Impact of Peer Victimization on In-School Adolescents: Understanding, Prevention and Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

Globally, the educational settings are faced with a high prevalence of peer victimization with its obvious consequences, which undermine the academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being of the students. In Nigeria, this phenomenon remains underexplored, yet its implications are profound. This paper discusses the impact of peer victimization on in-school adolescents, specifically on understanding, prevention, and intervention strategies. It describes varying forms of peer victimization via verbal, physical, relational, and attacks on property. The prevalence of peer victimization is high, with notable contributing factors including individual, family, environment, peer relationship, and school environment factors. The effects of peer victimization on adolescents include psychological, academic, and social development problems. The significance of addressing peer victimization will help in maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment, reducing the risk of mental health problems, low self-esteem, and improved academic performances. The strategies for prevention and interventions within the Nigerian context are discussed. The paper recommends the need for positive school climate, training educators and students on recognizing and addressing victimization, and providing resources for victims. These approaches would be instrumental in creating a more inclusive environment that would promote the well-being and academic achievement of all students.

Keywords: Peer, Victimization, Strategies, Prevention, Intervention

Introduction

Peer victimization, commonly referred to as bullying, continues to be a major concern among adolescents in schools worldwide, significantly impacting their mental well-being, academic achievements, and social growth. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) highlight that peer victimization is a serious public health concern that affects adolescents in educational settings. It is estimated that between 100 and 600 million adolescents are directly harmed by peer victimization (Gonze Lez-Cabrera et al., 2021). Bullying that occurs among peers is identified as peer victimization.

Peers are individuals who are of similar age and likely reside close enough to interact either in person or online. According to Satrock (2019), peers are adolescents in school who are alike in age, status, or abilities and have shared traits or experiences, particularly in a social or educational environment. In this sense, peers are age group members who possess similar attributes or are in comparable academic situations. Peer victimization, as defined by Kawabata (2020), involves bullying behaviours exhibited by peers. It represents a deliberate act of intimidation among peers that can manifest in physical, verbal, or relational forms, often linked to mental health issues such as depression, loneliness, and self-harming behaviours (Nunez et

al., 2021). Peer victimization denotes a purposeful attempt to harm peers through verbal, relational, or physical means, or by damaging property. Various types of peer victimization exist, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying, all of which can impact the psychological and social well-being of adolescents in school settings.

According to research, bullying victims are more likely to suffer from psychological issues such as anxiety, despair, and low self-esteem (Atilola, 2017). Additionally, bullying can have a negative impact on academic performance since victims may become less motivated and involved in school-related activities. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that students who report experiencing severe peer victimization or being physically, verbally, relationally, or cyberbullied are more likely to suffer from mental and physical health issues such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, psychological well-being, internalized and externalized problems, and risky behaviours (Siddiqe & Mondol, 2020); Fung, 2021; Arif-Khan et al., 2019). According to a study by Siddique and Mondol (2020), respondents' long-term reactions to relational victimization include feeling alone, having low confidence and self-esteem, avoiding school, and having trouble focusing. Peer victimization was very common and can lead to trauma, anxiety, and depression in those who experience it. According to Halliday et al. (2021), psychological issues such as anxiety and depression were prevalent among victims. According to the prevalence data, 46.79% of people in urban areas and 53.21% of those in rural areas were victims. Students attending government schools in remote areas were shown to have a higher prevalence (Tippangoudna et al., 2020). Peer victimization affects school-age adolescents more in rural than in metropolitan areas, according to Hang et al. (2024). According to Biswas et al. (2022), bullying victimization throughout adolescence was substantially linked to bad peer relationships, poor household functioning, and poor school connectivity. According to Raji et al. (2019), bullying victimization was influenced by a number of factors, including being in a junior class, attending a boarding school, having a friend who makes decisions for you, abstaining from smoking, and being unaware of the school's bullying policy. According to Li et al. (2024), the issue of peer victimization at school can persist into adulthood. According to Aidomojie (2022), bullying behaviour among students can be influenced by peers and the media, and excessive exposure to violent media content may encourage someone to engage in bullying. In addition, Aidomojie et al. (2022) suggested that in order to lessen bullying behaviour, principals should make sure that students are deterred from copying the behaviour patterns of their peer group by providing counseling services. In order to lessen bullying among students, they also suggested that principals counsel parents to restrict the media content their kids can view at home. According to Ojugo and Ojeli (2017), school officials should bolster and strictly execute anti-bullying policies and procedures.

Peer victimization can have a negative impact on students' academic achievement, social relationships, and overall quality of life. It can also result in long-term health issues, such as psychological and emotional problems.

Peer victimization has significant implications, although its effects are still poorly understood. Based on this, this paper reviews the effects of peer victimization on adolescents enrolled in school, including comprehension, prevention, and intervention techniques. Therefore, it aims to increase knowledge about peer victimization among teenagers enrolled in school and offer practical solutions for establishing a more secure and welcoming learning environment. The goal of preventive measures is to lessen the incidence of peer victimization by, among other things, parental involvement, school policy, and educational initiatives. Furthermore, to turn preventive plans into actual activities, intervention measures should be implemented in conjunction with preventive tactics. Addressing current instances of peer victimization and

providing assistance to impacted individuals via counseling, support networks, and other means is known as intervention.

Peer victimization among adolescents in school can be addressed by parents, legislators, and educators working together to limit its effects and create safer and more supportive learning environments for all students. This can be done by understanding the phenomenon, putting prevention strategies into practice, and offering effective interventions by educators.

Types of Victimization by Peers

Cyberbullying, relational victimization, verbal victimization, and physical victimization are the four categories of peer victimization. Peer victimization in schools can be divided into four categories, according to Igbaede-Edwards et al. (2023): physical, verbal, social manipulation, and property attack.

- A direct physical attack on a pupil, such as a slap, kick, punch, hit, and so forth, is known as physical victimization. According to Cho et al. (2022), physical victimization includes, among other things, striking and threatening. Direct physical assault or hostility, such as striking, punching, slapping, kicking, or causing damage to the victim's property, constitutes physical victimization (Polanco et al., 2023). According to Igbaede-Edwards (2023), physical bullying, which includes kicking, beating, and stealing property, is the most prevalent kind of bullying. According to Biswas (2022), boys are more likely to be physically abused, which leads many of them to be forced into cults where they seek safety.
- According to Arif et al. (2019), verbal victimization includes using words to harm another individual, such as teasing, insulting, and name-calling. Low self-esteem and, in certain situations, depression are the results of verbal abuse. According to Igbaede-Edwards (2020) and Siddique and Mondol (2020), verbal victimization—which includes calling names or making fun of families or tribes—is the most prevalent kind of peer victimization. Some schools have laws that specifically prohibit fighting, which may be the reason why verbal bullying is so common there. The majority of victims in relationships are women.

Excluding someone from social events, destroying relationships, or spreading rumours are examples of relational victimization. Relational victimization is characterized by Cho et al. (2022) as peer control through relationship harm and rumor propagation. Relational peer victimization can lead to low self-esteem, low concentration, school avoidance, and loneliness (Siddique & Mondol, 2020). According to Siddique and Mondol (2020), 36.5% of those surveyed said that victimization caused their friendship to terminate.

Cyberbullying is when someone uses a digital platform to harass or injure another person, as through exclusion, rumours, or threats sent online. Stated differently, it is harassment via digital channels, such as messaging applications and social media. Cyberbullying, according to Olweus and Limber (2018), is a type of bullying in which threatening behaviour is inflicted on a person via electronic channels such as forums, email, media sites, and instant messaging. According to Gohah et al. (2023), cyberbullying is defined as a recurring behaviour in which an individual uses internet-based tools or platforms, such as a smartphone, email, or website, to harass, hurt, or abuse others. Ray et al. (2024) provided a standardized definition of cyberbullying as the use of technology to manipulate and exploit vulnerable victims by

threatening them repeatedly and employing online violence or harassment to cause psychological and emotional distress, which can sometimes result in physical assault.

Peer victimization, whether verbal, physical, or relational, among adolescents in school is concerning since it has been connected to a number of severe concerns, including low academic achievement, low school involvement, mental health disorders, and harmful behaviours that persist into adulthood. Teenagers who have experienced severe peer victimization are more likely to experience physical and mental health issues, loneliness, poor sleep, low psychological well-being, internalized and externalized problems, and risky behaviour, according to Siddique and Mondol (2020) and Fing et al. (2021). Teenagers who may have been victims of peer victimization in school may not be interested in their studies or perform poorly, according to Gohah et al. (2023). Nonetheless, peer victimization is very common (Ehekal & Ladd, 2017).

The Frequency of Victimization by Peers

Studies on the incidence of peer victimization revealed startling numbers, with teenagers reporting experiencing bullying in a variety of ways. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2019), referenced in Li et al. (2024), roughly one-third of students worldwide (32%) have been victims of peer abuse at school, with victimization rates varying from 7.1% through 7.4% across 144 nations and regions. According to Gonzalez-Cabren et al. (2021), violence damages between 100 and 600 million teenagers annually worldwide. According to the Global School Students Health survey of pre-adolescents and adolescents in 83 low-, middle-, and high-income countries in the six World Health Organization (WHO) regions, peer victimization was highly prevalent, with the highest prevalence reported in the Eastern Mediterranean region (45.1%) and Africa (43.1%), while the lowest prevalence was found in Europe (Ghardallouri et al., 2024). Additionally, the results showed that, at 42.7%, North Africa is the second most common region for peer victimization. According to Biswas et al. (2020), the frequency in Africa varies between 16 and 63 per cent. The prevalence of peer victimization appears to be high in Africa. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019), bullying among adolescents in schools is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, with rates of 48.5 per cent, 40 per cent, 62.8 per cent, and 54.6 per cent reported in North Africa, Malawi, Ghana, Zambia, and Sierra Leone.

According to Igbaede-Edwards et al. (2023), the prevalence rate of peer victimization in Nigeria is estimated to be between 21 and 82 per cent. It seems that one of the main issues affecting teenagers in school is peer victimization. According to Raji (2019), peer victimization is very common among teenagers enrolled in school. Peer victimization among adolescents in school is 85% due to physical violence and 50% due to psychological violence, according to a nationwide study on violence carried out by the Federal Ministry of Education in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007 as cited in IIgbaede–Edwardset al., 2023). The results emphasize how common peer victimization is in schools and how urgent it is to address this problem.

Factors that Contribute to Peer Victimization among Teenagers in School

The causes of peer victimization among teenagers in school are a serious problem that has a number of detrimental effects on them. The elements were derived from the school environment, peer interactions, home environment, and individual considerations.

·   Adolescents in school who have low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression tend to withdraw socially are at a higher risk of being victimized by their peers (Hawker & Boulton, 2018). Personal characteristics such as physical frailty and being perceived as 'different' from others raise the chances of experiencing peer victimization (Griffin & Gross, 2019).

In-school adolescents from poor family relations, lack of parental monitoring and exposure to family violence increase the risk of victimization. According to Espelage (2016), families that lack parental support and monitoring can make adolescents more susceptible to peer victimization.

In-school adolescents with few friends can contribute to victimization. In-school adolescents that lack supportive friends are at greater risk of peer victimization. In addition, peer rejection also increases the risk of peer victimization ((Juvonen & Graham, 014).

Peer victimization among teenagers in school is exacerbated in schools with a bad school atmosphere, a lack of teacher support, and insufficient anti-bullying measures. Peer victimization may be more common in schools with bad school climates and inadequate measures to combat bullying behaviour (Guera et al., 2018).

Having good communication skills, a decent school climate, and a high sense of self-worth are protective factors against peer victimization. Teenagers at school who have a good sense of self-worth and others won't suffer harm. They do not aid in the victimization of peers

Effects of Peer Victimization on Adolescents in Schools

Peer victimization causes psychological issues, scholastic difficulties, social and behavioral issues, physical health issues, and long-term consequences for many teenagers in school (Atilola, 2017). It is impossible to overestimate the negative effects of peer victimization on teenagers' well-being. According to research, bullying victims are more likely to suffer from psychological issues such as anxiety, despair, and low self-esteem (Atilola, 2017). Additionally, bullying can have a negative impact on academic performance since victims may become less motivated and involved in school-related activities.

Simply put, a psychological problem is any component of human behaviour, widely defined to encompass thought, perception, emotion, and behaviour patterns that make people unhappy or make it difficult for them to perform in significant areas of their lives. Adolescents who are severely victimized by their peers at school may develop psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Adomeh (2020) found that adolescents who were victimized by their peers in school had poorer self-esteem. According to Lee (2020), teenagers who experienced peer victimization were more likely to suffer from depression. Peer victimization caused anxiety, which is characterized by feelings of worry, apprehension, or fear, to interfere with everyday tasks for teenagers at school.

Peer victimization is also linked to academic challenges. Adolescents in school who experience victimization from their peers often exhibit decreased academic achievement, struggle with concentration, tend to avoid school, and have a higher likelihood of dropping out. Victimized students may dread attending school for fear of facing further victimization. Ehekal and Ladd (2017) found that peer victimization is connected to a variety of negative outcomes, including poor academic performance and low levels of school engagement. The fear of victimization can lead students to skip school, which negatively impacts their academic success.

Additionally, social and behavioral issues are significant consequences of peer victimization among school-aged adolescents. Such victimization is often associated with challenges in building trusting relationships and a heightened sense of isolation. Hawker and Boulton (2018) noted that those who are victimized by peers often display increased aggression, engage in antisocial behaviour, and struggle with forming healthy relationships. Social maladjustment can result in difficulties in social interactions even in later stages of life.

Health issues are also one of the consequences of peer victimization among adolescents in school. Intense victimization can result in physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pains, and difficulties sleeping. Takizawa et al. (2014) noted that the stress resulting from peer victimization can lead to headaches, sleep issues, and fatigue, which may persist into adulthood. According to Biebl et al. (2017), physical health issues can deteriorate if victimization persists over time.

The Importance of Tackling Peer Victimization in Schools

First, it contributes to fostering a safe and nurturing educational setting, which is crucial for both academic achievement and emotional health. Educational and mental health professionals play a vital role in establishing a secure and supportive atmosphere for every student (Jacobs et al., 2019). Next, it lowers the likelihood of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem stemming from experiences of victimization. Offering supportive resources to those affected by bullying can mitigate the adverse effects on their mental well-being and academic performance (Chem & Smith, 2016). Additionally, it promotes healthy peer relationships and social skills, thereby helping to curb future aggressive behaviour (Garcia et al., 2020). The implementation of anti-bullying initiatives and the encouragement of positive peer interactions can contribute to a decrease in instances of victimization and enhance the overall school environment.

Prevention of Peer Victimization among In-School Adolescents

Addressing peer victimization among adolescents in schools is crucial for fostering a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. A holistic strategy is necessary to prevent peer victimization, engaging students, health educators, parents, and the community. Here are some methods to prevent peer victimization:

Raising awareness and providing education, implementing straightforward anti-bullying policies, engaging parents, offering support for both victims and perpetrators, educating on digital safety, conducting regular staff training, and establishing peer mentorship programmes.

- Implementation of educational programmes creates awareness of peer victimization, its effects, and how to prevent it. According to Tippangoudna et al. (2020), in-school adolescents should be provided with educational programmes and public awareness

campaigns based on print, electronic, and social media. The programmes and awareness will help in preventing peer victimization thereby preventing its implications on in-school adolescents.

- Another way of preventing peer victimization is through the provision of anti-bullying policies. These policies make clear anti-bullying policies with well-defined consequences. Schools providing anti-bullying policies will help in preventing peer victimization. The policies must be consistently enforced. Raji et al. (2019) recommended the use of an anti-bullying policy to protect in-school adolescents. Parental involvement is one of the ways to prevent peer victimization. Parents are to be educated in recognizing signs of bullying and taking appropriate action. Whether their child is a victim or a perpetrator. Wright and Harper (2019) revealed that parental monitoring is a significant preventive factor against peer victimization among adolescents. With monitoring, the parents would be able to notice the signs of victimization and take appropriate action.
- Peer mentoring. Training student leaders to promote positive behaviours and mediate conflicts (Lodge & Frydenber, 2020). This is a situation where older in-school adolescents are trained to support younger peers or more vulnerable peers, thereby preventing the risk of peer victimization. This creates a positive school environment.
- Digital safety education can also help in the prevention of peer victimization. This is done through addressing cyberbullying, educating in-school adolescents on safe online behaviour, and encouraging responsible digital citizenship (Livingstone et al., 2019).

Intervention Strategies for Peer Victimization

The following are the intervention approaches to peer victimization among in-school adolescents.

- Artificial intelligence monitoring tools: In this approach, artificial intelligence tools are used to monitor and analyze online intervention for signs of peer victimization. It alerts educators and parents to victimization issues, enabling timely intervention.
- Socio-emotional learning programme: Schools organizing programmes that teach empathy, emotion regulation, and social skills can help reduce incidents of peer victimization (Jones et al., 2021).
- In order to address underlying issues and encourage coping mechanisms, victims, offenders, and bystanders might get individual and group counseling.
- A culture of zero tolerance for peer victimization is fostered by anti-bullying laws, which enforce explicit school policies that identify and forbid peer victimization. Garcia et al. (2020) claim that fostering positive peer interactions and anti-bullying initiatives can assist lower victimization rates and enhance the general atmosphere.
- Planning educational and public awareness campaigns through school programmes. Peer victimization and bullying perpetration are greatly decreased by programmes (Gaffney, 2021). The programme should be tailored to the age range of the intended audience in order to accomplish its goal. It will lessen the incidence of peer victimization.
- Encourage reporting of cases of peer victimization is another way to reduce peer victimization and its implications. Creating safe and confidential ways for students to report peer victimization cases or incidents will help in the reduction of victimization when the reports are taken seriously and addressed promptly.
- Another intervention strategy on peer victimization is through giving support to victims and bullies through counseling and support for victims of bullying and working with

bullies to address underlying issues such as anger, aggression, or self-esteem problems. Providing support and resources for victims of bullying can help alleviate the negative impact on their mental health and academic success (Chem & Smith., 2016).

▪ One intervention strategy against peer victimization is to provide personnel with regular training. This is accomplished by giving educators, school personnel, and administrators' continual training on how to identify, stop, and deal with bullying situations. Peer victimization will decrease, and prompt action will be simple once they have the information. In order to assist anti-bullying initiatives and foster a safe and encouraging atmosphere, training the stakeholders will aid in preventing peer victimization.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, peer victimization presents serious obstacles to the well-being of teenagers enrolled in school. By knowing how common it is, what causes it, and how it affects teenagers' psychological, intellectual, and social development, as well as the prevention and intervention techniques that can create a more secure and encouraging learning environment.

Recommendation

The paper suggests that schools should have a good atmosphere that teachers and students should be trained to identify and deal with victimization, and that victims should have access to supports. These strategies would be crucial in establishing a more welcoming atmosphere that would support each student's academic success and general well-being.

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