

EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEER BULLYING, SELF-ESTEEM AND DEPRESSION IN HIGH SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS

Sezen ÇAVULDAK

Istanbul Arel University, Institute of Graduate Studies, Türkiye

Leman Elif AYBAY¹

Istanbul Arel University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the relationship between peer bullying, self-esteem and depression in high school adolescents was investigated. The research was conducted at Şişli Yunus Emre Anatolian Imam Hatip High School and Şişli Anatolian High School. A total of 584 adolescents participated in the research, 309 (52.9%) of whom were female and 275 (47.1%) of whom were male. The mean age of the adolescents participating in the study was calculated as 15.79 ± 1.09 . In the study, the Peer Bullying Rating Scale was used to assess peer bullying, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used for self-esteem, and the Depression Scale was used to assess depression. According to the results, statistically significant differences were found between all of the bully and exposure sub-parameters of peer bullying and self-esteem scores.

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Peer bullying, self-esteem, adolescents, depression.

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1. Introduction

The increase in violence, aggression and bullying in schools in the early 2000s attracted the attention of researchers, and the fact that it continues to increase significantly today has caused this issue to maintain its popularity. Peer bullying is defined as; one or more students consistently engaging in negative actions against another student and these actions are intended to intentionally harm and disturb (Olweus & Limber, 2010). The causes of peer bullying are complex and multifaceted. It has been stated that gender is an important factor in whether individuals are bullies or victims.

Peer bullying manifests itself as behaviors that occur at school, outside of school or on the way to school. Conceptually, peer bullying refers to the actions of individuals who enjoy harming those they perceive as weaker. According to the literature, peer bullying is a common problem, especially in schools. Peer bullying usually involves a powerful individual systematically harming a weaker or less powerful individual through physical or verbal assault, harassment or threats. Such behaviors can be seen not only among adolescents, but also in workplaces, schools, communities and many other areas (Aksoy, 2019).

When the gender factor in peer bullying was examined; it was seen that bully and victim behavior differed according to gender and that the bullying system can become more understandable when this issue is investigated in depth in both dimensions (Çiftçi, 2018). According to the types of bullying in peer bullying, it was found that male adolescents resorted to physical bullying (pushing, hitting, beating, kicking, etc.) more commonly than female adolescents, while female adolescents exhibited bullying behaviors in verbal (name-calling, teasing, etc.) and relational dimensions (exclusion, sabotaging relationships with others, etc.) (Iossi, Pereira, Mendonça, Nunes, & Oliveira, 2013). It was observed that males were involved in the bullying system at a higher level than females in both victim and bully roles. Considering gender roles, since males are expected to be stronger, competitive and angry in society, it was observed that male adolescents resorted to physical bullying more often and responded to this situation with

physical bullying behavior when they encountered bullying behaviors. In addition, it was observed that when males were exposed to peer bullying, they were more active in both behavioral dimensions (bully and victim) in order to gain a status in their social relationships (Kocaşahan, 2012).

When the psychological effects of peer bullying on adolescents by gender were examined, it was found that males showed various behavioral symptoms such as aggression, anger and depression, while females showed behavioral symptoms such as low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. The fact that peer bullying is indirect and difficult to detect among females makes it difficult to observe the psychological effects of bullying. This situation invites female adolescents to experience psychological problems in the future (Gürsoy, 2010).

Another variable that is highly correlated with peer bullying is self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as an individual's positive or negative attitudes and behaviors towards himself/herself. The fact that individuals have positive attitudes towards themselves indicates that they have high self-esteem, and on the other hand, the fact that individuals have negative attitudes towards themselves indicates that they have low self-esteem (Tutar, Özgür, & Tutar, 2018).

In studies conducted to determine the relationship between self-esteem and peer bullying, individuals' high perceived self-esteem shows that they avoid bullying behaviors towards other individuals. (Aydiner, 2021). At the same time, it was concluded that individuals with low perceived self-esteem exhibit bullying behaviors towards other individuals with whom they interact at a high level (Aydiner, 2021; Salmivalli, 2010; Yılmaz, 2024; Yılmaz & Çağlayan, 2018).

On the other hand, it has been determined that individuals with low self-esteem show tantrums, depersonalization, lack of empathic behavior, inability to stay in the moment, inability to socialize, communication problems, internet addiction behaviors as well as peer bullying, and also experience high levels of depression. Depression, like peer bullying and low self-esteem, is one of the most common mental health problems among adolescents. One of the reasons why adolescents become depressed is the environmental conditions they live in. These environmental factors: negative communication within the family, negative academic situations they have experienced in school, pressure and

coercion they are exposed to by their peers during the socialization process have been determined as some of the environmental conditions that increase the risk of depression (Jorm, 2020).

Adolescents who are exposed to peer bullying are most emotionally harmed. It has been determined that the self-esteem of adolescents who have experienced peer bullying decreases and their risk of depression is high. At the same time, these adolescents with low self-esteem were found to have a high frequency of depressive symptoms (Juvonen & Graham, 2017). These studies also show that adolescents who are exposed to bullying have been found by researchers to have impaired socialization processes, increased loneliness levels, social isolation, decreased self-esteem and increased depression levels due to bullying behaviors (Mynard & Joseph, 2000).

In this study, the relationship between peer bullying, self-esteem and depression levels of high school adolescents were examined in terms of gender.

Method

Research Model

In this study, relational screening method was used to examine the relationship between peer bullying and self-esteem and depression in high school adolescents. The study included 584 high school students from Şişli Yunus Emre Anatolian Imam Hatip High School and Şişli Anatolian High School. In our study, Peer Bullying Identification Scale was used to evaluate peer bullying, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used for self-esteem, and Depression Scale for Adolescents was used to evaluate depression. In this information form developed by the researcher, the age and gender of the adolescents participating in the study were examined.

Peer Bullying Identification Scale-Adolescent Form

The Peer Bullying Identification Scale Adolescent Form was developed by Ayas and Pişkin (2015) to identify the “bully” who perpetrates bullying incidents among students in schools and the “victim” students who are exposed to such incidents. The scale

consists of 53 items, 6 factors, and 5-point Likert-type options such as “almost every day”, “at least once a week”, “once a month”, “once a semester”, and “never”. The lowest score that can be obtained from the bully and victim sub-dimensions of the scale is 53 and the highest score is 265. As the scores increase, the levels of being a bully and a victim increase.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

Çuhadaroğlu (1986) adapted the Self-Esteem Scale into Turkish and conducted studies on the validity and reliability of the scale. The scale consists of 12 subcategories. There are 6 items and a total of 10 questions in the self-esteem subscale. Positively and negatively loaded items are listed consecutively. For each question, the answers that will receive points are determined. There are three questions in item I. If a point-getting answer is marked in 2 questions, it receives 1 point ($2/3$ correct=1 point). There are 2 questions in items II and VI; if a point-earning answer is marked in any of them, it receives 1 point ($1/2$ correct=1 point). Items III, IV and V are each worth one point. According to the evaluation system within the scale itself, subjects score between 0-6 points. An answer key is used in the evaluation of the subscales of continuity of self-concept, trusting people, sensitivity to criticism, depressive affect, dreaminess, psychosomatic symptoms, feeling threatened in interpersonal relationships, degree of participation in discussions, parental interest, relationship with father and psychic isolation, and each correct answer is given one point.

Adolescent Depression Scale

It is a self-report scale developed by Kovacs (1979) to determine the severity of depressive symptoms in children between the ages of 7-17. The Adolescent Depression Scale was adapted into Turkish and studies on the validity and reliability of the scale were conducted by Oy (1991). The Adolescent Depression Scale (ADS) has five sub-dimensions: “negative mood”, “interpersonal problems”, “inadequacy”, “lack of pleasure” and “negative self-esteem”. It consists of 27 items in total and participants answer each question by choosing the most appropriate one from three multiple-choice

statements. Total scores that can be obtained from the scale range from 0 to 54. An increase in the score indicates an increase in depressive symptoms.

Conclusion

A total of 584 adolescents participated in the study, 309 (52.9%) of whom were female and 275 (47.1%) of whom were male. The mean age of the adolescents participating in the study was calculated as 15.79 ± 1.09 . The data on peer bullying of the adolescents participating in the study are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison analysis of the Peer Bullying Identification Scale-Adolescent Form between genders

Scales and Subscales		Gender	\bar{X}	SD	Group Comparison	n
BULLY	PBIS					
	Total score	Female	76,0	21,1	$Z= 5.830; p<0.001$	584
		Male	95,8	24,4		
	Physical	Female	23,4	7,11	$Z= 5.228; p<0.001$	584
		Male	29,6	6,98		
	Verbal	Female	12,8	6,12	$Z= 5.538; p<0.001$	584
		Male	16,7	7,77		
	Exclusion	Female	8,55	4,97	$Z= 6.257; p<0.001$	584
		Male	10,5	4,87		
	Spreading rumors	Female	6,18	2,25	$Z= 4.457; p<0.001$	584
		Male	7,49	3,55		
	Property damage	Female	12,5	5,01	$Z= 4.593; p<0.001$	584
		Male	15,2	7,05		
	Sexual	Female	12,5	4,44	$Z= 3.911; p<0.001$	584
		Male	16,0	5,99		

VICTIM	Total score	<i>Female</i>	81,3 8	30,1 9	Z= 5.094; <i>p</i> <0.001	584
		<i>Male</i>	98,6 7	37,9 1		
	Physical	<i>Female</i>	23,7 7	8,01	Z= 5.106; <i>p</i> <0.001	584
		<i>Male</i>	29,0 9	8,97		
	Verbal	<i>Female</i>	13,3 7	5,55	Z= 6.067; <i>p</i> <0.001	584
		<i>Male</i>	16,6 0	6,98		
	Exclusion	<i>Female</i>	9,05	3,91	Z= 3.541; <i>p</i> =0.011	584
		<i>Male</i>	10,6 3	4,07		
	Spreading rumors	<i>Female</i>	7,22	3,33	Z= 4.834; <i>p</i> <0.001	584
		<i>Male</i>	8,51	5,06		
	Property damage	<i>Female</i>	13,1 6	7,02	Z= 3.109; <i>p</i> <0.001	584
		<i>Male</i>	15,5 4	7,14		
	Sexual	<i>Female</i>	14,8 1	6,08	Z= 6.163; <i>p</i> <0.001	584
		<i>Male</i>	18,2 9	8,89		
PBIS: Peer Bullying Identification Scale						

When the total peer bullying scores of the adolescents participating in the study were analyzed according to their gender ($Z= 5.830; p<0.001$), it was found that male adolescents had higher mean scores than female adolescents. It was found that male adolescents showed higher rates of peer bullying in terms of bullying behaviors than female adolescents. Accordingly, the male adolescents who participated in the study had higher mean scores than the female adolescents in the physical sub-dimension ($Z= 5.228; p<0.001$), verbal sub-dimension ($Z= 5.538; p<0.001$), exclusion sub-dimension ($Z= 6.257; p<0.001$), rumor spreading sub-dimension ($Z= 4.457; p<0.001$), damaging objects ($Z= 4.593; p<0.001$) and sexual bullying sub-dimension ($Z= 3.911; p<0.001$).

When the total peer bullying scores of the adolescents participating in the study were analyzed according to their gender, it was found that male adolescents in the victim dimension ($Z= 5.094; p<0.001$) had higher average victim scores than female adolescents. According to this study, in the victim subscales of the Peer Bullying Identification Scale,

physical subscale ($Z= 5.106$; $p<0.001$), verbal subscale ($Z= 6.067$; $p<0.001$), exclusion subscale ($Z= 3.541$; $p=0.011$), rumor spreading sub-dimension ($Z= 4.834$; $p<0.001$), damaging objects sub-dimension ($Z= 3.109$; $p<0.001$) and sexual victimization sub-dimension ($Z= 6.163$; $p<0.001$).

In the bully and victim sub-dimensions of the Peer Bullying Identification Scale, it was concluded that male adolescents were more likely to engage in bullying and victimization behaviors than female adolescents.

Table 2: Comparison analysis of the Adolescent Depression Scale and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale between genders

Scales and Subscales	Gender	\bar{X}	SD	Group Comparison	n
ADS	Female	25,55	4,01	Z= 0.825; $p=$ 0.251	584
	Male	25,87	4,44		
RSES					
Self-Esteem	Female	1,73	0,46	Z= 2.564; $p=$ 0.011	584
	Male	1,50	0,68		
Concept of Self	Female	3,93	1,05	Z= 3.012; $p=$ 0.003	584
	Male	3,68	1,16		
Trust	Female	1,61	0,24	Z= 2.508; $p=$ 0.011	584
	Male	1,80	0,44		
Criticism	Female	1,99	0,19	Z= 6.163; $p<$ 0.001	584
Sensitivity	Male	1,28	0,27		
ADS: Adolescent Deprression Scale, RSES: Rosenberg Self – Esteem Scale					

When the depression levels of the adolescents participating in the study were examined according to their gender ($Z= 0.825$; $p= 0.251$), no significant difference was found in the Adolescent Depression Scale. Again, when the self-esteem of the adolescents participating in the study was examined according to gender, the scores of female adolescents in the self-concept sub-dimension ($Z= 2.564$; $p= 0.011$), confidence sub-dimension ($Z= 2.508$; $p= 0.011$) and sensitivity to criticism sub-dimension ($Z= 6.163$; $p<0.001$) were significantly higher than male adolescents in the self-concept and

sensitivity to criticism sub-dimensions. The higher mean self-concept scores of female adolescents indicate that they have higher self-concept than male adolescents. On the other hand, the higher scores of female adolescents in the sensitivity to criticism dimension compared to male adolescents indicate that female adolescents are more sensitive to criticism and their self-esteem is affected by this. In addition, the higher scores of male adolescents in the trust sub-dimension compared to female adolescents indicate that male adolescents have higher trust seeking.

Discussion

When the total peer bullying scores of the adolescents participating in the study were analyzed according to their gender, it was found that male adolescents had higher mean scores than female adolescents. When the study conducted by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) was examined, it was determined that the peer bullying behaviors of male adolescents in general were higher than female adolescents (Espelage, 2014). It was found that male adolescents participating in the study showed higher levels of bullying behaviors in the verbal, exclusion, rumor spreading, damage to property and sexual bullying sub-dimensions of the physical domain of the peer bullying identification scale compared to female adolescents. This finding supports the research results. In the studies, it was found that in the physical dimension of bullying behavior, males exhibited more physical bullying (pushing, hitting, beating, kicking, etc.) than females (Espelage, 2014; Iossi, Pereira, Mendonça, Nunes, & Oliveira, 2013), and in the field of social exclusion, it was found that when males were exposed to peer bullying, they had more difficulties and encountered difficulties in social relationships than female adolescents (Kocaşahan, 2012). It was found that male adolescents' behavior of damaging objects was higher than female adolescents (Demir, 2022). The findings of the studies are in parallel with the research results. In some studies, it was concluded that there was no difference between males and females in terms of being exposed to peer bullying (Polat & Sohbet, 2020). These findings do not support the research result. In the study conducted by (Aslan & Polat, 2023), it was found that female adolescents exhibited more bullying behaviors than male adolescents in the dimensions of exclusion, manipulating relationships, and spreading rumors during adolescence. This result is not similar to the results of the study.

This situation, which differs according to gender in peer bullying, also determines how the type of bullying is experienced by the adolescent and what kind of intervention strategies should be used in peer bullying. In order to combat peer bullying, to create a positive school climate, and to ensure that students are supported at all levels of development in a safe environment, it is necessary to understand the importance of peer bullying and the gender factor variable (Aksoy, 2019; Maher, Hanlon, & Hajjar, 2014; Yılmaz, 2024).

When the depression levels of the adolescents participating in the study were examined according to their gender, no significant difference was found in the adolescent depression scale dimension. When the literature on adolescent depression is examined, it is stated that the depression level of female adolescents is higher than that of male adolescents (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012), but in some studies, female adolescents are more successful in expressing their emotions than male adolescents, while male adolescents have low depression levels because they cannot express their emotions (Kuehner, 2017), and in another study, it was determined by the researchers that since male adolescents reflect their depression as a behavioral problem (anger, substance use, alcohol, involvement in crime) (Hammen, 2009), the diagnosis of their depression is either late or not at all. The findings of these studies do not support the results of the study.

When the self-esteem of the adolescents participating in the study was analyzed according to gender, it was found that female adolescents had significantly higher scores than male adolescents. When the researches are examined, it is seen that male adolescents have higher self-esteem than female adolescents in areas such as physical strength, self-confidence and success, female adolescents have higher self-esteem in self-expression and social skills (Gentil & Lauer, 2009), female adolescents have higher self-esteem in self-expression and social skills, (Flett, Hewitt, & Martin, 1995), and in some studies, it was stated that self-esteem did not differ significantly between the genders of adolescents (Tafarodi, & Swann, 1995), and that self-esteem was more affected by social factors and culture. The results of this study show similarities with some of these research results.

When the self-perceptions of the adolescents participating in the study were examined, the mean score of female adolescents regarding self-perception was found to be higher than male adolescents. When the studies on this subject were examined, it was concluded that female adolescents had more significant self-perceptions than male

adolescents (Rosenberg, 2015) because they involved their emotional processes in their communication with others at a higher rate (Rosenberg, 2015), and they also had significantly higher self-perceptions than male adolescents (Markus & Oyserman, 1989) in helping other people, being in emotional balance with them, being sensitive to social events and acting emotion-oriented. These studies support the findings obtained from the research.

When examining the sensitivity to criticism scores of adolescents participating in the study, it was found that female adolescents scored higher in this domain compared to male adolescents. A review of the literature reveals that female adolescents exhibit stronger reactions to body image and social acceptance levels compared to their male counterparts. In other words, female adolescents are more profoundly affected by negative criticisms, exhibit greater emotional withdrawal, whereas male adolescents are less sensitive to criticism and focus more on individual empowerment during identity development. Additionally, male adolescents tend to respond to self-directed criticism through behavioral reactions rather than self-criticism (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Kuehner, 2017). The findings of the study conducted by Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) support the results of this research.

It was also observed that male adolescents scored higher than female adolescents in the confidence sub-dimension. Studies indicate that female adolescents have significantly lower levels of self-confidence compared to male adolescents and are more susceptible to external influences. This may be due to the fact that female adolescents are more affected by societal rules, value judgments, and norms imposed upon them, which, in turn, leads to lower levels of self-confidence (Flett, Hewitt, & Martin, 2016). This finding aligns with the results of the present study. The societal attribution of strength to males may explain why male adolescents are more confident and exhibit behaviors that reflect strength, as they tend to avoid appearing emotionally vulnerable due to social expectations and values.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Author Contact Information

E-mail: tarkantat38@gmail.com

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