

BULLYING, SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG SCHOOL STUDENTS: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study's major goal was to study the connection between bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress among school students. To investigate the relationships between the variables, a correlational study approach was used. The non-probability convenience sampling method was used to choose a sample of 300 students, ages 11 to 16. The Distress Questionnaire-5 (Batterham et al., 2016), the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the Multidimensional Bullying Victimization Scale (Harbin, 2016) were used to measure the variables. Data were analyzed using SPSS through Pearson product-moment correlation, linear regression, and independent sample t- tests. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between bullying and psychological distress, while bullying was negatively associated with self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem showed a significant negative relationship with psychological distress. Both bullying and self-esteem significantly predicted psychological distress. The demographics such as age, gender, education, school type, socioeconomic status, birth order and family system were also examined for their influence on the variables. However, findings showed no significant differences between male and female students in terms of bullying, self-esteem, or psychological distress. The implications of these findings highlight the need for school-based intervention programs that focus on anti-bullying strategies and self-esteem enhancement. These initiatives can help mitigate psychological distress among students and foster a more supportive and emotionally healthy school climate.

I. INTRODUCTION

Students are confronted with a number of obstacles which may have a profound effect on their wellbeing and achievement in the modern setting. Among these challenges, bullying, low self-esteem and psychological distress are particularly disturbing. Bullying could have a destructive influence on a student's feeling of self-worth, often leading to reactions such as isolation, anxiety, and helplessness. Such experiences can damage self-esteem and increase psychological distress. The current study seeks to look into the relation between bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress in school students.

Bullying

Bullying defined as intentional, adverse, and frequent conduct of one other citizen with a view to causing injury, fear, or distress to another person (Olweus, 1993). Similarly, Smith et al. (2004) describes it as "an aggressive behavior involving repeated acts against victims who are less able to defend themselves." The bullying may acquire

different forms, each with distinct features and effects on the victim. Physical bullying includes behaviors such as hitting, pushing, or otherwise damaging property which usually leads to visible damage (Olweus, 1993). Verbal bullying, including name calling, abuse, and risk, which can be equally damaging to a human's self-esteem and mental health (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Relational bullying refers to conduct that targets a person's social bonds, such as spreading rumors, expulsion, or manipulating them (Salmivalli, 2010). Lastly, cyberbullying includes the use of electronic devices or online networks in order to harass, threaten, or circulate injurious information towards different people (Kowalski et al., 2014). The repercussions of the bullying may extend beyond the immediate victim, moving their competence to create a strong social bond. A student with prolonging bullying may have self-esteem problems that prevent them from trusting other citizens or engaging in constructive dialogue with their peers. This interference in social development may increase loneliness and distress.

Self-Esteem

The term "self-esteem" describes a person's overall view of their own value or worth. It is a self-evaluation technique that people use to assess their worth based on their personal achievements and external reactions (Rosenberg, 1965). Good psychological wellness is intimately linked to high self-esteem, whereas emotional distress, anxiety, and depression are frequently related to poor SE (Baumeister et al., 2003). Peer relationships, particularly during adolescence, are crucial in forming SE. Adolescence is a crucial development stage where people become excessively self-conscious and delicate in order to receive social feedback. Adolescents who experience peer rejection or bullying are prone to experience low SE. These events may have long-term effects, affecting not only mental health but also interpersonal competence and strength. Numerous studies have demonstrated that how people handle difficulties, is significantly influenced by their sense of self-confidence. Those with increased self-esteem, typically have better mental health and greater resilience (Crocker & Knight, 2005), while those with lower self-esteem are more at risk of distress.

Psychological Distress

The term "Psychological distress" is a broad spectrum of mental sufferings, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and general irritation. It described as a state of psychological and emotional strain which affects a person in a number of aspects of their lives, ranging from everyday functioning to long-term mental wellbeing. Unlike temporary reactions to stressors, psychological distress may develop chronically if it is not managed, causing significant damage to life satisfaction and general health (Moussavi et al., 2007). "Adolescence" is a particular time in terms of the emergence of psychological distress due to the many developmental obstacles that people deal with during this age. Adolescents must navigate the academic pressure, peer relationships, and self-identity while seeking greater autonomy within their families. These developmental demands may exacerbate feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Due to their rapid developmental changes, adolescents frequently have heightened emotional sensitivity, which makes them more vulnerable to stress and environmental stressors. The coping mechanism significantly influences the manner in which people experience and manage psychological distress. The study by Crocker and Knight (2005), observed that people with high SE and robust coping mechanisms were less likely to suffer psychological distress, as they were better equipped to manage difficult conditions and recover from a setback.

Theoretical Framework

According to "social learning theory" of Albert Bandura, behaviors like bullying and other similar behaviours are picked up through imitation, reinforcement, and observation. Victims of bullying might end up engaging in negative behaviors themselves and consequently develop negative beliefs about themselves, feelings of guilt, and low personal efficacy. Cognitive Behavior Theory proposed by Beck believes that our thoughts are directly influential-by- means of our feelings and behaviors. Most of the time when individuals are exposed to negative experiences such as bullying, they may form maladaptive thoughts like 'I am not lovable,' which can lead to emotional disturbances such as anxiety or depression. This theory explains how both bullying and low self-esteem can contribute to psychological distress, such as anxiety or depression. According to concept of Morris Rosenberg, 'self-esteem' is crucial for the psychological health of individuals. People's interpretations and reactions to life events, especially social pressures, are greatly influenced by their sense of "self- worth". Individuals with diminished SE may be more vulnerable to psychological distress, whereas those with high level of SE may be more resilient.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large literature on the connection between bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress. However, there is limited local research on this topic and not all of these variables have been studied together.

International Researches

Hassan et al. (2024) conducted study on the effect of school bullying on physical health, psychological well-being, and self-esteem among adolescents, in four public schools located in the city of Minia, Egypt. The descriptive cross-sectional design was used. The sample consisted of 400 students from two boys and two girls' school. According to the results, over seventy percent of the students experienced bullying, and over half of them had low self-esteem and psychological well-being. The findings showed that bullying had a positive correlation with physical symptoms such as headaches but a negative correlation with psychological well-being and self-esteem. Balluerka et al. (2023) studied the relationship between childhood and adolescent's depression, anxiety and bullying victimization, the role that self-esteem plays as a mediator. The sample comprised 550 Basque Country individuals who were between the ages of 10 and 17. The findings, which were examined using structural equation modeling, show that being the target of bullying significantly increases the probability of exhibiting anxiety and depressive symptoms. Additionally, because the mediating effects were larger in this area, it was shown that SE serve as a mediator between bullying and feeling negative psychological impacts, particularly with regard to depression.

Zhong et al. (2021) conducted study to examine the relationship between children's depression symptoms and bullying victimization, with self-esteem serving as a mediating factor. The longitudinal approach was used in that study. The sample comprised of 4043 Chinese primary school students in grades 3 and 4, who were evaluated five times every six months. The results demonstrated a significant positive correlation between the two variables—bullying victimization and depressive symptoms. Additionally, research demonstrated that the association between bullying victimization and depressed symptoms is mediated by self-esteem, suggesting that poor self-esteem exacerbates the negative impact of bullying on depressive symptoms. Arhin et al. (2019) studied bullying victimization and psychological distress among Ghana school-age adolescents. The methodology was cross-sectional. The sample was consisted of 198 students selected from southern Ghana schools and given self-report questionnaires evaluating psychological distress and bullying victimization. The results showed that bullying victimization was positively correlated with all areas of psychological distress, and that the sole meaningful predictor of bullying victimization was depression.

Indigenous Researches

Safa (2025) investigated the intricate relation among adolescent psychological discomfort, self-concept, and bullying experiences. It was a correlational study. The sample included 250 students, ages 13 to 19, from private schools and universities. The researchers discovered that certain types of bullying, such as verbal abuse, social manipulation, and property attacks, were substantially and favorably connected with psychological distress, especially signs of anxiety and depression. The study also showed that a negative self-concept was highly linked to anxiety and modestly associated with depression, underscoring the psychological vulnerabilities brought about by a negative self-perception. Zulfiqar et al. (2024) conducted research at University of Sargodha to look into the link between "bullying" and "self-esteem" among students. The study aimed to assess how bullying affects various aspects of self-esteem, including self-image, confidence, and personal motivation. The research was designed quantitatively and descriptively. The sample was of 208 students. The data was collected through online questionnaires. The result was that bullying experience have a significant negative correlation with self-esteem, which means that the more severe the bullying, the lower the self-esteem of the victim.

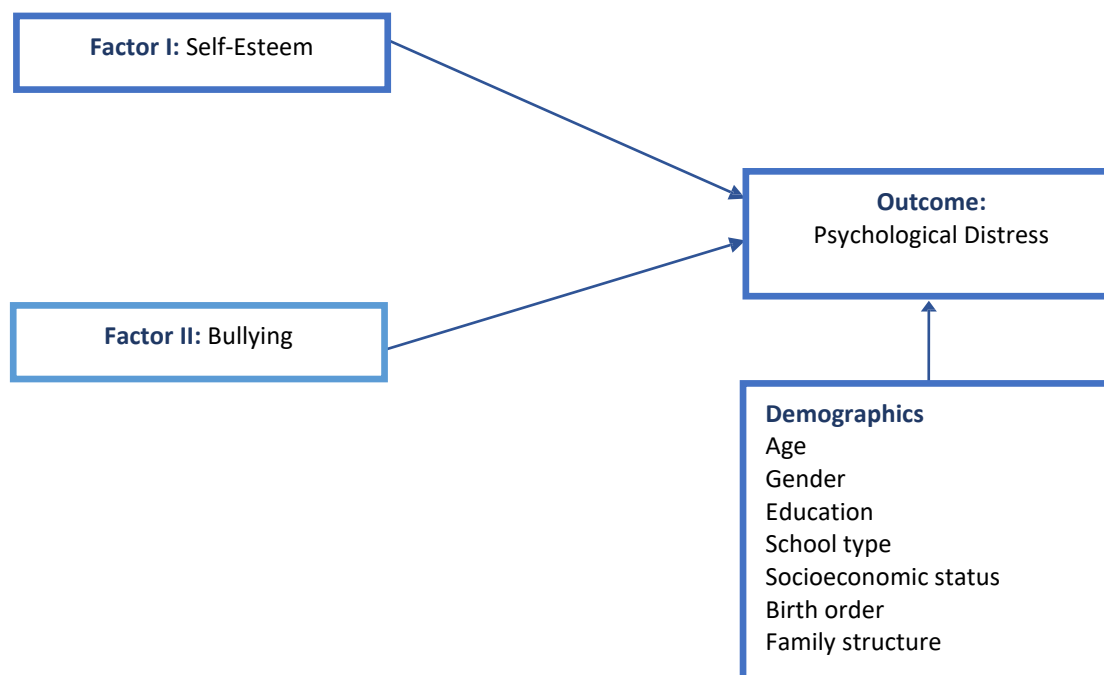
Batool (2023) conducted a study to explore the "relationship between bullying victimization with self-esteem and psychosocial problems in the Pakistani adolescents". The sample of the study consisted of 499 adolescents, whose ages ranged from 13 to 17, attending public schools in the capital city Lahore, Pakistan. The study discovered a positive correlation between bullying victims and psychological issues and a negative impact on self-esteem. Self-esteem partially moderated the effects of bullying on psychosocial difficulties, even though it was also negatively correlated with psychosocial problems. Khizar et al. (2018) investigated the psychological effects of peer

victimization on adolescents, paying particular attention to psychological well-being, psychological distress, and self-esteem. The sample consisted of 200 students aged 10 to 17 from educational institutions in Multan, Pakistan. According to the findings, adolescents who were victimized by their peers reported far higher psychological discomfort as well as poorer levels of self-worth and general wellbeing. These results highlight that bullying negatively impacts children's emotional and psychological development. Significant differences by gender were also noted in the study, indicating that male and female adolescents may internalize and experience victimization in different ways. This review consistently shows that bullying negatively impacts self-esteem and contributes to increased psychological problems.

Rationale

Bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress are serious factors affecting students' psychological and emotional health. Any form of 'bullying' causes damage to the student's self-image and mental health. The victim of bullying often experiences worthless and helpless, which typically reduces their self-esteem and increases a spectrum of psychological distress. While the existing literature that seeks to understand the individual effect of bullying on mental health, very little has focused on how bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress interact, particularly in a defined socio-cultural context. Research in Pakistan, where mental health issues are stigmatized and underreported, lacks empirical data that can delve such relationships in the school context. Culture, social, and institutional factors may further affect how students experience and cope with bullying and the shaping of their self-esteem in such conditions. Therefore, it becomes important to study this interplay between bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress in schools in Pakistan for comprehensive understanding of student well-being. This research will contribute to enhance the development of contextually relevant therapeutic or preventive strategies against a general decline in the incidence of bullying, besides enhancing mental resilience, self-esteem, and emotional support systems in students.

Figure I: Hypothetical Model



Objectives

1. To investigate the association between bullying and psychological distress in school students.
2. To explore the link between bullying and self-esteem.
3. To examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress.
4. To identify the predictor of psychological distress in school students.
5. To explore the potential gender differences in bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress in school students.

Hypotheses

1. There is likely to be a significant relationship between bullying and psychological distress.
2. There is likely to be a significant relationship between bullying and self-esteem.
3. There is likely to be a significant relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress.
4. Bullying and self-esteem is likely to predict psychological distress in school students.
5. There will be significant differences in bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress in male and female school students.

III. METHOD

Participants

A correlational research design was used to study the relationship between the variables. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to collect data from school students. The sample comprised of 300 school students. The students' age range was 11-16 years, with both 150 male and 150 female students. The sample consisted of 300 school students aged 11–16 years. The largest proportion of participants was aged 13–14 years (40.0%), and males and females were equally represented (50.0% each). Most participants were enrolled in 9th class (33.3%) and attended government schools (53.3%). Regarding socioeconomic status, the majority belonged to the middle class (70.7%). More than half of the participants lived in nuclear families (54.7%), while middle children represented the largest birth-order group (38.7%). Participants within the age range of 11-16 years, both genders and students from both government and private schools were included in the sample. Primary school students were excluded. Moreover, individuals who were not enrolled in a school and with cognitive disabilities that affect their ability to comprehend or respond to the questionnaire were excluded from the sample.

Measures

Following assessment measures were used to get the information from the participants during the collection of data. The demographic sheet was used to obtain informed consent and information such as age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, school type and family structure of the participants. [I] Multidimensional Bullying Victimization Scale: This scale was developed by Harbin (2016), to measure bullying in adolescents. It consists of 24 items to measure bullying on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) 1 (sometimes) 2 (often) 3 (very often). Reliability findings in the previous studies were good, thereby suggesting that scale reliability is good, to evaluate the bullying experiences. [II] Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: This scale was constructed by Rosenberg (1965). It gives information about what a person considers as their own value and regard for oneself. It is a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", consisting of 10 items. In this scale, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 items are reverse scored. Its simplicity, reliability, and excellent psychometric properties have established it as the standard instrument in psychological studies, clinical assessments, and social science research with diverse populations and cultures. [III] Distress Questionnaire-5 Scale: Batterham et al. (2016). It is a short self-report measure intended to assess general psychological distress in community and clinical settings. It comprises of five items that assess symptoms related to anxiety, depression, and emotional strain. It is a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often) to 5 (Always).

Procedure

Prior to data collection, confirmation was obtained via official websites that all scales used in the study were free to use. The age range was 11-16 years. It was correlational research design. Non-probability convenience sampling was used as a sample approach. The male and female students were selected from different schools. They were given the instructions beforehand, and the confidentiality of their information and responses was assured. Participants were asked to complete the demographic information sheet first, then the questionnaire. After the completion of questionnaire, the participants' contributions were acknowledged and sincerely praised. The data analytic strategy began with reliability analysis using Cronbach's alphas for scales. In the second step, Pearson product-moment correlation was used to assess the relationship between demographics, bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress. To discover if bullying and self-esteem are predictors of psychological distress, linear regression analysis was used. Independent sample t-test was run to comparison.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into consideration and upheld before, during and after the completion of the research, which includes: 1. The scales chosen for the study variable were having their free to use claim on their respective websites. 2. The informed consent of participants was obtained after explaining the purpose and procedure of study. 3. The participants were assured of their right of their freedom to decline to provide any data against their will and to leave the study at any moment. 4 Privacy and confidentiality of participants' data were ensured during and after the data collection.

IV. RESULTS

The outcomes of this study are discussed to explore the relationship between bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress in school students. The data analysis process began with reliability analysis for scales. The second step involved evaluating the relationship between bullying, self-esteem, psychological distress and demographic variables using Pearson product-moment correlation. To determine if demographics, bullying, and self-esteem are predictors of psychological distress in school students, linear regression analysis was used.

Reliability Analysis

Following are reliability and descriptive analyses for each assessment measure, actual and potential ranges of variables shown in Tables 1.

Table I: Psychometric Properties

Variables	n	M	SD	Range		α
				Actual	Potential	
Bullying	24	54.10	23.767	48-72	24-96	.99
Self-esteem	10	26.00	9.954	10-32	10-40	.92
Psychological Distress	05	15.11	7.114	10-20	5-25	.98

Note. M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; α = Cronbach alpha

The reliability of each assessment measure was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha. For bullying scale, the reliability was .99, for self-esteem scale reliability was .92, and psychological distress scale was .98. All bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress scales showed excellent internal reliability.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis

Pearson Product Moment Correlations were carried out on demographics and variables.

Table II: Pearson Product Moment Correlation Indicates Association among Demographic Variables, Bullying, Self-Esteem, Psychological Distress (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	-	.114*	.937**	.358**	.358**	.089	-.263**	-.213**	-.264**	-.207**
2. Gender		-	.096	-.154**	-.061	-.063	.060	.048	.088	.113
3. Education			-	.390**	.396**	.139*	-.283**	-.232**	-.260**	-.226**
4. School type				-	.349**	.049	-.194**	-.334**	-.288**	-.281**
5. Socioeconomic Status					-	.107	-.243**	-.176**	-.148*	-.133*
6. Birth order						-	-.033	.020	-.030	-.055
7. Family structure							-	.120*	.131*	.121*
8. Bullying								-	-.882**	.889**
9. Self-Esteem									-	-.894**
10. Psychological distress										-

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

To assess the correlation between the study variables of bullying, self-esteem, psychological distress, and demographic variables, a Pearson product correlation analysis was done. Age, demonstrated a strong and

significant positive correlation with education and is also moderately positively correlated with socio-economic status and school type. On the contrary, age showed significant negative correlations with family structure, bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress. Education showed significant positive correlation with socio-economic status and school type while negative correlation with family structure, bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress. Family structure also showed negative correlation with age, education, and socio-economic status. Results showed that bullying significantly and positively correlated with psychological distress, and significantly and negatively correlated with self-esteem. Additionally, self-esteem was significantly and negatively correlated with psychological distress.

Linear Regression

To check the prediction of bullying and self-esteem on psychological distress among school students.

Table III: Linear Regression Analysis of Bullying and Self-esteem as Predictor of Psychological Distress

Predictors	B	SE	β	95% CI		P
				LL	UL	
Age Group	.544	.464	.078	-.369	1.457	.242
Gender of Students	.683	.337	.048	.019	1.346	.044
Education	-.569	.487	-.080	-1.527	.389	.243
School Type	.274	.381	.019	-.476	1.023	.473
Socioeconomic Status	.363	.338	.028	-.303	1.029	.284
Birth Order	-.337	.170	-.046	-.671	-.003	.048
Family Structure	.079	.343	.006	-.596	.755	.817
Bullying	.142	.015	.473	.112	.171	.000
Self-Esteem	-.343	.036	-.479	-.413	-.272	.000
R ²	.851					
F	183.590					.000

Note. B = Unstandardized Regression Coefficient; β = Standardized Regression Coefficient; SE= Standardized Error

Linear regression analysis was conducted using SPSS Version 25 to examine whether bullying, self-esteem, and demographic variables predict psychological distress. The results demonstrated that bullying was a significant positive predictor of psychological distress, while self-esteem was a significant negative predictor. The findings also indicate that gender was significant positive predictor and birth order was significant negative predictor of psychological distress. Other variables including age group, education, school type, socio-economic status, and family structure were not significantly predicting psychological distress.

Independent Sample T-Test

To find out gender differences in study variables, T-test was run.

Table IV: Independent Sample T-Test Shows gender difference for Bullying, Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress (N=300)

Variables	Males		Females		t(298)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Bullying	53.07	24.46	55.13	23.08	.75	.45
Self-Esteem	25.22	10.29	26.76	9.57	1.34	.15
Psychological Distress	14.35	7.50	15.86	6.64	1.84	.06

Note. CI= Confidence Interval; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; LL= Lower Limit; UL= Upper Limit

The results revealed no meaningful gender differences in any of the three variables. Although slight differences in mean scores were noted, the effect sizes were small, indicating that males and females reported similar levels of bullying victimization, self-esteem, and psychological distress.

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to look into the relation between school student's psychological distress, bullying, and self-esteem. In particular, the study aimed to assess whether bullying and self-esteem contribute to psychological distress, and how these relationships are reflected in the school environment. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a significant relationship between bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress in school students. The outcomes of correlation of present study demonstrated that there is significant correlation between bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress (see table 4.2). This shows that students who reported bullying also reported lower self-esteem and higher psychological distress. These results correspond with earlier study by Ilyas et al. (2021) that looked at the connection between psychological distress and bullying/victimization in Pakistani secondary schools. According to the study, students who experience bullying / victimization claim to feel psychologically distressed. Similarly, Jamir et al. (2014) showed that Bullying victimization was strongly correlated with self-esteem and depressed symptoms. Their findings offer more evidence that bullying can significantly harm students' psychological wellness by decreasing their sense of feelings of worth and raising their emotional distress.

It was hypothesized that bullying and self-esteem is likely to predict psychological distress in school students. The current study showed that, bullying and self-esteem were significant predictors of psychological distress (see table 4.3). According to this research, school student's psychological distress is largely influenced by how they deal with bullying and their perception of self. Study by Mungala and Nabuzoka (2020) showed that bullying experiences, especially social bullying, significantly predicted low self-esteem and elevated levels of depression among school students in Zambia. The study of Balluerka et al. (2023) that explored the connection between bullying victimization, depression and anxiety in childhood and adolescence, with self-esteem serving as a mediator, lends further support to these findings. According to their findings, being the victim of bullying greatly raises the probability of exhibiting signs of anxiety and depression. Additionally, they found that the association between bullying and depression, in particular, was mediated by self-esteem. Furthermore, it was hypothesized there is likely to be a significant gender difference in bullying, self-esteem and psychological distress in school students. The present study identified no significant gender differences in bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress among school students (see table 4). These results imply that bullying's psychological impacts and associated emotional difficulties are not gender-specific, and that boys and girls may be equally susceptible to its consequences. The current study's findings align with Espelage and Swearer (2003) study's finding noticed no difference in the psychological distress linked to bullying between boys and girls. Similarly, Bhau et al. (2020) found that self-esteem among Jammu City school students did not differ significantly by gender. This implies that self-esteem levels during adolescence may not be accurately predicted by gender.

Limitations and Suggestions

Following are the limitations and suggestions of this research. The study only used self-report measures, which could be biased by false self-perception or social desirability. Future research may benefit from incorporating teacher or peer reports and observational methods to strengthen the findings' validity. The data was collected from students in Lahore, making the sample less representative of the broader Pakistani population. Future studies should include data from other regions of Pakistan to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Psychological distress was measured as a general construct. Future research could examine specific aspects such as anxiety, depression, or stress separately to identify more targeted patterns of influence.

VI. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the outcomes of the study, we may conclude that there is a significant relation between bullying, self-esteem, and psychological distress in school students. It is also concluded that bullying and self-esteem are significant predictors of psychological distress.

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