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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Peer Victimization, Higher Education, Socio-Emotional, Well-Being, Social Exclusion, Bullying, Emotional Distress, Social Identity, Youth	Peer victimization is a significant social problem in higher education globally influencing the emotional well-being and social adjustment. Peer Victimization is a repeated activity of aggression, abuse and violence by a peer or group through coercive power physically, verbally, emotionally and socially. The present study aims to explore the experiences of peer victimization among university students including the patterns, sources and consequences, focusing on how these experiences reshape their meanings of social belonging or exclusion. The research is positioned epistemologically in the interpretive paradigm and thus it has been conducted using qualitative research method. For the aforementioned purpose, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults (18-25) using a purposive sampling technique. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke). The findings of the study suggest that sources of peer victimization among university students are physical appearance, trends following, financial status, and power display through informal patterns of ridiculing and intense emotional torture or threats. Social exclusion, emotional distress, poor self-esteem and identity suffering were the consequences of peer victimization. The findings of this research can be used by student counselors and can support the emotional well-being of victims and inform interventions aimed at perpetrators.
ARTICLE HISTORY Date of Submission: 12-07-2026 Date of Acceptance: 18-08-2026 Date of Publication: 21-08-2026	 2026 Journal of Social Research Development
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Email:	kkiranmalikk@gmail.com
DOI	https://doi.org/10.59075/jsrd.v7i6.570
Volume/Issue	7(6), 2026, 389-400

Background & Introduction

Peer victimization has emerged as one of the most persistent social problems in educational institutions across the globe (Chen & Huang, 2015). Traditionally it has been defined through the lens of bullying research, most influentially by Olweus, who considered it as aggressive, intentional behavior repeated over time, occurring within a relationship as a manifestation of a real or perceived imbalance of power between the peers (Olweus, 1993, 2001). Peer victimization refers to the experience among peer children or adults of being a target of any

form of harmful behavior inflicted by other peers in a repetitive manner (Cho, et al., 2022). The term peer victimization encompasses both peer victimization and bullying since it is a broader and more inclusive concept than bullying (Sjögren, Thornberg, Wänström & Gini, 2021). Bullying is conceptualized as a subset of peer victimization involving repeated or continuous harmful behaviors. While peer victimization and bullying are frequently used interchangeably in the literature, some scholars caution that peer victimization is the broader construct, encompassing both chronic and systematic bullying which brings serious consequences for students' mental health and wellbeing. Multiple forms of peer victimization are physical, verbal, psychological, emotional and even digital, which brings long-term unfortunate consequences (Mishna et al., 2012). Peer victimization has often been categorized as being either physical (e.g. direct) or social (e.g. indirect) in nature (Ostrov & Perry, 2019, Morrow et al., 2019; Iyer-Eimerbrink, Scielzo & Campbell, 2015). Olweus (1978) has pointed out that historically, peer victimization revolved around the concept of bullying in middle childhood and adolescence in which the major focus was physical harm and victimization. However, scholars in previous decades also identified the other forms of victimization in which they understood and explored that the children could be victimized and harassed by relational as well as physical means such as the use of the relationship or threat of the removal of the relationship as the means of harm which further can create social isolation and exclusion.

Some recent studies highlighted that peer victimization brings severe consequences for the victim including social adjustments; mainly in the later stage of adolescence. The impact resulted in low levels of social competence, acceptance popularity, isolation, and rejection indicating worse relationships with their peers as well as forming negative self-perception (Core et al., 2020; Romera, Ortiz & Ruiz, 2016). The evidence from the study of Joseph and Stockton (2018) is significant in highlighting that the victims generally have a low quality of life, experience poor self-esteem, loneliness and isolation, and an increase in psychosomatic disorder, anxiety level and depression. Academic performance also becomes lower than those who are not victimized. People who face victimization are at greater risk for suicidal ideation and behaviors and are subject to greater externalizing problems such as aggression, delinquency and misconduct (Reijntjes et al., 2011; Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). The study by Asher & Paquette (2003) stated that inclusiveness in groups and with peers is a fundamental need of humans to maintain close relationships and if this social need remains unmet, it can cause emotional distress such as loneliness, the feeling of emptiness and sadness. These psychological problems can develop from childhood to adolescence as well as adulthood creating more room for medical problems like depression.

Peer victimization in higher educational institutes is often treated as an individual psychological issue, focusing on anxiety, depression, or academic performance. However, the social insight on how students experience, interpret, hide or negotiate these experiences are under-research particularly in context of university students in Pakistan. The study therefore examines the hidden social processes through which peer victimization produces emotional distress and shapes students'

everyday university lives and making or creating the meaning of belonging for them. Peer Victimization and its outcomes on the social and emotional life of an individual are important concerns of researchers in the disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, and Health, considering its outcomes and significance in different domains of life. The intensity or magnitude of peer victimization about what peer victimization is being faced also depends on gender differences (Eimerbrink, Scielzo & Campbell, 2015). Many of the previous studies highlight the psychological and academic problems of peer victimization under the positivist research paradigm. However, investigating the phenomenon of peer victimization with the subjective meaning of the victimized itself can be more comprehensive and thicker by bringing in-depth narratives. This study will be an addition to understand the dynamics of violence and abuse among youth in academic organizations. The present research can amplify the importance of involving academic organizations as support groups and counseling centers with a dignifying and instrumental role in the context of student bullying and victimization by identifying and monitoring the predators and victims. The under-discussed phenomenon will sensitize many of the students about the issue of victimization is a kind of abuse and the abuser should be accountable and answerable.

Methodology

Qualitative research empowers the participants by engaging them fully in the context of subjectivity, personal experiences, and inner emotions of the research participants (Patton et al., 2015, Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). Previous researches have used quantitative methods in exploring peer victimization and its prevalence. The present study particularly involves the robust and enriched experiences of university students by involving them to unveil the abuse, bullying and victimization by their peers. Understanding it in a specific context of youth and university with the subjective meanings is essential for suggesting some interventions. The research employed qualitative methods; as this study opted to gain a profound understanding of peer victimization among young adults and recognize its influence on their social life. The significant reason to select qualitative research is that each person has his/her observation and construction of reality based on different social factors, and interactions with the external world, as a result, each person has dissimilar behaviors and reactions. To gain a better insight into experiences of peer victimization semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide with fifteen (20) participants; fifteen (14) females and five (6) male students belonged to different educational institutes/universities of Lahore, Pakistan. The snowball sampling technique was used to select participants (sample) who belonged to the target age group ranging from 18-25 years and experienced peer victimization at any point in their lives. The rapport building and trust were crucial throughout the research because of the sensitivity of the topic. Considering this the researchers followed all the procedures of ethics and confidentiality. The data was collected and analyzed following the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved interpretation, selecting codes and constructing themes (Kiger & Lara Varpio, 2020). The method of analysis consists of six steps (Terry et al., 2017; Clarke & Braun, 2017); 1) Familiarization, 2) Coding, 3) Generating themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, 6) Writing up (Jack Caulfield, 2022). All the requirements for conducting interviews were mentioned to the participants before starting the

interviews. The interview recording and note-taking were done with their consent. To regard their privacy, the names and other personal details were kept anonymous. Any sensitive or personal details were handled with respect, allowing the participant to speak or explain as per their comfort level.

Analysis & Results

Findings and Discussion

The current study is based on the socio-emotional experiences of peer victimization among youth studying in Pakistani universities. The research participants were 14 females and 6 males from different universities of Lahore. The results of the research developed diverse conclusions to the research objectives, in terms of the experience of peer victimization in an adult's life.

The Physical Appearance Dilemma:

Physical appearance is an essential and dominating part of identity, especially in the adult age. Early adulthood is a sensitive age of making intimate relations in the social hierarchy as well as in terms of self-disclosure. Certain appearance standards are set by society regarding physique, complexion, weight and height. These standards are further emphasized by various sources such as the media and the apparel industry. Individuals make these endorsed standards by society as primary criteria to recognize their selves in society. In case of failure to fulfill these standards, individuals have to bear sanctions which may range from ridicule, isolation and social withdrawal. Such attitudes of society encourage peer victimization as a continuous series of abuse and hurt. The participants elaborated this phenomenon of bullying and victimization as a result of failure to be up to date according to society's standards. Two of the research participants stated that the phenomenon of bullying and victimization happens primarily because of not embracing different physical appearances such as being thin, fat, bulky, or skinny and how a person's body looks, what shape it has and whether the body fits with standards set by society. A female participant shared,

"My broad physics and pitch voice had been a source of humiliation for me since my school life, but at the university level my male mates hurt me more with the labels of *Pai (man)*, *Full Size* and other names which hurt my feminism." (P.15)

Even boys experience similar kind of victimization as one of the male participants shared,

"I have been called by many names like *Haathi (Elephant)*, *Gaint* and *Chitaan (Mountain)* is more common in my life than my real name because of my over-weight" (P.13). Another participant reported, "Because of my heavy chest people kept calling me *Zanana (Woman)* even when I was 12, I faced child mensuration as a boy touched me with a bad intention (P.7)".

Body shaming due to being overweight has always been found as a primary cause of bullying (Fowler et al., 2021) from ages. The present study also highlights that not only obesity but infact thin body structures also make someone ashamed among their peers. As a boy portrayed "*I had to face*

sarcastic comments about my masculinity due to shortened height and slim body structure, people say that me I am impotent and no girl can consider me as an ideal companion because I cannot protect and safeguard them"(P.10). Young adults perceive that weight-related stigma is the main reason for falling victim to peers, and Verbal attacks are the most common type of peer victimization to encounter (e.g., mocking, swearing, teasing). One of the male participants hesitantly spoke about his adolescence phase: “

My male mates used to show sex-appealing gestures because I have a thin waist and they resembled my body shape with girls”, he further explained that he had been labeled by slang words: “ohh...cake piece”, “chocolate lark (boy)”. The other boys even pass vulgar statements to him; “Tum mardo jesa ni dikhta, mard ho bhi ya nahi?” (You do not look like a boy, are you a really a boy?) (P.7).

Physical appearance in adult age is a core personality attribute and individuals who do not feel well in it suffer multiple social and emotional challenges. A female respondent shared, “My body figure is not attractive like other girls, and my fellows used to tease me that no boy would like to have my companion as I don’t look like other girls.”

The above-mentioned narrations indicate that gender physical appeals and gender roles are interrelated as males are considered bread-earners and protective of females. Society expects that their strength should be reflected in their physical appearance. On the contrary, females are considered to be pleasing and sexually appealing so they have to be fragile to be considered feminine. Furthermore, the participants revealed that failure to meet the physical appearance and expectations of society causes victimization in childhood and adolescence. This not only prevents individuals, from engaging in less physical activities but also hinders their social inclusion and participation.

The Intersection of Trends, Fashion and Attire

Personality is the package of physical traits, grooming and attitude towards life. The dressing hairstyling and accessories enhance one’s personality. Personality grooming is not only an individual’s born instinct but with the help of financial grooming and learning one can improve the personality and outlook. However, certain trends and fashions are not possible for everyone, especially in the context of the urban fashion market; individuals who come from multicultural families and ethnicities reported certain barriers towards modernism making them vulnerable to being ridiculed and teased by their peers. The participants found to be reported that due to their dressing people gossiped and laughed about their dressing styles which made them fail and less confident as reported by one of the female participants,

“I belong to a very conservative family they don’t allow me to go to university without a full chadar (a big piece of cloth used to cover the body). I feel hesitant and less modern while going in this manner to university as my fellows tease me and call me humiliating names. My fellows don’t feel me compatible with their age

group. Therefore, I have realized I could not change my family attitudes, just to reach the modern age requirements (P.2).

Three participants explicitly mentioned that in college and university, fellows and other students gossip about their dressing style; they make fun of them, stare and laugh at them deliberately making them feel awkward and less confident. They stated that because of not following the trending styles and attires they felt left out and remained unpopular. Mishnaa et al., (2020), suggested that a dressing-based victimization includes biased judgment of ability due to athleticness, smartness, and how an individual dress. They have been teased with mean remarks, and uncooperative behavior as a result of this verbal victimization; they lose confidence, face difficulty in social adjustment, and increased anxiety.

A female respondent shared,

My simple and unbranded dresses make me a source of fun for my fellows, due to my poor financial conditions I can't afford to wear branded and new clothes every day. But the most painful thing is my appearance makes my level of competence very low in the class not only in appreciation from my fellows in fact I sometimes feel the majority of teasers influence the class instructor as well. These humiliated attitudes in academic life discourage me from public participation (P.8).

Adult age is the age of intimacy and adolescence as in this age, individuals pass through different stages of identity development. The recurrent abuse and bullying make them uneasy and dissatisfied with their selves and society as well. This brings negative consequences in one's life in the life course. The invisible wounds of peer victimization leave intense influences on the personality and relationship development.

The Fiscal-Power Duo: Financial Status and Power Display at Crossroads

A strong social and economic status is considered to be a reflection of power. It is evident by the statements of the interviewee that students in school, college and universities who belong to the elite class or enjoy stable financial status are more likely to influence peers who come up from the middle or lower class due to the charisma of money and strong social status. They consider them superior and bully other fellows. Sometimes they tease them about their dress and others make fun of them and also exclude and ridicule them for not having as much pocket money as they had.

As said by a participant, *"I feel embarrassed to open my wallet in front of my class because it always hurt me even one of my fellow often comment chanda change kia (do you need donation)"* (P.10). Schools and classrooms with greater income inequities are associated with higher rates of bullying. It is noted that children living in poverty or belonging to low-income neighbourhoods were potential targets (Mishna et al. 2020). similarly, low-middle-income countries showed a high prevalence of bullying. Pakistan also belongs to the same income group which suggests that youth from poor or low-middle income class are at greater risk of victimization. According to other

surveys, students in low-income households are more likely to be bullied than students in high-income households (Murshid, 2018).

Another respondent shared,

“I belong to a family where money and showing off are not ever seen, observed or learned. “I feel myself a misfit among my peers at university. The hangouts they plan and the party sessions are more than their passion. I always was teased bookworm and Bechara (Poor)” (P.5).

In the Pakistani context, the elementary school level indicates that the socioeconomic status of the child is a potential risk factor associated with Peer victimization (as the majority of victims were from low or average socioeconomic class) (Shafiq & Batool, 2023). Another important finding of the study is that few respondents shared that victimization on the basis of financial status is at its peak in adolescence.

The Episodes of Religious Discrimination and Ethnocentric Dispositions

Young people experience exclusion, ridicule, stereotyping, or unfair treatment from peers because of their religious identity or perceived ethnic background. Such experiences can occur through derogatory comments, religious labelling, avoidance, or assumptions about cultural superiority. Ethnocentric dispositions may reinforce these behaviors by positioning one's own religious or ethnic group as more acceptable or superior to others. Repeated exposure to such discrimination can undermine young people's sense of belonging, social confidence, and emotional well-being. Thus, peer victimization becomes a mechanism through which religious and ethnic boundaries are reproduced within youth social spaces. Muslims are the officially dominant group, accounting for about 96% of the total population (Iqbal, Ahmad & Ayub, 2012), non-Islamic people are officially declared a minority in Pakistan, accounting for less than 4% of the total population (Iqbal, Ahmad & Ayub, 2012). Among the religious minorities, Hindus make up 2.14% and Christians are the second largest minority; they account for 1.27% of the total population (Pakistan Census 2021). A Christian female participant shared her experiences of peer victimization during the interview during her childhood and adulthood phases. She stated, “*I studied in a combined school with Muslim students in the majority and during the recess time, I used to hear demeaning remarks*” (P.5). Mishna et al. 2020 in their research manifested that peer victimization is done based on “difference”; it was consistently articulated that youth were bullied because they were perceived to be different and this difference can be made in terms of religion, ethnicity, race, or even skin tone.

Another boy shared “*my fellows used to say that the dark complexion makes my face so ugly and dirty that I feel like puking on your face*” (P.5). In 1983, Alice Walker coined the term colourism, also known as skin tone bias. It is an observed and well-established phenomenon that the Christian community in Pakistan is judged by their darker skin tone. A Christian female shared that “*our dark color complexion symbolically attached to the Christine community is a source of tease, ridicule and make us inferior in our peers dually attached to our appearance, beauty standards and minority* (P.7).”

Any person with a dark-coloured complexion or a darker skin tone is questionable for their religion. The colour of the skin, more specifically the socially constructed meaning of tone and treatment, attached to skin tone has an important psychological impact on the living experience of the individuals (Abrams et al., 2020). In response to other questions, one of the respondents mentioned that *“people misjudged me for being a Muslim because of my bright skin tone”, and “Sometimes it becomes hard for me to make other people believe that I am a Christian as I do not look like a Christian” she mentioned sarcastically.* Consistent with her statements but not generalizing it, the outcome of such victimization makes social adjustment a challenge for Christian adults especially where they stand out as a minority. Being bullied or victimized just because one belongs to a “different” religion, cast, or ethnicity makes it difficult to develop a social association and hinders the creation of an exclusive environment instead of encouraging disproportionate peer victimization.

Repercussions of Peer Victimization

Peer Victimization is a series of continuous and repetitive abuse and bullying either physical or emotional by using the power and creating the meaning of daily lives for others. Peers have a strong influence on one's life, particularly in adult age. A university student being at the sensitive phase of developmental age needs self-recognition and inclusiveness in his or her social circles. But the oppression, ridicule, labelling and teasing of their self either in the context of personality, language or social status bring many social and emotional plethora for them which include social inclusion, low social well-being, and withdrawal of friendships. Social exclusion is an aversive experience that implies a lack of belongingness or association with others. Children and adolescents who experience peer victimization and exclusion report a greater fear of negative evaluation and heightened distress in social situations. A respondent shared: “my physical appearance and low social status have always been a source of disowned from my peers. I feel lonely and worthless and prefer to stay in my own shell rather than be a source of fun for others”. Social exclusion through peer victimization is known to have detrimental effects on social and emotional maladjustment. This maladjustment disturbs the state of social well-being among adolescents causing social anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Clear, Gembeck, Duffy & Barber, 2020). Poor social adjustments bring multiplex emotional, psychological and social consequences including, lack of trust, friendship withdrawals, loneliness, and poor self-esteem.

Limitations, Recommendations & Future Implications

The scope of the research is limited to the socio-emotional challenges of Peer Victimization among young adults studying in universities of Pakistan; future research on peer victimization should examine the perpetrators' motivations and the negotiation or coping of victims at individual, group or institutional level. In Pakistan, the understanding of how and why victimization occurs in society has been an unaddressed phenomenon due to the fear of stigma, Pakistani society attached to any sort of victim. The findings of this research can be helpful in sensitizing students about victimization and its affects; this can bring a positive result while involving the perpetrators as sometimes they are unaware about the harmful consequences of what they are doing with others. Contextually, it is

crucial for the bystanders who can bring a solution by raising their voices and being a support and helping mechanism for the victims.

Research on the experiences of peer victimization among university students can have several future implications. It informs the development of targeted interventions and support systems to address mental health issues arising from such victimization. Additionally, universities may implement proactive measures to create a safer and more inclusive environment, fostering positive social interactions among students. This research could contribute to policy changes, shaping campus culture to promote empathy, respect, and psychological well-being. Ultimately, a better understanding of peer victimization can lead to more effective strategies for preventing and addressing these issues in educational settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study brings forth the prevalence of peer victimization among youth in Pakistan particularly among university students. The findings of the study highlight the deep-rooted consequences of peer victimization in university students in their personal and professional domains from relationship building to self-esteem and social exclusion. The study's results underscore the need for urgent action to address bullying and victimization in educational institutes as social support can mitigate social exclusion and promote healthy social adjustment. Some of the respondents' narratives also highlighted that family and social support networks and organizational support can reduce the prevalence of victimization. Interventions should focus on creating a safe and supportive environment, promoting empathy and inclusivity, and addressing the root causes of bullying behavior. Additionally, there is a need for increased awareness and education among parents, teachers, and policymakers about the devastating impacts of bullying and victimization. Furthermore, the study's findings highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and context-specific interventions, as bullying and victimization manifest differently in the Pakistani context. In this study, peer victimization reflects the power dynamics among youth and highlight how individuals are marked or labelled in the sensitive years of their youth in which their identity develops. Thus, empathy, diversity and inclusion are highly needed to inculcate in the early year's curriculum and learning for maintaining an inclusive society.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the design, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

Grant Support and Financial

The authors have declared no specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or nonprofit sector.

Declarations

Consent to Participate

All participants completed an informed consent before interviews.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of Interest.

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