

## School Climate and Peer Victimization as Predictors of Self-Esteem and Identity Continuity Among Minority Adolescents

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### Abstract

*Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage during which various external influences shape identity formation and self-worth. This study investigates how school climate and peer victimisation jointly influence self-esteem and identity continuity in adolescents, with particular attention to minority youth. Using a sample of 150 adolescents, multiple regression and interaction analyses revealed that a supportive and inclusive school climate was positively associated with stronger identity continuity and healthier self-concept. At the same time, experiences of peer victimisation had a detrimental impact on both self-esteem and identity development. Consistent with prior findings (Bear et al., 2015; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), the results highlight how a nurturing environment promotes resilience and provides adolescents with a sense of belonging that buffers them against negative social experiences. The findings highlight not only the independent effects of school climate and peer victimisation but also their interactive influence in shaping developmental trajectories. For minority students, who often face ethnic victimisation or discrimination (Benner et al., 2018), these dynamics can be especially pronounced, amplifying risks to psychological and academic adjustment. By situating these results within broader literature on school-based inclusion (Juvonen et al., 2019), the study underscores the importance of cultivating equitable, safe, and inclusive educational settings that can promote resilience, continuity of identity, and overall well-being during a formative life stage.*

**Keywords:** Peer Victimization, Self Esteem, Minority Adolescents.

### Introduction

Adolescence is widely recognised as one of the most critical stages of human development, marked by rapid psychological, social, and emotional changes. During this period, individuals face the essential developmental task of forming a coherent sense of self, a process Erikson (1968) famously described as the resolution of the identity versus role confusion crisis. Successful navigation of this stage fosters identity continuity, which refers to a consistent, unified self-concept that connects past, present, and anticipated future roles. Closely tied to identity development is self-esteem, a foundational psychological construct that shapes how adolescents perceive their own worth and competence across various life domains, including peer relationships, school engagement, and broader community involvement (Harter, 2012). Both identity continuity and self-esteem are not constructed in isolation. Still, they are deeply influenced by adolescents' social ecologies, especially the environments in which they spend most of their time, such as schools and peer groups.

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### **Role of School Climate in Adolescent Development**

School climate, defined as students' shared perceptions of fairness, inclusivity, safety, and emotional support, has been consistently linked with positive developmental outcomes. A favourable school climate fosters a sense of belonging, academic motivation, and psychological well-being (Bear et al., 2015; Wang & Degol, 2016). Conversely, a hostile climate, characterised by exclusion, bias, or lack of supportive teacher–student relationships, can undermine both self-esteem and identity continuity, particularly for students from minority groups. For these students, who may already face systemic inequities and microaggressions, perceptions of school fairness and inclusivity are not just academic concerns but are central to their overall psychosocial well-being.

Santo and colleagues (2019) emphasised that adolescents' perceptions of school fairness and support can buffer the detrimental impact of ethnic victimisation, especially in culturally diverse schools. Their findings underscore the importance of contextual factors, suggesting that identity development unfolds not only as a personal endeavour but also as a socially embedded process shaped by institutional and interpersonal dynamics. In other words, schools are not neutral settings; they can either promote resilience by offering inclusive environments or exacerbate vulnerability when social justice and fairness are lacking.

### **Impact of Peer Victimization on Self-esteem and Identity Continuity**

Alongside school climate, peer relations form another powerful influence on adolescent development. Peer victimisation, including bullying, exclusion, and verbal harassment, poses significant risks to both self-esteem and identity formation. Espelage and Swearer (2003) highlighted how persistent victimisation erodes adolescents' sense of self-worth and contributes to mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. Victimization disrupts the developmental task of forming a positive identity by creating experiences of shame, isolation, and invalidation. For minority students, peer victimisation often intersects with ethnic or cultural biases, producing compounded effects on psychosocial well-being (Benner et al., 2018). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals derive their sense of self-worth and meaning from their group memberships. When adolescents experience discrimination or exclusion from peers based on ethnicity, religion, or other minority statuses, their social identities are directly threatened. This disruption not only lowers self-esteem but also destabilises the sense of continuity that is essential for healthy identity development. Conversely, environments that validate and affirm minority identities promote resilience and foster positive identity trajectories.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. Adolescents develop within interconnected systems, where microsystems, such as schools and peer groups, interact with broader societal structures to shape their identity and self-worth. A favourable school climate and supportive peer networks can serve as protective factors that mitigate the risks associated with negative experiences, such as victimisation. Similarly, minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) suggests that unique stressors faced by marginalised groups, including discrimination and bias, create vulnerabilities in psychosocial adjustment. However, the presence of affirming institutional climates can buffer these risks and foster resilience.

Despite a growing body of literature, gaps remain in understanding how school climate and peer victimisation interact to influence both identity continuity and self-esteem simultaneously. While prior studies (e.g., Santo et al., 2019; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014) have highlighted the protective role of school climate, fewer investigations have examined how these contextual and interpersonal factors interact to predict developmental outcomes, particularly among minority youth. This is a crucial area of inquiry, given the increasing diversity of school populations and the persistent disparities in psychosocial well-being experienced by marginalised groups.

### **Significance**

The current research seeks to address these gaps by examining the combined and interactive effects of school climate and peer victimisation on adolescent self-esteem and identity continuity. Using a sample of 150 adolescents, the study examines how positive perceptions of school climate may promote resilience and buffer against the negative consequences of peer victimisation, particularly for minority students. By integrating insights from Erikson's identity theory, social identity theory, and ecological models of development, this study aims to extend existing research and provide theoretical and practical implications for fostering inclusive educational environments. Ultimately, the findings can inform interventions that enhance resilience, support identity development, and promote psychosocial well-being among diverse adolescent populations.

### **Methodology**

#### **School Climate**

The Delaware School Climate Survey – Student Version (DSCS-SV) assessed school climate through a 5-item subscale focused on students' views regarding fairness, teacher support, safety, and inclusiveness (Bear et al., 2011). Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal reliability for this sample was satisfactory ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

#### **Peer Victimization**

Peer victimisation was assessed using the Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (RPEQ), developed by Prinstein et al. (2001). The 6-item version centred on the occurrence of bullying, social exclusion, and relational aggression encountered in the previous three months. Participants answered using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Several times a week). The scale exhibited high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

#### **Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem was assessed utilising a modified 10-item version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1965). The items indicated global self-esteem and were rated using a 5-point Likert scale that spanned from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The internal reliability of this study was strong ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

#### **Identity Continuity**

Identity continuity was evaluated using a revised 5-item iteration of the Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ) (Balistreri et al., 1995), which emphasises the perceived consistency and coherence of an individual's identity across time. Feedback was gathered using a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all accurate, 5 = Extremely accurate). This measure demonstrated satisfactory reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

## Procedure

Surveys were distributed online, with informed consent obtained from participants and their guardians. Data Collection was anonymous. Data was analysed using SPSS, including Pearson's correlations and multiple regression.

## Results

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

| Variable            | Mean | SD   |
|---------------------|------|------|
| School Climate      | 3.41 | 0.71 |
| Peer Victimization  | 2.59 | 0.89 |
| Self-Esteem         | 4.60 | 0.51 |
| Identity Continuity | 3.67 | 0.47 |

The mean scores indicate that students generally perceived the school climate positively ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and reported relatively low peer victimization ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). Self-esteem levels were moderately high ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ), while identity continuity was also above the scale midpoint ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ).

## Group-Level Comparisons

Minority students reported slightly lower school climate perceptions and higher victimization compared to majority peers. However, the differences were not statistically significant at the group level, suggesting variability within groups.

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix**

|                          | SC | PV  | SE   | IC   |
|--------------------------|----|-----|------|------|
| School Climate (SC)      | 1  | .04 | .15  | .24  |
| Peer Victimization (PV)  |    | 1   | -.54 | -.52 |
| Self-Esteem (SE)         |    |     | 1    | .30  |
| Identity Continuity (IC) |    |     |      | 1    |

These results suggest that while school climate plays a role, peer victimization is strongly correlated with both self-esteem and identity continuity.

## Regression Analyses

### Model 1: Predicting Self-Esteem

$R^2 = 0.32$ ,  $F(2,147) = 34.54$ ,  $p < .001$

School Climate ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p = .011$ )

Peer Victimization ( $\beta = -0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ )

### Model 2: Predicting Identity Continuity

$R^2 = 0.34$ ,  $F(2,147) = 37.65$ ,  $p < .001$

School Climate ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $p < .001$ )

Peer Victimization ( $\beta = -0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ )

### Model 3: Interaction Effect on Identity Continuity

$R^2 = 0.38$ ,  $F(3,146) = 29.70$ ,  $p < .001$

The interaction between School Climate and Peer Victimization ( $\beta = 0.12, p = .036$ ) suggests that a more positive school climate reduces the negative effect of peer victimization on identity continuity.

## **Discussion**

This study offers strong evidence that both peer victimisation and school climate function as significant determinants of adolescents' psychosocial development, particularly in shaping self-esteem and identity continuity. The findings highlight the dual nature of adolescent experiences: while peer victimisation can destabilise identity development, an affirming and equitable school environment can serve as a compensatory buffer that minimises harm. Such results underscore that the school setting is not merely an academic space but a primary developmental ecology where social relationships, values, and self-concepts are negotiated and solidified.

### **School Climate as a Protective Factor**

The observation that a nurturing and equitable school climate protects minority youth from the adverse psychological impacts of peer victimisation aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which emphasises the interplay between individual development and contextual environments. Schools, situated within the mesosystem, are uniquely positioned to mediate experiences of inclusion, fairness, and belonging. A favourable school climate characterised by inclusivity, teacher support, and peer cooperation provides adolescents with a sense of predictability and safety, both of which are essential for the consolidation of identity continuity.

Moreover, the noteworthy interaction effect observed here, where harm to identity continuity is reduced in inclusive school environments even when victimisation occurs, illustrates the resilience-promoting role of institutional contexts. These findings align with those of Santo et al. (2019), who demonstrated that perceptions of fairness and inclusivity mitigate the negative consequences of ethnic victimisation in culturally diverse schools. Together, this body of research suggests that identity development is not solely an intrapersonal process but one that is co-constructed through the broader social climate.

### **Minority Youth and Identity Vulnerability**

The heightened vulnerability of minority students to identity disruption when faced with hostile or exclusionary experiences reflects patterns documented in research on acculturation and racial-ethnic identity development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Adolescents from marginalised groups often contend with dual pressures: navigating normative developmental challenges while also negotiating stigmatised identities in contexts where they may feel devalued. When peer victimisation intersects with systemic inequities, the risk of diminished self-worth and fragmented identity continuity becomes pronounced. This underscores the moral and developmental imperative for schools to enact equity-driven practices that actively counter exclusion.

Although this study shows that a favourable school climate does not eliminate the impact of peer victimisation, the moderating influence highlights that even partial protective effects can significantly shape trajectories of resilience. Adolescents who perceive their school environment as supportive may interpret negative peer encounters as isolated incidents rather than reflections of their self-worth or broader social standing.

### **Developmental Pathways and Theoretical Implications**

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is a critical period for identity exploration and self-esteem development, as theorised by Erikson (1968). The disruption of these processes

through persistent negative peer experiences can have cascading effects on future psychosocial adjustment. However, consistent with resilience theory (Masten, 2014), protective factors such as supportive school climates can enable "ordinary magic", the capacity for positive adaptation despite adversity. This interplay between risk and resilience highlights the need to address both individual experiences of victimisation and systemic school-level practices.

The findings also align with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that individuals derive self-concept from group memberships. For minority youth, being integrated into an inclusive school community affirms their group belonging, thereby stabilising identity continuity and bolstering their self-esteem. Conversely, exclusionary climates may amplify perceptions of marginalisation, undermining both personal and collective identity development.

### **Implications for Intervention and Policy**

The results carry significant implications for educational policy and intervention design. Preventing victimisation alone is insufficient; schools must simultaneously cultivate climates that affirm diversity and promote psychosocial safety. Several evidence-based strategies emerge:

*Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs:* SEL interventions that emphasise empathy, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution have been shown to reduce bullying behaviours and increase students' sense of belonging (Durlak et al., 2011).

*Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:* Curricula and teaching practices that integrate diverse cultural narratives validate minority students' identities and counteract exclusionary norms.

*Peer Mentorship and Cooperative Learning:* Structured opportunities for cross-group friendships foster empathy and reduce intergroup bias, creating peer dynamics that are less conducive to victimisation.

*Restorative Justice Practices:* Shifting from punitive discipline to restorative approaches encourages Accountability, relationship repair, and community building within schools.

*Whole-School Climate Initiatives:* Programs that engage teachers, administrators, parents, and students in co-creating inclusive policies ensure that equity and belonging are institutional priorities.

By adopting multi-level approaches that simultaneously address individual behaviours and systemic contexts, schools can transform into environments that actively promote resilience and psychosocial flourishing.

### **Toward Resilience and Flourishing**

Ultimately, the findings reinforce the principle that adolescents thrive when supported by both interpersonal relationships and institutional structures that affirm their identities. For diverse adolescent populations, resilience is not a fixed trait but an outcome of dynamic interactions between risks (such as peer victimisation) and supports (such as positive school climates). Schools that embrace inclusivity, fairness, and belonging not only mitigate harm but also actively promote the developmental tasks of adolescence: the integration of a coherent identity, the maintenance of healthy self-esteem, and the emergence of psychosocial well-being.

### **Conclusion**

This research highlights the pivotal role of school climate and peer victimisation in shaping adolescent self-esteem and identity continuity, underscoring the view that identity development is a socially embedded process (Erikson, 1968; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The findings demonstrate that while peer victimisation undermines adolescents' self-worth and sense of identity, a supportive

and inclusive school environment can buffer these risks and promote resilience. This aligns with socioecological theories, which highlight the interaction of individual and contextual factors in development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), and with identity development models that emphasise the integration of personal, cultural, and social dimensions (Santo et al., 2019).

From a policy perspective, these results highlight the urgent need for schools to adopt comprehensive anti-bullying policies that extend beyond disciplinary approaches to foster belonging, equity, and cultural responsiveness. Initiatives such as peer mentorship programs, teacher professional development on inclusivity, and restorative practices can reduce the prevalence and impact of victimisation. Furthermore, school psychologists and counsellors should be equipped to design interventions that not only address harm but also actively support the exploration of positive identity and psychosocial well-being among diverse student populations.

For future research, longitudinal designs are needed to examine the long-term effects of school climate and victimisation on identity trajectories, particularly across diverse cultural contexts. Exploring the mediating role of resilience and coping strategies could deepen our understanding of how adolescents adapt to adversity. By integrating theoretical frameworks with practical interventions, this line of work can continue to inform practices that ensure schools are not only sites of academic learning but also developmental contexts that safeguard and nurture the identities of all adolescents.

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