systems play a central role in identity formation (Shukla & Kakkar, 2020). In such settings, paternal alienation may carry additional weight, as the father is often viewed as an authoritative figure. Discrepancies in the emotional availability of mothers versus fathers observed in this study may reflect

culturally reinforced gender roles (Peterson & Ray, 2006), and suggest a need for culturally sensitive models of emotional support during childhood trauma.

The current findings also contribute to the ongoing discourse on developmental timing and intervention efficacy. Yeager et al. (2015) showed that anti-bullying programs tend to be less effective in adolescence, a critical period when peer approval becomes central to self-concept. As a result, individuals who do not receive adequate support during these years may carry unresolved emotional injuries into adulthood, manifesting in dysfunctional romantic patterns (Cook et al., 2010; Faris & Felmlee, 2011).

Although the study did not find statistically significant differences in romantic mutuality or perceived romance, the elevated disconnect scores indicate that relational flourishing may be impaired even when surface-level satisfaction appears intact. This highlights the distinction between relationship structure and depth, with bullied individuals potentially mimicking normative relationship behaviours while struggling with deeper issues of trust, self-worth, and intimacy regulation (Cloonan et al., 2023; Smolderen et al., 2007).

Taken together, the study reinforces the hypothesis that early peer victimization has cascading effects on emotional development, particularly when compounded by paternal emotional disengagement and unaddressed identity confusion. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, including trauma-informed therapy, attachment-based interventions, and father-inclusive support systems, to mitigate long-term relational harm.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the effects of childhood bullying don't end when the bullying stops—they can echo into adulthood, shaping how people trust, connect, and love. Those who were bullied often carry deep emotional wounds that affect their attachment styles and romantic relationships, especially when there was little emotional support from parents during those difficult years. The role of fathers stood out in this research, reminding us how important every parental bond is in healing or hurting. Even when bullied individuals find supportive partners, they may still struggle internally with closeness and trust. These findings highlight the need for early, compassionate support systems at home, in schools, and in therapy that help young people feel safe, seen, and emotionally held. Understanding the quiet, long-term impact of bullying can guide us toward building relationships and interventions that truly make a difference.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its reliance on retrospective self-report measures may have introduced recall bias, as participants' memories of bullying and parental relationships can be influenced by current emotions or relationship contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions; it remains unclear whether attachment difficulties are a result of bullying or a pre-existing vulnerability. Third, the sample was limited to urban, middle-class young adults in Kolkata, which restricts generalizability across different cultural or socioeconomic contexts. Lastly, gender imbalance within subgroups may have influenced relational outcomes, warranting further investigation in more diverse and balanced samples.

Implications

The findings of this study highlight the deep and lasting effects of childhood bullying on adult emotional and relational wellbeing. Mental health professionals and educators should recognize that bullying impacts not only self-esteem but also how individuals form and sustain close relationships later in life. Emotional support from parents, especially fathers emerged as a crucial protective factor, suggesting that parent-focused interventions could help reduce long-term harm. Therapists working with young adults who have a history of bullying may benefit from exploring attachment patterns and unresolved relational trauma. Schools should also move beyond punitive responses to bullying and provide safe spaces where emotional recovery is supported. Lastly, fostering open conversations about vulnerability and connection, both at home and in therapy can help break cycles of emotional disconnection and build healthier relationships over time.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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