



Adolescent Adjustment: How Social Withdrawal and Number of Friends Affect Peer Victimization

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Introduction

Social interaction between peers and friends is incredibly influential in the process of identity formation during adolescence, and poor relationships between peers can negatively affect the self-concept and give way to peer victimization (Paul & Cillessen, 2003). Rates of peer victimization on the individual is relatively stable throughout adolescence and could lead to a variety of issues for the individual, such as depression, lack of friends, and poor academic performance (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Previous studies have shown that having a higher number of friends means that the individual is less likely to be victimized by peers (Hodges et al., 1999), and that adolescents were more likely to be socially withdrawn when experiencing issues among their peers (Barveza et al., 2020).

The current study aimed to examine whether social withdrawal and number of friends predicted peer victimization. It was hypothesized that social withdrawal will be a positive predictor of peer victimization, and that having a higher total number of friends will be a negative predictor for peer victimization.

Method

A total of 1375 children ranging in age from 6 to 15 years old ($M_{Age} = 10.39$, $SD_{Age} = 1.35$; 57.2% female) participated in this study. There were 397 participants from Montréal, Canada and 978 participants from Barranquilla, Colombia. After parents provided informed consent and children provided assent, participants completed questionnaires during class time.

Peer victimization, social withdrawal, and number of friends were measured using peer nominations of classmates. Peer victimization was measured with three items (e.g., "Others do mean things to them"; $\alpha = .72$). Social withdrawal was measured with two items (e.g., "Someone who would rather play alone than with others"; $\alpha = .80$). Number of friends referred to the number of classmates who nominated them as a friend.



Figure 1. Peer victimization could lead to a variety of socioemotional issues in adolescence. Image via [news.missourista.edu](https://www.news.missourista.edu).

Results

A multiple regression was performed, regressing peer victimization on social withdrawal and number of friends. The full model was significant, $R^2 = .22$, $F(2, 1193) = 164.62$, $p < .05$. Variance in social withdrawal and number of friends accounted for 22% of the variance in peer victimization. Social withdrawal was a significant, positive predictor of peer victimization, such that higher levels of social withdrawal were associated with higher levels of peer victimization, $\beta = .41$, $t(1193) = 15.69$, $p < .05$. Number of friends was a significant, negative predictor of peer victimization such that having more friends was associated with lower levels of peer victimization, $\beta = -.15$, $t(1193) = -5.78$, $p < .05$.

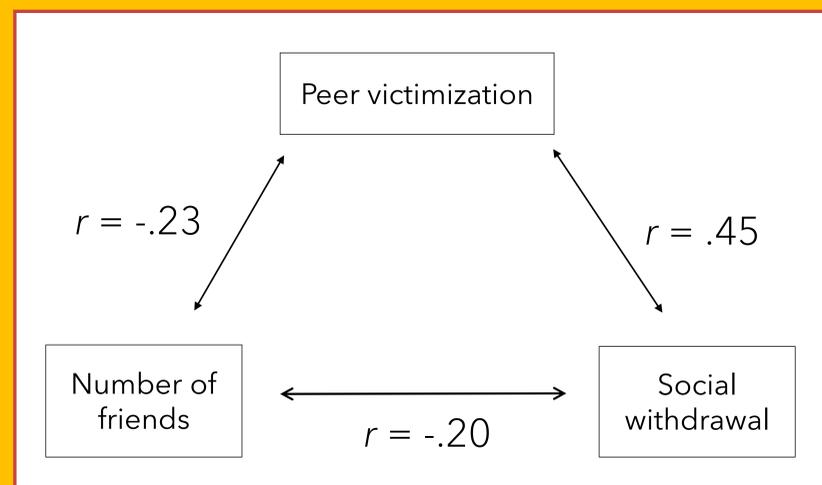


Figure 2. Correlations between peer victimization, number of friends, and social withdrawal.

Discussion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis in that social withdrawal was a positive predictor of peer victimization and that having more friends was a negative predictor for peer victimization. This indicates that being more socially accepted by friends and peers, and feeling less isolated, led to a lesser likelihood that an adolescent would be harassed or victimized by their peers. There was also relatively consistent results between participants in Montréal, Canada and Barranquilla, Colombia.

Future directions for this study could be to analyze if social withdrawal, total number of friends, and peer victimization are maintained in a cyclical relationship or a cause-and-effect relationship, as well as to research what intervention methods are best to reduce rates of peer victimization. Parent/guardian and child relationships and that effect on social withdrawal, number of friends, and peer victimization is another study that could be considered. Further cross-cultural studies should be conducted and may yield more diverse results.

References

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