The Moderating Role of Peer Support in the Relationship Between School Bullying and Anxiety in Middle School Students with Social Anxiety in Wasit, Iraq

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: *Original Research* **How to cite this article:** Alkouradi, S. J. K., Golparvar, M., Shallal, A. A., & Yousefi, Z. (2025). The Moderating Role of Peer Support in the Relationship Between School Bullying and Anxiety in Middle School Students with Social Anxiety in Wasit, Iraq. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology, 8*(3), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ijes.8.3.12 © 2025 the authors. Published by Iranian Association for Sociology of Education, Tehran, Iran. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.	**Purpose:** This study aimed to determine the moderating role of peer support in the relationship between school bullying and anxiety in students with social anxiety in Wasit city, Iraq. **Methods and Materials:** The research method was correlational, and the statistical population consisted of middle school students in Wasit city, Iraq, in the spring of 2024. From this population, 300 students were selected using convenience sampling and then completed three questionnaires: the Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck et al., 1988), the School Bullying Questionnaire (Álvarez-Marín et al., 2022), and the Peer Support Questionnaire (Mostafai Alayi & Mohsennajad, 2020). **Findings:** The data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients and hierarchical regression analysis through SPSS version 26. The results showed that school bullying was significantly related to anxiety, peer support, and anxiety with peer support ($p < 0.05$). The hierarchical regression analysis results indicated that peer support moderates the relationship between being a victim of bullying, aggression, and cyberbullying victimization with anxiety. **Conclusion:** Based on the findings, it is essential to consider the role of peer support in either weakening or strengthening the relationship between school bullying and anxiety in educational environments to empower students. *Keywords: School bullying, inferiority feelings, academic achievement, students.*

1. Introduction

The interaction of adolescent students in educational and social environments is one of the most prominent topics among theorists and researchers worldwide. This interaction, in its positive form, creates the groundwork for the social and psychological development of adolescents and, at the same time, provides a foundation for acquiring various social skills for future stages of life (Irani et al.,

2024). The form of student interaction may be influenced by various factors. Some adolescents may experience negative emotions, including social anxiety, due to a lack of social skills, physical changes (which they may not accurately assess), an inability to recognize and accept their own capacities and potential, and the tendency to compare themselves to others (Jones & Rozenman, 2024; Millgram et al., 2024). According to documented estimates published in comprehensive studies and meta-analyses, the prevalence of social anxiety symptoms in adolescent populations has been reported between 6.4% and 8.3%, as a compilation of studies conducted across different countries (Salari et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2022). Social anxiety involves fear and worry about being in social environments and receiving negative evaluations from others in terms of appearance, behavior, and performance (Pinkse-Schepers et al., 2024). With such anxiety dominating adolescents' psychological spaces, they often tend to withdraw as much as possible from social settings (Urbán et al., 2024). If an adolescent struggling with social anxiety cannot avoid social situations, the symptoms of unease, worry, and stress intensify. With the exacerbation of anxiety and worry, the behavior and performance of adolescents deviate further from the normal, creating a vicious cycle of anxiety-avoidance, which severely disrupts the adolescent's natural development and growth process (Pinkse-Schepers et al., 2024). This vicious cycle requires educational and therapeutic interventions (Smout et al., 2024). To empower adolescents with social anxiety, it is essential to fundamentally address the phenomenon of anxiety in them. In this regard, this study focuses on the relationship between school bullying and anxiety, considering the moderating role of peer support, specifically for middle school students with social anxiety in the city of Wasit, Iraq. This area has received limited attention in terms of the models and correlates of various variables involved in social anxiety (whether antecedents, consequences, or simply as correlated variables).

All humans experience anxiety at some point in their lives. However, chronic and severe anxiety is abnormal and problematic. Anxiety is recognized as an unpleasant, diffuse, and vague feeling of fear and worry with an unknown origin, accompanied by uncertainty, helplessness, and physiological arousal (Rapee et al., 2023). The recurrence of real or imagined situations that were previously stressful or in which an individual has been harmed can easily, especially in adolescents, lead to anxiety (Dickson et al., 2024). Research indicates that generalized anxiety often blends with social anxiety at different ages (Fancourt et al., 2021).

Anxiety in the context of social anxiety can interfere with a wide range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functions of students in educational environments (Dickson et al., 2024). For instance, frequent evidence shows that students with anxiety have lower self-esteem, negative self-evaluations, lower motivation compared to non-anxious students, and weaker academic performance and achievement (Fang et al., 2024; X. Liu et al., 2024; Y. Liu et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2022; Stromájer et al., 2023). According to available evidence, several factors in educational environments can cause or intensify anxiety. Among these, bullying in schools during adolescence is one of the factors that can create and exacerbate anxiety by instilling a sense of psychological and social insecurity in students (Krokstad et al., 2024).

Bullying, as a form of behavior associated with violence and aggression, has been the subject of numerous studies worldwide across various age groups. This phenomenon is prevalent among children, adolescents, youth, and adults. Despite being relatively more vulnerable during childhood, bullying cannot be strictly considered age- or life-stage-dependent (Pichel et al., 2021). From a semiotic perspective, any repetitive behavior that occurs between individuals in situations where one individual or group holds physical or social superiority over another group, aimed at causing harm, extortion, or demanding something unethical, can be regarded as bullying behavior (Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). In the context of this definition, bullying behavior can manifest in virtual (online), verbal, relational, or physical (hitting and injury) forms (Accardo et al., 2024). Naturally, bullying behavior in the social arena, when it emerges, at least involves three groups: bystanders, perpetrators of bullying behavior, and the victims of bullying behavior (Krokstad et al., 2024). Frequent evidence from across the globe shows that bullying in schools, whether between girls or boys, with a notable higher prevalence among boys, is common (Useche et al., 2023). The prevalence of bullying behavior among students and in schools can lead to multiple physical, psychological, and social harms (Y. Liu et al., 2024; Rusillo-Magdaleno et al., 2024). One of the phenomena related to bullying in schools is the intensification and creation of anxiety in students. Studies such as those by Accardo et al. (2024), Liu et al. (2024), and Luo et al. (2022) have shown that bullying behaviors are linked with anxiety, particularly in bystanders and victims of bullying (Accardo et al., 2024; Y. Liu et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2022). The connection between bullying and anxiety is due to the reinforcement of a sense of threat and worry, followed

by a feeling of psychological and social insecurity (Pichel et al., 2021).

In addition to the relationship between bullying and anxiety, bullying in school is an harmful phenomenon that requires the identification of variables that may intensify or weaken its effects. Through scientific research, it is necessary to identify these variables and create an environment for the implementation of effective intervention strategies. One of the variables that holds significant potential to moderate the roles and functions of bullying in school is peer support in social and educational environments (Xie et al., 2024). Peer support, as one of the forms of social support, refers to verbal, behavioral, emotional support, and the expression of empathy and willingness to assist from peers, especially in the adolescent context (Walker et al., 2024). Peer support, as a social support resource and a factor for emotional relief and psychological empowerment from peers, is associated with higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, better academic performance, higher perceived self-efficacy, and greater perceived competence, particularly in educational environments such as schools (de Beer et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Murphy et al., 2024). Beyond the relationship between peer support and important variables like anxiety, academic performance, and achievement, according to the theoretical approach of survival resources, receiving support from individuals around, including peers, is seen as a source of self-confidence and assurance in one's ability to cope with challenges, environmental stress, and the adversities of the environment, including bullying behaviors. This capacity has the potential to moderate the effects of bullying on anxiety and academic success. In support of this, the findings of the study by Yarrow et al. (2019) identify peer support as a moderating variable in the relationship between environmental hardships (bullying by peers or others can be potentially considered as an environmental hardship) and complex trauma and psychological pathology in adolescents (with anxiety being one of the cases). The study by Zhang et al. (2024) introduces peer support as a moderator in the relationship between being a victim of bullying and psychological well-being (Zhang et al., 2024), while the study by Healy et al. (2024) presents relationships with classmates as a moderating factor in the relationship between being a victim of bullying and psychological distress (Healy et al., 2024).

In conclusion, based on the theoretical and research foundations presented, and the available evidence, bullying is a significant factor in exacerbating anxiety among students with social anxiety. Furthermore, according to the survival resource theory, peer support has the capacity to moderate the relationship between bullying and anxiety. Based on this theoretical approach, among students with social anxiety, peer support can mitigate, weaken, or alter the impact of bullying behaviors on anxiety by creating a sense of access to help and support from peers. In this case, the vicious and destructive cycle of anxiety-avoidance and social withdrawal may be weakened. Despite the theoretical and research foundations reviewed, no studies were found that examined the role of peer support in the relationship between bullying and anxiety in middle school students with social anxiety in the city of Wasit, Iraq. This indicates a gap in knowledge and scientific understanding regarding potential pathways needed to assist middle school students with social anxiety in Iraq. As middle school students are in the adolescent stage and will assume various roles in society and the country as they transition into adolescence and adulthood, it is essential that they acquire the skills and capabilities needed to cope with their social anxiety and, consequently, with the behaviors of other students through scientific research findings. In this regard, the current study aims to provide a scientific answer to the question of whether peer support can moderate the relationship between bullying in schools and anxiety among middle school students with social anxiety in the city of Wasit, Iraq.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study is of a correlational type using structural equation modeling. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all first-grade secondary school students in Wasit City, Iraq, totaling 7,000 individuals in the fall of 2024. From this population, after administering the Social Anxiety Questionnaire by Connor et al. (2000) and obtaining a cutoff score of 40 or higher, and based on the table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), considering the potential invalidity of some questionnaires, 330 participants were selected. After the questionnaires were returned, 30 were invalid, reducing the sample size to 300. The inclusion criteria were consent to participate in the study and being enrolled in the first grade of secondary school in Iraq. The following tools were used in the study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Anxiety

To assess anxiety, the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) by Beck et al. (1988), which consists of 21 questions, was used. Each item in this questionnaire describes and measures one of the common symptoms of anxiety (mental, physical, and phobic symptoms). The respondent selects one of the four options in each item that reflects the severity of the anxiety. The response scale of this inventory ranges from 0 to 3, with a total score ranging from 0 to 63, where an increase in the score indicates a higher level of anxiety. The anxiety levels based on this scale are as follows: 0–7 (no or minimal anxiety), 8–15 (mild), 16–25 (moderate), and 26–63 (severe). This questionnaire has high reliability and validity. Beck et al. (1988) reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.92, test-retest reliability after one week as 0.75, and item correlations ranging from 0.30 to 0.76. The questionnaire has been tested for five types of validity: content, concurrent, construct, diagnostic, and factorial, all of which indicate its high efficacy in measuring the intensity of anxiety. For example, the correlation between scores from this questionnaire and the Hamilton Anxiety Scale scores was 0.51, and with the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale was 0.25 (Beck et al., 1988). Some studies in Iran have investigated the psychometric properties of this test. Kaviani and Mousavi (2008) provided extensive evidence for its validity and reliability in both healthy individuals and those with disorders in Iran. As evidence of its reliability in the Iranian population, Kaviani and Mousavi (2008) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 and a test-retest reliability of 0.83 with a one-month interval. As evidence of validity, the scores from this questionnaire showed a significant positive correlation of 0.73 with clinical evaluations in individuals with anxiety disorders by two independent evaluators, who were unaware of the Beck Anxiety Inventory scores for each participant. For the present study, this questionnaire was translated into Arabic, its validity was confirmed by five university professors, and its reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha in Iraq (Kaviani & Mousavi, 2008). The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire in the present study was 0.93.

2.2.2. School Bullying

To assess bullying in schools, the 12-item questionnaire by Alvarez Marin et al. (2022), which covers four areas: victimization (3 items), aggression (3 items), cyber

victimization (3 items), and cyber aggression (3 items), was used. The response scale for this questionnaire is five-point: never = 0, once or twice = 1, once or twice a month = 2, about once a week = 3, and more than once a week = 4. The student indicates how often in the past two months they have experienced or engaged in the behaviors described in each item. The score range for each of the four subscales is from 0 to 12, and an increase in scores indicates an increase in any of the dimensions of the questionnaire. At the same time, scores can be calculated for two dimensions: bullying victimization (direct or cyber) and aggressive bullying (direct or cyber), each of which has 6 items. Alvarez Marin et al. (2022) documented the factorial validity of the questionnaire through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and provided evidence of convergent and divergent validity by reporting significant correlations with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (ranging from -0.05 to -0.22, significant at $p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$), the Short Form of the Beck Depression Inventory (ranging from -0.16 to -0.27, significant at $p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.001$), and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (ranging from -0.16 to -0.29, significant at $p < 0.01$ or $p < 0.001$). As evidence of its reliability, the Cronbach's alpha for the four dimensions of victimization, aggression, cyber victimization, and cyber aggression were reported as 0.65, 0.70, 0.75, and 0.71, respectively, and the composite reliability for each dimension was reported as 0.72, 0.76, 0.81, and 0.75, with omega coefficients of 0.72, 0.72, 0.82, and 0.77, respectively (Álvarez-Marín et al., 2022). For use in the present study, this questionnaire was translated into Arabic, its validity was confirmed by five university professors, and its validity was tested through exploratory factor analysis, with reliability measured using Cronbach's alpha in Iraq. The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire in the present study for its four subscales (victimization, aggression, cyber victimization, and cyber aggression) was 0.71, 0.76, 0.77, and 0.96, respectively, and the overall Cronbach's alpha for the full questionnaire was 0.93.

2.2.3. Peer Support

To measure peer support, the questionnaire developed and validated by Mostafai Alaii and Mohsennajad (2020), which consists of 22 items covering informational support, emotional support, instrumental support, feedback/validation, and companionship support, was used. The response scale for this questionnaire is five-point: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4,

and strongly agree = 5. The score range for this questionnaire is from 22 to 110, and an increase in scores indicates an increase in perceived peer support. Mostafai Alaii and Mohsennajad (2020) documented the factorial construct validity of the questionnaire through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was reported as 0.935 (Mostafaei Alaei & Hosseinnezhad, 2020). For use in the present study, this questionnaire was translated into Arabic, its validity was confirmed by five university professors, and its validity was tested through exploratory factor analysis, with reliability measured using Cronbach's alpha in Iraq. The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire in the present study was 0.96.

2.3. Data Analysis

The research questionnaires were completed using self-reporting. The collected data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient, along with the mean and standard deviation. After checking statistical assumptions for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test and linearity of the relationships between variables through scatter plots, as well as other assumptions for hierarchical regression analysis, the data were analyzed using this method with SPSS software, version 26.

3. Findings and Results

The sample consisted of 300 participants with a distribution of family size and birth order as follows: 7 participants (33.2%) had families of up to four members, 68 participants (22.7%) had families of five or six members, and 225 participants (75%) had families with seven or more members. Regarding birth order, 78 participants (26%) were the first or second child, 153 participants (51%) were the third or fourth child, and 69 participants (23%) were the fifth child or higher. In terms of age, 169 participants (56.3%) were aged 13 or 14 years, while 131 participants (43.7%) were aged 15 or 16 years. The gender distribution was equal, with 150 females (50%) and 150 males (50%) in the sample.

Table 1 shows the mean, standard deviation, and correlation between the study variables.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Between Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Victimization of Bullying	-					
Aggression	**0.59	-				
Cyber Victimization	**0.73	**0.74	-			
Cyber Aggression	**0.83	**0.73	**0.85	-		
Anxiety	*0.52	**0.66	**0.67	**0.59	-	
Peer Support	**-0.33	**-0.35	**-0.30	**-0.29	**-0.31	-
Mean	13.20	13.32	13.53	14.33	65.31	74.37
Standard Deviation	2.68	2.99	2.65	2.40	15.15	23.35

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01*

As shown in Table 1, there is a significant positive relationship between the dimensions of school bullying and anxiety, and a significant negative relationship with peer support (p < 0.01). Additionally, a significant positive relationship between anxiety and peer support was found (p < 0.01). The results of hierarchical regression analysis to examine the moderating role of peer support in the relationship between school bullying and anxiety are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Predicting Anxiety via Bullying and Peer Support (Dependent Variable = Anxiety)

Predictor Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	b	b
Victimization	0.04	0.02	0.07
Aggression	**0.37	**0.35	**0.51
Cyber Victimization	**0.43	**0.43	**0.41
Cyber Aggression	-0.08	-0.06	-0.18

Peer Support	-	-0.08	-0.04
Victimization × Peer Support	-	-	*0.18
Aggression × Peer Support	-	-	*0.26
Cyber Victimization × Peer Support	-	-	**0.67
Cyber Aggression × Peer Support	-	-	-0.08
R or ΔR²	0.51	0.005	0.065
F or ΔF	**76.83	3.01	**11.13

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

As shown in Table 2, in the first step, among the four bullying dimensions, only aggression and cyber victimization had a significant coefficient for predicting anxiety, explaining 51% of the variance in this variable. In the second step, peer support did not contribute any significant added variance for predicting anxiety. In the third step, among the four interactions of bullying dimensions with peer support, the interactions of victimization × peer support, aggression × peer support, and cyber victimization × peer support produced a significant additional variance of 6.5% for predicting anxiety. These significant interactions mean that peer support moderated the relationship between bullying victimization, aggression, and cyber victimization with anxiety. Overall, based on the results, peer support moderated the relationship between victimization, aggression, and cyber victimization with anxiety.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the moderating role of peer support in the relationship between bullying in school and anxiety among middle school students with social anxiety in the city of Wasit, Iraq. The results indicated that peer support moderates the relationship between being a victim of bullying, being a victim of cyberbullying, and aggression with anxiety in students with social anxiety. Specifically, when peer support is low, being a victim of bullying—whether physical or cyberbullying—or even engaging in aggressive bullying behaviors increases anxiety in students with social anxiety. Conversely, when peer support is high, such effects are not observed. Additionally, regarding aggression, which is conceptually the opposite of being a victim of bullying and involves perpetrating bullying behaviors toward others, the results suggest that when peer support is low, aggressive bullying behaviors are linked to higher anxiety, but when peer support is high, such a relationship does not occur. These findings have significant theoretical and practical implications, which will be further discussed below.

In general, the moderating role of peer support in the relationship between being a victim of bullying, being a victim of cyberbullying, and aggression (engaging in bullying behaviors toward others) with anxiety in the current study is consistent with the results of Yearwood et al. (2019) regarding the moderating role in the relationship between environmental difficulties (bullying by peers or others can be considered a form of environmental stress) and complex trauma and psychological pathology in adolescents (Yearwood et al., 2019). It also aligns with the findings of Zhang et al. (2024) regarding the moderating role of peer support in the relationship between victimization from bullying and adolescents' psychological well-being (Zhang et al., 2024), as well as with the research by Healy et al. (2024) on the moderating role of relationships with classmates in the relationship between victimization from bullying and psychological distress (Healy et al., 2024). In the mentioned studies, like the present one, when peer support is high, the relationship between being a victim of bullying and distress, including psychological issues such as anxiety, is weak or non-significant.

Several important points need to be considered when interpreting the results of the current study. The moderating role of peer support in the relationship between bullying in school (in three significant aspects: being a victim of physical bullying, cyberbullying, and engaging in aggressive bullying behaviors) and anxiety is explained based on the theoretical approach of social resources, particularly survival resources. Peer support serves as a social support resource that provides comfort and psychological strength from peers. It is positively correlated with higher self-esteem and lower anxiety, which in turn leads to greater perceived competence in adolescents, particularly in educational settings like schools (de Beer et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Murphy et al., 2024). Therefore, especially for the two aspects of being a victim of physical bullying and cyberbullying, when peer support is high, it acts as a reliable source of support by providing assurance of help from friends and classmates. This reduces feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and fear, thus decreasing anxiety in socially anxious students who are victims of bullying. Similarly, in cases of aggression and engaging in bullying behaviors,

when peer support is high, bullying and aggression do not increase anxiety because the student engaging in such behaviors does not fear the consequences of their actions or potential retaliation from the victims.

This result highlights an important point: peer support, as a positive social and psychological resource, can benefit both victims of bullying and those who engage in bullying behaviors. This finding contextualizes the function of peer support, suggesting that it can serve different roles depending on the context. Specifically, for bullying aggression, peer support can help reduce the anxiety of those exhibiting such behaviors, and for victims of bullying, peer support functions to alleviate anxiety. The dual positive roles of peer support in these contrasting contexts emphasize the practical implication that if a peer support network can be dispersed among students engaged in bullying behaviors, it could potentially reduce these behaviors' anxiety-inducing consequences, thereby effectively managing and decreasing bullying.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The first limitation is that the study was conducted on middle school students with social anxiety in the city of Wasit, Iraq. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing the results to other populations. To address this limitation, the study should be replicated with different samples. Additionally, future research should investigate the role of anxiety in managing the behaviors of bullying perpetrators, alongside protective variables such as self-esteem and resilience in students. Finally, since peer support played a moderating role in the relationship between school bullying and anxiety in this study, it is recommended that educational programs focusing on how to build peer support networks and create supportive environments to enhance students' sense of empowerment be incorporated into short- to mid-term planning in secondary school curricula in Wasit. Moreover, strategies to reduce or diminish peer support for students exhibiting aggressive bullying behaviors should be considered in school climate management programs to control and manage such behaviors effectively.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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