

# Predicting Emotional and Behavioral Problems through Bullying and Victimization in Pakistani Adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** Bullying and victimization are critical issues affecting the mental and emotional wellbeing of students worldwide. Despite extensive research demonstrating a robust link between bullying victimization and various emotional and behavioral problems, there remains a significant gap in understanding these dynamics within the Pakistani context. This study aimed to examine the prevalence of bullying and victimization among Pakistani school adolescents and investigate their predictive relationship with emotional and behavioral problems.

**Methodology:** The cross-sectional study involved 500 adolescents ( $M_{age} = 11.06$  years) from four public schools in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Participants completed the Forms of Bullying Scale and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

**Findings:** Findings revealed a higher prevalence of boys in both categories. Overall, 29.6% of boys and 23.6% of girls fell into the clinical category for behavioral problems. Bullying significantly predicted conduct problems and externalizing behaviors, while victimization was associated with peer problems, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, and internalizing behaviors. Both bullying and victimization negatively predicted prosocial behavior.

**Conclusion:** Study highlight the need for gender-sensitive, targeted anti-bullying policies and support systems in Pakistani educational settings, emphasizing the importance of promoting mental health and positive social interactions among adolescents.

**Keywords:** Bullying, Victimization, Pakistani Adolescents, Estimates, EBPs.

## Introduction

Bullying has received a great deal of attention from researchers and practitioners over the last two decades. Bullying is characterized as an intentional and frequently repeated set of behaviors designed to taunt, humiliate, physically harm, and socially isolate the victim (Olweus, 1993). As a form of systematic aggression, it involves an imbalance of power, and it has a significant impact on the lives of a significant minority of children.

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Bacchini et al. (2015) reported that 40% of students experienced bullying at least once over their academic tenure. However, the prevalence of bullying varies across studies (Modecki et al., 2014; Ngo et al., 2021; R. G. Smith & Gross, 2006), although it is widely recognized as a common concern in primary and middle schools (Walters, 2021). Simultaneously, this stage of development is critical for identity formation and the development of a positive self-perception, making the impact of bullying particularly detrimental. Bullying has been associated with various emotional and behavioral problems, including poor social adjustment, increased risk of substance abuse, and various psychological difficulties in later life (Nansel et al., 2001). The adverse effects of bullying extend beyond the victims, impacting the perpetrators as well. Victims often experience profound and immediate psychological distress, which can persist over time, manifesting as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and interpersonal difficulties (Esquivel et al., 2023a; Shahid et al., 2022).

## Literature Review

The American Psychological Association (*Bullying*, 2024) defines bullying as aggressive behavior that involves intention, a power imbalance, and repetition. Bullying can manifest in various forms, including physical bullying, verbal bullying, social or relational bullying, cyberbullying, emotional/psychological bullying, sexual bullying, and economic bullying (Bansal et al., 2023; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Kowalski et al., 2012; Martin, 2000; Olweus, 2010; Shute & Slee, 2015; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005; Underwood, 2003). Physical bullying involves inflicting physical harm on the victim, such as kicking, punching, or beating, while verbal bullying includes mocking, humiliating, or belittling through words (Rigby, 2002). Social or relational bullying involves spreading rumors or gossip to damage someone's relationships and reputation (Underwood, 2003). Lastly, cyberbullying extends these behaviors to digital platforms (Kowalski et al., 2012). Emotional or psychological bullying targets mental health through manipulation or criticism, whereas sexual bullying includes passing sexual slurs, commenting on someone's body, or threatening to misuse private pictures (Shute & Slee, 2015). Economic bullying refers to stealing, robbing, or taking money by force, and it is also observed among college students (Martin, 2000). Understanding the various forms of bullying is crucial, however, it is equally important to recognize the impact these behaviors have on individuals. Victimization, the experience of being targeted by bullying, often results in significant emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical harm (Finkelhor, 2008). Bullying inflicts harm on the victim, while victimization represents the injury sustained.

Globally, bullying affects millions of children daily. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) reports that one in three adolescents aged 6-11 years experiences bullying. Studies indicate varying prevalence rates, with boys experiencing bullying more frequently in some regions, and girls in others (Hosozawa et al., 2021; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Additionally, in East Asian countries such as Korea and Japan report lower bullying rates, while Southeast Asian countries such as India, Pakistan and China recorded higher rates (Katsantonis, 2021). For instance, physical bullying in Ethiopia, Peru, and Vietnam is less frequent, with a prevalence rate of 7%, but in India, it affects 17.3% of adolescents (Ngo et al., 2021).

Similarly, studies have highlighted the alarming prevalence of bullying and its associated risks. Research shows that 30-35% of Pakistani adolescents face physical, verbal, or relational bullying in schools (Shahid et al., 2022; Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023), with 37% expressing significant fear of being bullied (Sunbal & Jabeen, 2023). Furthermore, literature demonstrated gender differences in bullying dynamics. It has been observed that boys tend to be involved in physical bullying more while girls are more likely to be involved in emotional, verbal and social bullying (Inchley et al., 2020a). Similar trends are observed in India, where boys are more involved in bullying and victimization (Malhi et al., 2014; Narayanan & Betts, 2014; Patel et al., 2017). In Pakistan, boys tend to engage in physical bullying, while girls are more involved in relational bullying through gossip and rumors (Shehzadi et al., 2019; Batool, 2023).

Bullying has profound psychological and academic consequences for children in Pakistan. Those who experience bullying endure psychological distress, which negatively affects their well-being and academic performance (Khawaja et al., 2015). Peer bullying disrupts elementary students' academic participation, leading to difficulties in engaging with class activities (Usman et al., 2023). The associated low self-esteem, anxiety, and decreased motivation to attend school further hinder academic engagement (Ishrat & Hameed, 2024; Nadeem et al., 2022; Shaukat et al., 2023). The literature also highlights the psychological impact of bullying and its underlying causes. According to General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2006), adversity such as emotional maltreatment or bullying can lead to criminal behavior or negative emotions like depression. Victimization often leads to feelings of hostility, which can manifest in bullying behavior (Walters & Espelage, 2023). Additionally, physical maltreatment can trigger aggressive behavior (Shackman & Pollak, 2014).

The research on the impact of bullying on children and adolescents in Sialkot-Pakistan, involving 400 participants aged 8-18 years, reveals that bullying significantly and negatively affects their mental health and quality of life (Shahid et al., 2022). Specifically, the results indicate that pre-adolescents and adolescents experience bullying differently, with significant variations in both quality of life and mental health issues. Recent studies further emphasize the psychological toll of bullying. Students who are bullied often experience hopelessness and helplessness, which strain their interpersonal relationships and lead to avoidance behaviors at school (Esquivel et al., 2023b). Victimized adolescents are at a higher risk of self-harm (Bryson et al., 2021), and those involved in bullying, either as victims or perpetrators, are prone to psychosocial difficulties and self-harm (Eyuboglu et al., 2021). Cyberbullying is also a prevalent issue in Pakistan, linked with significant psychological distress among adolescents (Shaheen et al., 2023). Emotional bullying, which is widespread among youth, has been associated with depressive symptoms (Shahbaz et al., 2023). The behavioral consequences of bullying, including cognitive deficits and social competence issues (Hussain, 2024), are significant. For example, teasing related to appearance and weight is common among Pakistani college students, with verbal bullying based on weight leading to internalizing behavioral problems, particularly in girls (Yousaf et al., 2023). Bullying perpetration is associated with poor conflict resolution skills and social withdrawal in school students (Murad, 2022).

### ***Rationale of the Study***

Bullying and victimization are critical issues affecting the mental and emotional well-being of students worldwide. Extensive research has demonstrated a robust link between bullying victimization and a range of emotional and behavioural problems, including anxiety, depression, aggression, and academic challenges. Despite the global recognition of these issues, there remains a significant gap in understanding their impact within the Pakistani context.

Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period for individuals, and distress experienced during this stage can shape future relationships and overall well-being. The severe impact of bullying on some students can lead to extreme consequences, including suicide attempts, contributing to the higher suicide rates observed among adolescents globally. Therefore, a thorough investigation of the effects of bullying on Pakistani adolescents is crucial.

While international research has established strong links between bullying involvement and various emotional and behavioral problems, the specific manifestations and severity of these issues may vary across cultural contexts. The existing literature on bullying in Pakistan is limited, with most research focusing on prevalence rates in specific populations. Furthermore, these studies often address specific constructs such as depression, school performance, or withdrawal, without accounting for the wider range of emotional and behavioral consequences. Notably, the correlational studies present on bullying victimization have not fully demonstrated the predictive impact on emotional and behavioral health. This study seeks to bridge this research gap by examining the predictive relationship between bullying/victimization and a range of emotional and behavioral problems among Pakistani school adolescents.

Moreover, gender is a particularly important demographic factor to consider, as the percentage of reported bullying cases varies across genders. Both boys and girls experience and respond to bullying differently. Understanding gender norms in bullying dynamics is necessary to develop interventions that target the needs of each gender and provide equitable support. Additionally, by investigating both internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, conduct problems) outcomes, the study aims to provide a complete picture of the potential consequences of bullying involvement.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

The objectives of this study are centered around understanding the prevalence and impact of bullying and victimization on the emotional and behavioral problems of Pakistani school adolescents. Specifically, the study aims to determine the prevalence of various emotional and behavioral problems, such as conduct issues, peer problems, hyperactivity, emotional difficulties, and prosocial behaviors within this population. Additionally, the study seeks to identify significant gender differences in the experiences of bullying and victimization among these adolescents. Finally, the research aims to investigate the predictive relationship of bullying and victimization and emotional and behavioral problems, providing insights into the broader implications of these experiences on the wellbeing of Pakistani school adolescents.

## **Method**

### ***Study Design and Participants***

The present study was based on cross sectional study design. The sample consisted of 500 adolescents were drawn from four public schools of Rawalpindi. The average age of participants was 11.06 years (SD = 1.01). The gender distribution of the sample is approximately equal, with 259 males (51.8%) and 241 females (48.2%), suggesting a representative representation of both genders. According to teacher reports of child's academic standings, most participants are classified as average (53.4%) or high achievers (36.8%) in their classes, with a small percentage (9.8%) classified as lower achievers. This observation suggests that the sample exhibits a tendency towards average levels of academic performance. Furthermore, an overwhelming 92.4% of parents in the dataset are single (divorced, separated, or widowed), while only 7.6% are currently married, suggesting a significant presence of non-marital family structures within the population. There are almost equal numbers of nuclear (51.4%) and joint (48.6%) family systems. The reported monthly family income has a mean value of PKR 38,781.40 (approximately USD = 140), indicating the presence of low social economic status across the participants.

## **Measures**

### ***1. Demographic form***

A form was developed to obtain data about the sample's various demographic variables including gender, age, family income and family system.

### ***2. Forms of Bullying Scale***

Urdu version of Forms of Bullying Scale (FBS), (Shaw et al., 2013) with versions to measure victimization (FBS-V) and perpetration (FBS-P) was used, each form consists of 10 items. The scale encompasses response options structured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, spanning from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". FBS demonstrated adequate psychometrics (Flowers et al., 2023; Shaw et al., 2013), with concurrent validity was established with measures of emotional and behavioral problems such as Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire, Depression Anxiety and stress scale, and peer social support scale. Scale demonstrated high Cronbach's alpha values of .89 (FBS-V) and .92 (FBS-P).

### ***3. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire***

The study utilized the Urdu version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997; Samad et al., 2005), comprising 25 items, to assess a range of challenges and positive attributes. This tool is divided into five subscales, each containing five items, which measure conduct problems, hyperactivity-inattention, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and pro-social behavior. In addition, the externalizing score is the sum of the conduct and hyperactivity scales, and the internalizing score is a sum of the emotional and peer problems scales. Responses to these items are gauged on a three-point Likert-type scale, with the scoring system defined as 0 for "Not true," 1 for "Somewhat true," and 2 for "Certainly true." The SDQ has demonstrated a reliability coefficient of 0.70 in the present study.

### ***Procedure***

Permission for the study was secured from the administrations of four schools, and informed parental consent was subsequently obtained through these administrative channels. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary for the students, who were also explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. All assessments were conducted within the students' regular classroom environments to maintain consistency. Prior to administering the questionnaire, students were provided with detailed instructions on how to complete it accurately. They were also encouraged to document any challenges they encountered while responding to the questions, ensuring that any potential issues could be identified and addressed.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

After obtaining informed consent from each participant, they were contacted and readily informed of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time without obligation. The participants received a comprehensive briefing on the study's objectives and were guaranteed that their participation would not subject them to any physical or psychological harm. The study maintained the principles of respect and dignity, guaranteeing that all participants were regarded with the utmost respect.

### ***Data Analytical Plan***

SPSS version 26.0 was used for all analyses. All demographic variables' frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations were calculated to provide descriptive statistics. Internal consistency reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha considering following guidelines for qualitative interpretation:  $.70 < \alpha < .79$  = adequate;  $.80 < \alpha < .89$  = good; and  $.90 \alpha$  = excellent internal consistency (Hunsley & Mash, 2008). Categorical data was analyzed to establish percentages and frequencies to identify estimates of behavioral problems. Furthermore, t-tests and regression analyses were performed to test predictive relations.

### ***Results***

The results of the research are structured to offer a thorough comprehension of the relationships between bullying, victimization, and behavioral issues in school adolescents. We proceed by providing the psychometric properties for all the scales employed in the current study (Table 1). All the scales exhibited a high level of internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .70 to .92. This is followed by an analysis of the sample's prevalence of behavioral problems, with a particular emphasis on the borderline and clinical ranges to highlight the severity and extent of these issues. The analysis subsequently contrasts the mean levels of victimization and bullying across a variety of demographic groups, thereby demonstrating the extent to which these behaviors differ among different segments of the population. Subsequently, we investigate the correlations among the study variables and, finally, we conduct multiple regression analyses to investigate the predictive relationships between bullying, victimization, and behavioral problems. This provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to these challenges in adolescents.

**Table 1: Descriptives and Psychometrics of Study variables (N = 500)**

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Skewness</b>	<b>Kurtosis</b>	<b>Cronbach's alpha</b>
FBS_Perpetration	20.73	7.7	10-50	1.231	2.044	0.92
FBS_Victimization	20.79	8.14	10-50	0.759	0.173	0.89
Conduct	3.70	2.43	0-9	0.211	-1.016	0.76
Peer Problems	3.94	2.1	0-10	0.307	-0.268	0.79
Hyperactivity	4.41	2.04	0-10	-0.121	-0.41	0.73
Emot Prob	4.05	2.65	0-10	0.291	-0.679	0.70
Prosocial	6.49	2.67	0-10	-0.4	-0.698	0.71

Note. Emot Prob = Emotional problems; Pro = prosocial.

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

Table 2 reveals distinct gender differences across the Normal, Borderline, and Clinical categories when examining behavioral and emotional problems. Overall, a higher percentage of boys (29.6%) fall into the Clinical category compared to girls (23.6%), indicating that boys are more likely to experience severe behavioral issues. In contrast, the Borderline category shows a slightly higher prevalence among girls (10.4%) than boys (8.8%), suggesting that girls may be more prone to moderate issues that do not reach clinical significance. The Normal category is balanced between genders, with girls (14.2%) slightly surpassing boys (13.4%).

When comparing genders within each category, as illustrated in Figure 1, boys are more often found in the Clinical range for conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems, indicating a greater propensity for severe issues in these areas. For instance, boys are more likely to be classified in the Clinical category for conduct problems and hyperactivity than girls. Conversely, girls exhibit a slightly higher prevalence in the Clinical category for emotional problems and prosocial behavior, suggesting that girls are somewhat more prone to severe emotional difficulties and challenges in positive social interactions compared to boys.

**Table 2: Estimates of Behavioral problems in School adolescents (N = 500)**

		<b>Normal</b>			<b>Borderline</b>			<b>Clinical</b>		
		<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>
Conduct	n	83	111	194	25	21	46	151	109	260
	%	16.6	22.2	38.80	5	4.2	9.2	30.2	21.8	52
Emot prob	n	153	139	292	36	26	62	70	76	146
	%	30.6	27.8	58.4	7.2	5.2	12.4	14	15.2	29.2
Hyperactivity	n	166	171	337	36	30	66	57	40	97
	%	33.2	34.2	67.4	7.2	6	13.2	11.4	8	19.4
Peer prob	n	102	101	203	90	80	170	67	60	127
	%	20.4	20.2	40.6	18	16	34	13.4	12	25.4
Prosocial	n	168	155	323	34	25	59	57	61	118
	%	33.6	31	64.6	6.8	5	11.8	11.4	12.2	23.6
Total	n	67	71	138	44	52	96	148	118	266
	%	13.4	14.2	27.6	8.8	10.4	19.2	29.6	23.6	53.2

Note. Emot Prob = Emotional problems.

**Figure 1: Clinical Comparison of Behavioral problems in School Adolescents**

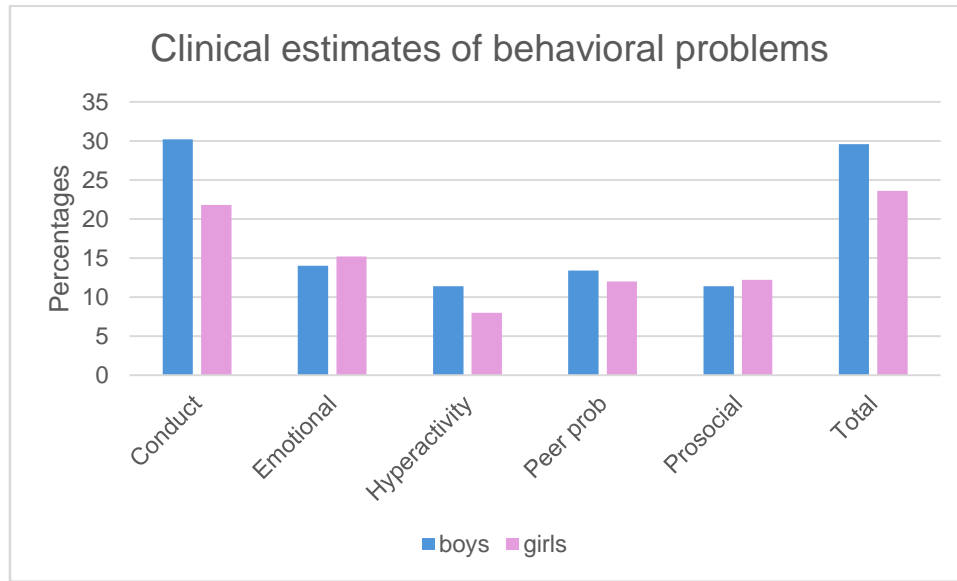


Table 3 shows the mean differences of bullying and victimization across different demographic groups such as gender, family system, and marital status. The analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in bullying and victimization between genders. Boys reported higher mean scores in both bullying and victimization compared to girls. The t-test results are significant ( $p < 0.001$  for both bullying and victimization), indicating that boys are more involved in bullying and are more often victims than girls in this sample. Furthermore, when considering family systems and marital status of parents, the differences in mean scores for both bullying and victimization are not statistically significant.

**Table 3: Mean Comparisons of Bullying and Victimization across Demographics Variables (N=500)**

Variable	Bullying				Victimization			
	M	SD	t-test	p	M	SD	t-test	p
<b>Gender</b>								
Boys	22.33	8.62	4.971	<0.001	22.21	8.85	4.149	<0.001
Girls	19.02	6.14			19.26	6.99		
<b>Family System</b>								
Joint	20.59	8.03	-0.431	0.197	21.01	7.91	0.615	0.563
Nuclear	20.88	7.35			20.56	8.37		
<b>Marital Status</b>								
Single <sup>a</sup>	20.56	7.67	-1.782	0.175	20.5	8.06	-2.839	0.603
Married	22.87	7.84			24.37	8.33		

Note. <sup>a</sup> Single means divorced or widowed or separated.

Table 4 extends the analysis to include correlations between bullying, victimization, and behavioral problems. There exists a significant positive correlation between bullying and victimization, indicating that those who perpetrate bullying are also prone to experiencing victimization. Bullying and victimization exhibit a positive association with conduct issues, peer difficulties, hyperactivity, and emotional challenges, suggesting a relationship among these adverse behaviors and experiences. Conversely, prosocial behavior displays a negative correlation with bullying, victimization, and other behavioral problems, indicating that an increase in problematic behaviors corresponds with a decrease in positive social behaviors.

**Table 4: Bivariate Correlations between Bullying, Victimization, and Behavioral Problems (N=500)**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Bullying	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 Victimization	.667**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3 Conduct	.465**	.422**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4 Peer Problem	.155**	.221**	.422**	-	-	-	-	-	-
5 Hyperactivity	.137**	.186**	.390**	.400**	-	-	-	-	-
6 Emot Prob	.122**	.145**	.418**	.527**	.491**	-	-	-	-
7 Pro Behavior	-.103*	-.141**	-.401**	-.447**	-.352**	-.199**	-	-	-
8 Externalizing	.377**	.376**	.865**	.493**	.800**	.540**	-.453**	-	-
9 Internalizing	.156**	.204**	.479**	.841**	.515**	.903**	-.352**	.593**	-

*Note.* Emot Prob = Emotional problems; Pro = prosocial.

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

Table 5 presents the multiple regression analysis assessing the relationship between bullying, victimization, and behavioral outcomes. The regression for conduct problems depicts that bullying significantly predicts conduct problems ( $B = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a moderate beta weight ( $\beta = 0.33$ ), indicating a strong positive relationship. Victimization also predicts conduct problems positively ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The model explains 23% of the variance ( $R^2 = .23$ ), which is substantial, demonstrating the significant impact of bullying and victimization on conduct issues. For peer problems, although victimization is a significant predictor ( $B = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), bullying shows no significant effect ( $p = 0.825$ ).

Furthermore, bullying does not significantly predict hyperactivity ( $p = 0.703$ ) or emotional symptoms ( $p = 0.445$ ). However, victimization shows a significant positive relationship with both hyperactivity ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a marginally significant relationship with emotional symptoms ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.054$ ). These models account for relatively small proportions of variance ( $R^2 = .03$  for hyperactivity and  $R^2 = .02$  for emotional symptoms). Interestingly, bullying and victimization negatively predict prosocial behavior, but not significantly for bullying ( $B = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.776$ ). In contrast, victimization significantly negatively predicts prosocial behavior ( $B = -0.04$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ). For externalizing behavior, both bullying ( $B = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and victimization ( $B = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) are significant predictors, indicating that as bullying and victimization increase, so do externalizing behaviors. The model for externalizing behavior explains 17% of the variance.

Moreover, bullying is not a significant predictor of internalizing symptoms ( $B = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.543$ ), whereas victimization is a significant predictor ( $B = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), suggesting that victimization is associated with an increase in internalizing symptoms. The model explains 4% of the variance in internalizing symptoms.



**Table 5***Multiple Regression Analyses between Bullying, Victimization and Behavioral Problems (N=500)*

Variables	Conduct					Peer Problems								
	B	SE	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	P	95% CI		B	SE	<i>β</i>	T	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						LL	UL						LL	UL
Constant	0.29	0.29		0.99	0.324	-0.28	0.86	2.73	0.28		9.74	<0.001	2.18	3.28
Bullying	0.10	0.02	0.33	6.29	<0.001	0.07	0.14	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.23	0.825	-0.03	0.04
Victimization	0.06	0.02	0.20	3.84	<0.001	0.03	0.09	0.05	0.02	0.21	3.61	<0.001	0.02	0.08
	<i>R</i> = .48, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .23, <i>F</i> = 77.78***					<i>R</i> = .22, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .05, <i>F</i> = 12.80**								
	Hyperactivity					Emotional								
Variables	B	SE	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		B	SE	<i>β</i>	T	<i>p</i>	95% CI	
						LL	UL						LL	UL
	Constant	3.40	0.27		12.43	<0.001	2.86	3.93	2.95	0.36		8.23	<0.001	2.24
Bullying	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.38	0.703	-0.02	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.05	0.76	0.445	-0.02	0.06
Victimization	0.04	0.01	0.17	2.90	<0.001	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.02	0.11	1.93	0.054	0.00	0.08
	<i>R</i> = .18, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .03, <i>F</i> = 9.008**					<i>R</i> = .15, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = .02, <i>F</i> = 5.65**								
	Prosocial					Externalizing								
	B	SE	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		B	SE	<i>β</i>	T	P	95% CI	
						LL	UL						LL	UL
	Constant	7.49	0.36		20.76	<0.001	6.79	8.20	3.68	0.46		7.93	<0.001	2.77
Bullying	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.28	0.776	-0.05	0.03	0.11	0.03	0.23	4.15	<0.001	0.06	0.16
Victimization	-0.04	0.02	-0.13	-2.18	0.030	-0.08	0.00	0.10	0.03	0.22	4.10	<0.001	0.05	0.15

$R = .14, R^2= .02, F = 5.97^{**}$						$R = .41, R^2= .17, F = 51.06^{**}$	
<i>Internalizing</i>							
						95% CI	
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p	LL	UL
Constant	5.67	0.56		10.20	<0.001	4.58	6.76
Bullying	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.61	0.543	-0.04	0.08
Victimization	0.09	0.03	0.18	3.06	0.002	0.03	0.15
$R = .20, R^2= .04, F = 11.00^{***}$							

*Note.* B = Unstandardized Regression coefficient; SE = Standard error; CI= Confidence Interval; LL= Lower Limit; UL= Upper Limit; p= level of significance.

\*\*\*p<.001.

## Discussion

The present study reveals significant gender differences in the prevalence and severity of behavioral and emotional problems among Pakistani school adolescents. Overall, boys demonstrate a higher likelihood of experiencing severe behavioral issues, with 29.6% falling into the Clinical category compared to 23.6% of girls. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that boys tend to exhibit more externalizing problems during adolescence (Burton et al., 2023; Hosozawa et al., 2021). Specifically, boys show a higher prevalence of clinically significant issues in conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems, corroborating existing literature on gender differences in externalizing behaviors (Batoool, 2023b; Inchley et al., 2020b; Malhi et al., 2014b; Shehzadi et al., 2019b). These differences may be attributed to a combination of biological factors, such as differences in brain structure and hormone levels (Paus et al., 2008), socialization practices that often encourage more active and assertive behaviors in boys (Endendijk et al., 2016), and potential differences in the development of self-regulation skills (Najmussaib & Mushtaq, 2023; Young et al., 2019).

Conversely, girls exhibit a slightly higher prevalence in the Borderline category (10.4% vs. 8.8% for boys) and show a higher prevalence of clinically significant emotional problems. This pattern is consistent with studies indicating that girls may be more prone to internalizing problems during adolescence (Sekaran et al., 2024; Yousaf et al., 2023). Factors contributing to this trend may include cognitive vulnerabilities such as a greater tendency towards rumination, the impact of pubertal timing, and higher levels of interpersonal stress (Ge et al., 2001; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Rudolph, 2002). Interestingly, the results also indicate that girls have a slightly higher prevalence in the Clinical category for prosocial behavior, suggesting more severe challenges in positive social interactions compared to boys. This unexpected finding warrants further investigation and may be influenced by measurement sensitivity, cultural factors specific to the Pakistani context. These gender differences underscore the importance of developing targeted, gender-sensitive approaches in assessment, intervention, and support strategies for adolescent mental health in Pakistan. Future research should explore the underlying mechanisms contributing to these gender differences, including biological, psychological, and social factors, while considering the cultural specificity of these findings.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate significant association between bullying behaviors and externalizing behavior problems such as conduct, hyperactivity and peer problems, as well as a positive correlation between victimization and internalizing behavior problems including emotional problems. These results are consistent with existing literature (De Sousa et al., 2021; Farmer et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2015), which suggests that individuals engaged in bullying are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors such as aggression, defiance, and disruptiveness. Research consistently shows a strong association between bullying and externalizing behaviors, particularly aggression. (Eastman et al., 2018) found that bullying victims were more likely to exhibit high levels of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms, with more frequent victimization increasing the odds of membership in these profiles. This is further supported by (Kaliampou et al., 2022), who emphasized the close connection between aggression and bullying, and the need for effective anti-bullying practices in schools. Prinstein & La Greca, (2004) highlighted the role of peer rejection in moderating the association between childhood aggression and adolescent outcomes, suggesting that social dynamics play a significant role in the development of externalizing behaviors. This externalization of problems may reflect underlying issues related to self-regulation, social interaction, or even home environment dynamics.

Similarly, another finding of victimization and emotional problems aligns with previous research indicating that victims of bullying often experience internalizing problems, including anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (De Sousa et al., 2021; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2019). Additionally, in our study, we observed a significant correlation between bullying and victimization behaviors. A recent meta-analysis (Walters, 2021) encompassing 22 longitudinal studies focused on adolescents aimed to explore the connection between bullying victimization and perpetration. The results indicate a robust and mutually influential longitudinal relationship between these two aspects, emphasizing the critical need to

investigate both directions in the context of bullying research. Moreover, these findings emphasize the importance of comprehensive strategies in educational settings that focus on both preventing bullying and supporting the psychological well-being of all students, particularly those who are involved in bullying, either as perpetrators or victims.

Furthermore, bullying was found to be negatively associated with prosocial behaviors whereas bully-victims show positive relation with prosocial behaviors. The inverse relationship between bullying and prosocial behaviors suggests that children who engage in bullying are less likely to exhibit behaviors characterized by empathy, cooperation, and helping others. Gini (2007) demonstrated that low levels of empathic responsiveness were associated with students' involvement in bullying others. In contrast, empathy was positively associated with actively helping victimized schoolmates. These findings align with the research that posits a deficit in social and emotional competencies among bullies.

In contrast, victims of bullying showed a positive correlation with prosocial behaviors. This could be interpreted as a coping mechanism or a form of social survival strategy, where victims may engage in more prosocial behaviors to gain social support or peer approval mitigate further victimization (Warden et al., 2003). Griesse and colleagues (Griesse et al., 2016) further highlighted the potential protective role of prosocial behaviors, with resilient victims displaying high and stable prosocial behaviors. Prosocial children and victims responded more constructively than did bullies to socially awkward situations, and bullies were less aware than prosocial children of the possible negative consequences of their solution strategies. These findings highlight a potential area for intervention, emphasizing the need for programs that not only discourage negative behaviors but also actively promote prosocial development.

The significant gender differences observed in our study, with boys reporting higher mean scores in both bullying and victimization compared to girls, resonate with a substantial body of research highlighting gender variations in these behaviors. Our findings underscore a higher involvement of boys in bullying activities and a greater likelihood of them being victims. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that boys are more often engaged in bullying, both as perpetrators and victims, than girls (Olweus, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001). The higher prevalence of bullying behaviors among boys could be attributed to social and cultural factors that often encourage aggressive behaviors as a means of asserting dominance or handling conflicts among boys (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Similarly, the increased victimization of boys may be linked to the nature of bullying they experience, which is often more direct and physical, making it more observable and reportable (P. K. Smith et al., 1999).

However, it is important to consider the nuances in these behaviors. While boys may be more involved in physical and overt forms of bullying, research indicates that girls are more likely to engage in relational or indirect bullying, such as social exclusion or spreading rumors, which may not have been captured as prominently in our study (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Moreover, the differences in reporting and perception of bullying behaviors based on gender could also play a role in these findings, with boys potentially more likely to report physical bullying, while girls might underreport or experience bullying in more subtle forms.

These findings highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches in anti-bullying interventions and policies. Understanding these gender-specific patterns can inform the development of targeted strategies that address the distinct ways in which boys and girls experience and engage in bullying. It also underscores the importance of fostering an environment in schools that discourages traditional gender norms that may perpetuate these behaviors, emphasizing instead communication, empathy, and respectful conflict resolution.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Despite its comprehensive approach, the study faces limitations due to its cross-sectional design and the use of self-reported and teacher reported data. Furthermore, the utilization of self-reported data may be susceptible to several biases, including social desirability bias and recollection bias. Further research may

benefit from the integration of a multi-methodological framework, such as peer reviews and observational techniques, to augment the dependability of the results.

### **Implications**

In conclusion, our study provides important insights into bullying, victimization, and bystander behaviors among Pakistani schoolchildren. The implications of our study are far-reaching, highlighting the need for well-rounded intervention programs. Such programs should focus on a range of factors including externalizing and internalizing behaviors, the impact of positive parenting, family relationships, and the school environment. Recognizing the interconnectedness of these elements, our findings suggest that effective strategies should not only address individual behavior but also foster healthy interactions within families and schools. Future research should focus on examining the long-term effectiveness of interventions targeting these areas, while also expanding our understanding of cultural factors in bullying behavior. Overall, this study contributes significantly to our understanding of bullying in the Pakistani context and paves the way for developing more comprehensive anti-bullying strategies.

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