



## Self-Esteem, Peer Support, and Campus Culture as Predictors of Bullying Victimization among University Students in Punjab, Pakistan

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Sajid Nadeem, <sup>2</sup>Qamar Shahzad & <sup>3</sup>Asma Seemi Malik

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor Sociology, Bahuddin Zakariya University Multan, Sub Campus Lodhran  
Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Visiting lecturer Department of Sociology & Criminology, University of Sargodha, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>Head of Department of Sociology Lahore College for Women University Lahore, Pakistan

### ABSTRACT

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Bullying victimization among university students is an underexplored yet critical issue in the context of higher education in Pakistan. This study examines how self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture predict bullying victimization among university students in Punjab. A quantitative, explanatory research design was employed, surveying 250 university students using standardized scales. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the hypothesized relationships. Findings indicate that higher levels of self-esteem and peer support are associated with lower levels of bullying victimization. Furthermore, a positive campus culture significantly reduces the likelihood of being bullied. The model demonstrates strong predictive validity and model fit. This study contributes to the growing literature on student well-being by integrating psychological and environmental factors into a cohesive framework. Its novelty lies in the use of SEM to explore these relationships in the Pakistani higher education context, where socio-cultural dynamics uniquely shape bullying behaviors. The findings provide practical implications for campus policy, suggesting that universities should promote peer bonding, enhance student confidence, and foster a supportive institutional culture to mitigate bullying. The research encourages future interventions that address both internal and external factors affecting students' experiences of victimization.

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**Corresponding Author's Email:** [msajid@bzu.edu.pk](mailto:msajid@bzu.edu.pk)

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## 1.0 Introduction

Although it is widespread and has a negative effect, bullying is still poorly investigated in higher-education institutions worldwide, especially in developing countries. The current research draws academic attention to the issue of bullying among university students in Punjab, Pakistan, where the culture, institutional framework, and student life are significantly shaped by socio-religious realities. Unlike at primary and secondary levels where bullying is normally open, university forms are more covert, psychological and deeply ingrained into peer relationships and the institutional culture (Singh, 2024). Social ostracism, oral abuse, on-line bullying, and intimidation is widespread, and its effects often persist as psychological wounds. Despite the growing discussion of mental health and well-being among students, bullying victimization in Pakistani universities is an understudied and underrecognized policy and academic issue that leaves a significant number of students without support and vulnerable. Since universities aim at developing academic excellence and personal development, the existence of bullying hinders these goals and creates an unfavorable, unsafe learning environment (Mahmoudi & Keashly, 2021).

In order to explain bullying in the university settings, it is necessary to focus on the complex interaction between the personal psychological characteristics and the social-environmental circumstances. Punjab students live in multidimensional social environments where their self-perceptions, peer relations and institutional culture play a significant role in experiences. Self-esteem, which refers to global evaluation of personal value, is one of the most crucial psychological resources that shape both perception and reaction to negative social occurrences (AlHarbi, 2022). Peer support that includes emotional, informational, and social support provided by other students acts as a protective factor against the negative consequences of victimization. Campus culture as the combined values, beliefs, and practices of a university is a macro-level determinant that either promotes or limits bullying behaviors. The culture of inclusivity, respect, and accountability in institutions is unlikely to accept such actions and behavior as normal and tolerate them, and the culture of hierarchy, competition, or apathy is likely to keep the victims quiet and the offenders unaccountable. These dynamics are further complicated by collectivist values, hierarchies, and a lack of institutional responsiveness to complaints by students in Pakistan (Riaz, 2020)

According to conceptual literatures, people who have high self-esteem are not easily bullied due to their assertiveness, resilience and ability to protect themselves. The empirical research in the West records a negative interdependence between self-esteem and victimization, which means that low self-esteem is a cause and a result of bullying. In Pakistani context where students face the pressures of parents, academic stress and identity issues, self-esteem is of paramount concern in defining social relations (Waqar et al., 2024). Peer support offers a protective factor: students who are surrounded by strong networks feel emotionally secure, are more likely to seek help in hard times and less likely to become isolated, which is a known risk factor of becoming a victim. In addition, peer support reduces psychological impacts and deters perpetration by interfering with the social patterns that bullies utilize. Lastly, the campus culture defines the normative context in which the interpersonal behaviors take place; when the campus

culture is open, fair, and student-centered, then it will encourage respect and inclusivity, and when it is indifferent or less responsive, then bullying can be a norm that goes unopposed (Gonzalez, 2024).

Theoretically, the present study is based on the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner, which states that human behavior is a product of interactions within various environmental systems, including proximate relationships, as well as institutional and cultural contexts. Self-esteem and peer support are at the microsystem level, which is the proximal relational aspect, whereas campus culture is at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, which is the institutional practice and societal norms. This model provides a subtle insight into the interaction between individual vulnerability and environmental risk that determines the bullying experiences (Siu, 2025). Moreover, the Social-Ecological Model of Bullying suggests that bullying should be approached using interventions across several levels, including individual, relational, institutional, and societal, which is agreeable with the current analysis. Combining these theoretical orientations, the research conceptualizes bullying victimization as an intricate, multi-dimensional process that requires thorough research rather than viewing it as a simple demonstration of individual weakness or deviance (Willis & Painter, 2025).

The modern theory of the West, including some Asian countries, has outlined a complex of relationships between self-esteem, peer support, institutional culture, and bullying in the academic environment. Such interrelations have however not been well explored in Pakistani universities. The national research has been inclined to explore bullying in school or general mental health indicators among university students but not to isolate the determinants of bullying victimization. Moreover, the majority of studies are based on one-way lens, whether it is psychological or sociological, and ignore the interdependence between internal and external factors (Yue et al., 2025). Therefore, there is a rare use of multivariate approaches that measure both direct and indirect effects simultaneously in studies. These gaps in methodology impede the development of evidence-based interventions that can reduce the prevalence of bullying in higher education, and they constrain the application of empirical evidence to the lived experiences of the Pakistani students who can be subjected to bullying but refuse to report it formally due to the fear of stigma, institutional retaliation, or social retribution (Tatarlar et al., 2021).

This study aims to fill these gaps by conducting an empirical study of the predictive effects of self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture on bullying victimization among Punjabi students with the help of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). This area was chosen to be analyzed since its variety of universities and student groups can help to shed some light on the way macrosocial, mesosocial, and microsocial factors come together around bullying. Through the use of SEM, the study goes beyond the traditional correlational analysis and test a theoretically-based model that can identify the multifactorial nature of bullying victimization (Chen et al., 2024). SEM enables evaluation of model fit and strength of predictive relationships and thus provides both specific and generalizable insights. This way the study not only addresses the shortcomings of the past methodologies, but also provides a culturally specific insight based on lived realities.

The inquiry is based on a central research question: that there is no contextual, theory-

based explanation of the factors that contribute to bullying victimization among Pakistani university students. Despite the fact that certain individual characteristics, including self-esteem, have been associated with the wider mental health effects, their direct connection with bullying has not been investigated in detail. Similarly, peer support, which is widely considered protective, has not been examined systematically in Pakistani context (Iqbal et al., 2022). The culture of campus, which has long been recognized as a determinant of the behavior of students, has been given little empirical study. The lack of integrative models undermines understanding as well as intervention. It is in this light that the current research makes an attempt to further a comprehensive framework in the psychological theory and sociocultural realities (Dean & Gallifa, 2025).

The contributions are theoretical and methodological in multidimensionality. On the theoretical level, the research develops the theory of ecological systems by connecting the variables of individuals, peers, and institutions to bullying victimization and confirming the links using SEM. Methodologically, SEM has brought in a stringent analytic method to a discipline that lacks such methods. In practice, the results have direct implications to university administrators, policymakers, and mental health professionals, as they provide specific measures to decrease victimization: peer-mentoring programs, self-esteem classes, or an overall audit of campus culture (Chisala, 2024). On a larger social scale, the report emphasizes the necessity to protect the educational route of youth to empowerment and social mobility, as bullying undermines institutional trust and reduces both performance and quality of education. Finally, being empathetic, respectful, and supportive of each other on campus can lead to the development of the environments that will facilitate learning and development of societies in a fair way (Muñoz & Ruiz, 2025).

Finally, the research is the result of an urgent necessity to consider bullying victimization in university students in Punjab in a multifactorial perspective. The study is not only a contribution to the national scholarly output but also the international one, as it combines the predictive variables of self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture, as well as the application of solid theoretical and statistical frameworks, to build a safer and more supportive learning environment in Pakistan. The research fills in the methodological and conceptual gaps, elucidates essential determinants, and provides a basis of future empirical and applied interventions.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Bullying victimization in higher education requires a solid theoretical framework that does not overlook individual psychological aspects as well as the broader social and environmental context. In this respect, the Ecological Systems Theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner provides a holistic approach by claiming that behavioral outcomes are a result of dynamic transactions at nested environmental systems, which range between the immediate microsystem and the superordinate macrosystem. In this ecological framework, self-esteem together with peer support is at the microsystem level, which is associated with personal traits and close interpersonal interactions that directly influence the lived experience of students (Jie, 2024). The campus culture, on the other hand, is the macrosystem level, which includes institutional norms, values and policies that set structural context within which bullying thrives or is mitigated. According to the theory,

therefore, the victimization of bullying is not only related to individual vulnerability but strongly influenced by contextual and structural exigencies (Gao, 2022). The Social-Ecological Model of Bullying presents a parallel conceptual framework highlighting the need to deal with the interdependence of individual, relational, institutional, and cultural determinants of bullying behaviors. Taken together, these theories promote a systemic perspective, as bullying victimization is a multidimensional phenomenon within the context of several layers of student life (Jacobsen-Grocott, 2024).

Empirical studies have always proved that self-esteem is one of the central psychological factors in bullying relationships. Through vast literature, low self-esteem is noted as a risk factor and an outcome of victimization. The victims often demonstrate low self-esteem, shyness and increased sensitivity to peer judgment. The person with weak senses of self-concepts are at times lacking assertiveness and have shortages in social skills, which further increases their vulnerability to chronic victimization (Kim, 2023). By comparison, students who possess high self-esteem tend to be more prepared to bargain with social issues, establish proper boundaries, and seek emotional and instrumental assistance when required. Recent research also indicates that self-esteem mediates the psychological impact of bullying: individuals with higher self-esteem demonstrate more resilience and less emotional sufferings (Virilia et al., 2024). Such association is especially relevant to university students in Pakistan, who are constantly faced with identity issues, academic stress, and limited psychological support networks. In a collectivist cultural environment where emotional expression is commonly discouraged, people with weak self-esteem are at a greater risk of being victimized and less likely to seek help (Wain, 2024).

Another important protective variable is peer support. Empirical evidence demonstrates that peer networks lower the risk of becoming a victim of bullying, as it helps to alleviate social isolation and allows acting in time during the episodes of incidents. The psychological sequelae of bullying such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal are reduced by emotional and instrumental support of peers. Moreover, peer support can re-arrange power imbalances perpetuated by bullies and make isolation and intimidation less possible (Wu, 2024). Studies prove that students who view peers as trustful, empathetic, and reliable record less cases of bullying. Peer support plays an even greater role in collectivist societies like Pakistan where the social bond and group affiliations are the most important. Peer networks are frequently the first line of defense against bullying in settings where formal reporting systems are insufficient or stigmatizing. Self-perception is strengthened by peer validation and inclusion and, as a result, builds resilience and decreases victimization vulnerability (Hasniati et al., 2024).

In addition to the individual and relational determinants, the institutional circumstances also play a significant role in the prevalence of bullying through the campus culture. Campus culture, which is the set of shared values, beliefs, norms and practices that contribute to the social environment of a university, either discourages or enables bullying. A healthy campus culture, inclusive, respectful, fair, and involving students, provides normative rules that discourage bullying and encourage prosocial behaviour. A feeling of belonging and psychological safety, which are mediators of bullying, are usually felt when students perceive the environment as

favorable and fair (Bora et al., 2024). On the other hand, a poisonous or apathetic campus culture that accepts discriminatory behavior, unequal power structures, and inaction on the part of the administration condones bullying and mutely encourages victims. In empirical research it has been found that institutional climates that are characterized by favoritism, opacity, or poor grievance systems are likely to contribute to the continuation of bullying and other types of interpersonal aggression (Tatarlar et al., 2021). The campus culture in most of the Pakistani universities with their bureaucratic hierarchies and burdensome administrative practices has significant influence over the sense of safety, empowerment, and respect. These tendencies can be balanced out by the existence of peer advocacy programs, student unions, and counseling services that will serve as structural barriers to bullying (Castleberry, 2021).

The discussion of the interdependence of self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture as three constructs that are the point of convergence in the holistic view of the phenomenon is essential in the comprehensive analysis of bullying victimization. Self-esteem can give people psychological strength, peer support can give them relational strength, and campus culture can give them the wider sociocultural context within which all these processes occur (Kocatürk & Çiçek, 2023). Empirical evidence reveals that high self-esteem improves the ability of students to establish and sustain peer relationships, which in turn increases the protective mechanism against bullying. On the other hand, socially isolated, very competitive, or rejecting university environments reduce peer support and self-esteem and increase the risk of becoming a victim. This mutual interdependence points out to the fact that these variables do not work independently of each other but constitute an interactive system that jointly defines the probability and the extent of bullying victimization (Vranjes et al., 2025).

Despite the existing voluminous literature on such relationships, however, there are still significant gaps especially in the Pakistani higher-education sector. The literature that exists is mostly based on a Western or high-income Asian setting where socio-cultural forces, institutional practices, and student life are quite different in Pakistan. Most of the bullying research in this country is limited to the school level and little research is focused on the university level issues (Aboagye et al., 2021). Moreover, integrated models, which simultaneously study individual, relational, and institutional antecedents of bullying, are rarely applied in Pakistan research. The existing studies are usually cross-sectional and utilize simple statistical methods without using more advanced analytical tools, like Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which would allow testing complex relations and determining the validity of the model (Bhattacharya et al., 2023). Moreover, culturally specific aspects of self-esteem, peer relations, and institutional activities in the Pakistani context have not received much attention. Such gaps constrain the relevance and success of existing anti-bullying interventions and emphasize the need to conduct contextually-related research that takes into account the lived experiences of Pakistani university students (Khan et al., 2025).

This paper fills these gaps by adopting an integrative framework in examining the predictive variables of self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture on bullying victimization among university students in Punjab, Pakistan. The study analyzes the relative and combined

impact of these variables using SEM as the analytical strategy, in one, unified model. Such a method not only increases the accuracy of analysis but also allows a subtle interpretation of their interactions (Mostafavi et al., 2025). The focus on Punjab, a heterogeneous and populous area with a variety of both public and private universities, allows the study to provide an invaluable perspective through which to question the role of social and institutional influences on the experiences of students. This position is a step forward of the fragmented analysis of the previous research and provides to the more complete picture of bullying victimization in Pakistani higher education (Saleem et al., 2025).

Based on the existing theories and empirical evidence, the following hypotheses were postulated: (a) self-esteem will have a negative relationship with bullying victimization, so that higher levels of self-esteem will be related to lower levels of reported bullying; (b) peer support will have a negative relationship with bullying victimization, which implies that students who report stronger emotional and social support of peers will experience fewer cases of bullying; (c) campus culture will have a negative relationship with bullying victimization, which suggests that students who perceive the culture of their university as inclusive and respectful will report. Altogether, these hypotheses reflect the multidimensionality of bullying victimization and correspond to the larger goal of investigating the psychological and environmental factors that determine the experiences of students in higher education institutions.

Findings indicated that self esteem was significantly and negatively related to bullying victimization; peer support was also significantly and negatively related to bullying victimization. However, campus culture was not a good predictor of bullying victimization. Comprehensively, the theoretically-based integrated model forecasted bullying victimization with an acceptable explanatory power (Jin et al., 2025). These results confirm the hypotheses and emphasize the dire significance of self-esteem and perceived peer support as a buffer against bullying among students. They further indicate that interventions that seek to empower these constructs have potentials of reducing bullying victimization.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The quantitative explanatory design was used in this research to study the predictive effect of self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture on bullying victimization among university students in Punjab, Pakistan. This choice was influenced by the fact that this approach could be used to test theory-driven hypotheses and could be used to determine causal relationships based on empirical data. The research was based on positivist philosophy that gives more importance to objectivity, measurability, and generalizability of results. Positivism is compatible with the objective of the study to examine the postulated relationships between predetermined constructs with the help of standardized measures and statistical modeling, and thus provide the foundation of general laws that explain phenomena in social contexts. One of the main positivist assumptions was that reality could be observed and measured and that human actions such as bullying victimization could be subjected to systematic study using objective methods.

The sample was made up of university students who were pursuing higher education in institutions of higher learning in the province of Punjab in Pakistan, which is the most populous

province and diversity in terms of academic institutions. Public and private universities are located in the province, and their student populations are highly socioeconomically, culturally and educationally heterogeneous. The involvement of this population enabled a full coverage of the interaction of psychological and environmental factors linked with bullying. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to have a representative sample. To start with, institutions were selected purposively and both the public and private universities were included to capture internal institutional variation. In every institution, stratified random sampling was used based on the academic disciplines and gender to have a proportional representation. This approach provided a more precise and generalizable picture of the higher education experience among different groups of the academic system in Punjab.

The information was gathered through a structured self-administered survey that was distributed in both hard and soft copies based on accessibility in the institution and the preference of the respondents. The tool included validated and standardized scales of self-esteem, peer support, campus culture, and bullying victimization. These instruments, already having a history of reliability and validity, were modified where needed to fit local contextual considerations but not to change the conceptual meaning of the constructs. The survey technique was beneficial in terms of obtaining information quickly on a large number of members of the population and in ensuring anonymity, which enabled unbiased answers to the delicate question of bullying victimization. A pilot study on 30 students was conducted to evaluate the clarity, reliability and cultural appropriateness before full-scale implementation and some minor revisions were made based on the feedback.

The analysis was done through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0. The selection of this method was based on the fact that this method will allow simultaneous evaluation of several independent and dependent variables and their complex interrelations, thus allowing the investigation of measurement validity within the same analytical model as the structural one. The reflective measurement model was assessed on convergent validity based on Average Variance Extracted (AVE), internal consistency reliability using Composite Reliability and Cronbach Alpha, and discriminant validity using Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Once the validity and reliability of measurements was determined, bootstrapping was used to extract the path coefficients, t-values and p-values of the structural model. The model fit indices and R-square were used to measure the explanatory power and the overall fit of the model. This analytic plan allowed a sophisticated evaluation of the combined and individual effects of self-esteem, peer support and campus culture on bullying victimization in the university setting.

The study ethically considered all aspects so that it could meet the institutional and scholarly standards. Before the collection of data, the participants signed an informed consent and received detailed information about the purposes, the process, and the confidentiality of the data. It was voluntary and the respondents were free to withdraw at any moment without any penalty. Data confidentiality was ensured and no personal identifiable information was obtained. The study received ethical approval by the appropriate institutional review board in order to protect the rights



and welfare of the participants. This kind of ethical scrupulousness is very useful in the credibility and integrity of the study findings.

To sum up, the methodological decisions of the study were consistent with its purpose, theoretical framework, and the particular environment of the Pakistan higher education system. The study provides a rigorous empirical analysis of the connection between self-esteem, peer support, campus culture, and bullying victimization because it uses a positivist, quantitative design and sophisticated statistical methods, including SEM. The well-developed sampling plan, the validated measurement instruments, and high ethical protection combined help to promote the reliability, validity, and academic value of the study.

## 4.0 Findings and Results

### 4.1 Reliability and Convergent Validity Analysis

**Table 4.1 Reliability and Convergent Validity Analysis**

| Construct                   | No. of Items | Cronbach's Alpha | Composite Reliability (CR) | Average Variance Extracted (AVE) |
|-----------------------------|--------------|------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Self-Esteem (SE)            | 5            | 0.86             | 0.89                       | 0.62                             |
| Peer Support (PS)           | 4            | 0.84             | 0.88                       | 0.65                             |
| Campus Culture (CC)         | 6            | 0.88             | 0.91                       | 0.63                             |
| Bullying Victimization (BV) | 5            | 0.87             | 0.90                       | 0.61                             |

The indices of reliability and validity of the study constructs demonstrated the strong measurement characteristics, which implied that the scales employed to measure self-esteem, peer support, campus culture, and bullying victimization were characterized by high values of internal consistency and validity. All constructs exceeded the traditional 0.70 threshold of the Cronbach Alpha, with the values between 0.84 and 0.88; the Composite Reliability (CR) values, which ranged between 0.88 and 0.91, also exceeded the recommended 0.70 threshold, which indicated consistency among items. In addition to that, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of all constructs was above the 0.50 threshold, which means that sufficient convergent validity was observed since more than half of the indicator variance was explained by the corresponding latent construct. Taken together, these results contribute to the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model, thus constructs are clearly defined and appropriate in further structural analysis.

### 4.2 Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

**Table 4.2 Collinearity Statistics**

| Path    | VIF  |
|---------|------|
| SE → BV | 1.33 |
| PS → BV | 1.28 |
| CC → BV | 1.42 |

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values that reflect the paths between self-esteem (SE), peer support (PS), and campus culture (CC) and bullying victimization (BV) reveal that the problem of multicollinearity is not a significant threat to the integrity of the model. The VIF scores are very low and are all much lower than the traditional threshold of 3.3: 1.33 in SE, 1.28 in PS, and 1.42 in CC. These findings indicate that the predictor variables are only moderately correlated and thus the stability and reliability of the path coefficients of the structural model are secured. As a result, every predictor can be viewed as contributing in a distinctive way to the prediction of bullying victimization. The lack of collinearity makes the model stronger and strengthens the validity of the reported findings.

#### 4.3 Model Fit Indices

**Table 4.3 Model Fit Indices**

| Fit Index                               | Value | Threshold | Interpretation                 |
|---|-------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Residual)  | 0.057 | < 0.08    | Good fit                       |
| NFI (Normed Fit Index)                  | 0.91  | > 0.90    | Acceptable model fit           |
| R <sup>2</sup> (Bullying Victimization) | 0.53  | > 0.25    | Moderate explanatory power     |
| Q <sup>2</sup> (Blindfolding for BV)    | 0.36  | > 0       | Predictive relevance confirmed |

The structural model in this study is satisfactory in terms of overall fit and strong predictive power. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) of 0.057 lower than the recommended level of 0.08 shows that there is little difference between the observed and predicted correlations. Normed Fit Index (NFI) of 0.91 exceeds the recommended cutoff of 0.90, which also proves that the model fits the data adequately. In addition, the R<sup>2</sup> of 0.53 indicates that the model has moderate ability to explain the variance in the outcome variable and 53 percent of the variance in the outcome variable is explained. The value of Q<sup>2</sup> of 0.36 calculated using the procedure of blindfolding is significantly higher than zero, which proves that the model has a strong predictive relevance. All these indicators confirm the theoretical integrity and the empirical soundness of the model.

#### 4.4 Structural Model Path Coefficients

**Table 4.4 Structural Model Path Coefficients**

| Hypothesis              | Path     | Beta ( $\beta$ ) | t-value | p-value | Supported |
|-------------------------|----------|------------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| H1: SE $\rightarrow$ BV | Negative | -0.31            | 4.25    | <0.001  | Yes       |
| H2: PS $\rightarrow$ BV | Negative | -0.28            | 3.90    | <0.001  | Yes       |
| H3: CC $\rightarrow$ BV | Negative | -0.34            | 4.68    | <0.001  | Yes       |

The empirical tests conducted by structural modelling provide strong support on all the three postulated relationships and show that self-esteem, peer support, and campus culture all predict bullying victimization among university students significantly and negatively. In particular, self-esteem ( $b = -0.31$ ,  $t = 4.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), peer support ( $b = -0.28$ ,  $t = 3.90$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and campus culture ( $b = -0.34$ ,  $t = 4.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) have statistically significant negative impacts on bullying victimization. These findings reveal that the lower the self-esteem, the lower the peer support, and the more negative the campus culture, the lower the bullying experiences. Moreover, the t-values and p-values that are statistically significant (less than 0.001) of all the paths support the evidence that both individual and environmental factors are vital in reducing bullying behavior in university environments.

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The current research confirms the negative forecasting impacts of self-esteem, peer support and campus culture on bullying victimization among undergraduate students in Punjab, Pakistan. The findings align with theoretical predictions and integrate with the known psychological and educational knowledge, proving that internal psychological traits and external social and environmental factors interactively determine the vulnerability of students to victimization. The negative correlation between self-esteem and being a victim of bullying supports the idea that those who feel more valuable are less likely to fall victims of bullies. This can be explained by the strength and demeanor that high self-esteem provides and thus reduces the chances of being viewed as an easy target and increases coping abilities and assertiveness. Such students are in a better position to prevent aggressors and to reduce the emotional consequences of bad peer relations.

Peer support also becomes a significant protective factor: students who are integrated within supportive peer groups feel safer, more accepted, and integrated into their social groups, and the effects of bullying are not isolating. By making perpetrators face social risk, peer support dampens them and bystander interventions whereby supportive peers intervene or report bullying behavior. Also, peer relationships lead to a sense of belonging and emotional distress reduction, which reduces the circumstances that can aggravate victimization. These observations explain why it is important to foster inclusive peer cultures within universities where empathy and mutual respect become the norm.

The strongest negative predictor of bullying victimization was campus culture which was measured as a composite score of inclusivity, fairness, transparency, and behavioral norms. A favorable institutional climate prevents aggression and fosters safety and respect and makes it less likely that bullying will take place. By promoting ethical behavior, student participation and the freedom to communicate, universities create an atmosphere of responsibility and mutual respect that strengthens reporting practices and helps victims through responsive institutional processes. The result indicates the necessity of institutional dedication to a positive culture in order to protect students against interpersonal violence and psychological distress.

Taken together, the results contribute to the usefulness of a multidimensional model that combines psychological (self-esteem) and social-environmental (peer support and campus culture) predictors of being a victim of bullying. The theoretical model was confirmed by Structural

Equation Modeling (SEM) that demonstrates the simultaneous interaction of these constructs. Despite the low value of the  $R^2$ , which suggests the presence of other factors, including family background, digital exposure, and mental health status, the strong model fit indices and significant path coefficients support the validity and strength of the assumptions of the model.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of the predictors of bullying victimization in the Pakistani university students. It demonstrates that self-esteem boosting, improving peer relations, and promoting positive campus culture jointly prevent the risk of bullying. The combination of the psychological and environmental aspects will provide the overall picture of the processes that either enhance or reduce the vulnerability of students. The results are a good example of how Western theoretical constructs can be adapted to the South Asian context as well as the impact of cultural and institutional specificities.

The study suggests practical recommendations that can be based on the establishment of specific interventions to enhance self-esteem by means of counseling, confidence-building workshops, and mentorship; fostering peer support through peer mentoring programs, group learning, and student-led networks; and the focus on the campus culture, including the integration of anti-bullying policies, awareness programs, and inclusive extracurricular activities. Training of the faculty and administrative staff should be provided to recognize and deal with bullying in a sensitive and effective way and make students feel safe, supported and empowered to report.

Theoretically, the results highlight the need to combine psychological and environmental factors in order to explain the complicated behaviors among students in educational establishments. Methodologically, the study builds on existing studies of bullying victimization to include the relatively less studied setting of Pakistani universities, adding a culturally embedded view. In practice, the study provides policymakers, educators, and support services with practical knowledge of how to develop comprehensive anti-bullying policies that can prevent and/or mitigate bullying before it occurs. Universities are well equipped to contribute to the well-being, academic involvement, and social stability of students by integrating psychological support and reinforced institutional commitment.

Finally, the issue of bullying in higher education is a shared responsibility that needs institutional commitment. The results highlight the importance of student safety and psychological well-being as part of educational success and an issue that must continue to be of primary concern in university governance, policy formulation, and the day-to-day running of the campus. The current model should be further developed by examining longitudinal effects, other moderators, and regional and educational-level extensions in the future research to provide more data on the nature of bullying in various settings.

**Muhammad Sajid Nadeem:** Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

**Qamar Shahzad:** Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

**Asma Seemi Malik:** Methodology and Revision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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