

RESEARCH TITLE

**Cyberbullying and Social Support in Secondary Schools:
Transforming Peer Relations from Risk to Emotional Resilience**

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Abstract

Adolescence is a critical period during which peer relationships influence emotional development, identity formation, and overall well-being. In secondary schools, these relationships can be a source of support, confidence, and motivation, but they may also become harmful when transformed into cyberbullying, exclusion, or emotional aggression. This article explores the dual role of peer relationships among high school students, examining how cyberbullying contributes to psychological harm, social isolation, and academic disengagement, while social support operates as a protective factor that restores emotional resilience, belonging, and self-worth. Drawing on current literature, the discussion highlights the moderating role of supportive peers, empathetic teachers, and family involvement in reducing the emotional consequences of cyberbullying. The article also emphasizes how schools can intentionally transform peer relations from a source of risk into a source of emotional protection through relational climate, digital responsibility education, and the development of supportive school cultures. Ultimately, the article argues that positive peer connections are not only protective but are essential for building emotionally safe, resilient, and inclusive learning environments in secondary education.

Key Words: Cyberbullying; Social Support; Adolescents; Peer Relationships; Emotional Wellbeing; Secondary Education; School Climate.

التنمر الإلكتروني والدعم الاجتماعي في المدارس الثانوية: تحويل علاقات الأقران من الخطر إلى الصمود العاطفي

المستخلص

تُعدّ مرحلة المراهقة فترةً حرجة تتأثر فيها عملية النمو الانفعالي وتشكّل الهوية النفسية والرفاه العام بشكل كبير بعلاقات الأقران. وفي المدارس الثانوية، يمكن لهذه العلاقات أن تكون مصدرًا للدعم والثقة والدافعية، غير أنها قد تتحول في بعض الأحيان إلى مصدر للأذى عندما تتجلى في صورة تنمر إلكتروني، أو إقصاء، أو عدوان انفعالي. يستعرض هذا المقال الدور المزدوج لعلاقات الأقران لدى طلاب المرحلة الثانوية، من خلال تحليل إسهام التنمر الإلكتروني في إحداث أضرار نفسية، وعزلة اجتماعية، وتراجع في الانخراط الدراسي، في مقابل الدور الوقائي الذي يضطلع به الدعم الاجتماعي في تعزيز الصمود العاطفي، والشعور بالانتماء، وتقدير الذات. وبالاستناد إلى الأدبيات الحديثة، تُبرز المناقشة الدور التعديلي الذي يؤديه الأقران الداعمون، والمعلمون المتعاطفون، ومشاركة الأسرة في الحدّ من الآثار الانفعالية السلبية للتنمر الإلكتروني. كما يؤكد المقال على قدرة المدارس على تحويل علاقات الأقران بوعيٍ وتخطيطٍ من مصدر خطرٍ إلى مصدر حماية عاطفية، من خلال تحسين المناخ العلائقي، وتعزيز التربية على المسؤولية الرقمية، وبناء ثقافات مدرسية داعمة. ويخلص المقال إلى أن الروابط الإيجابية بين الأقران ليست فقط عاملاً وقائياً، بل تُعدّ عنصراً أساسياً في بناء بيئات تعليمية آمنة انفعالياً، تتسم بالمرونة والشمول في التعليم الثانوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنمر الإلكتروني؛ الدعم الاجتماعي؛ المراهقون؛ علاقات الأقران؛ الرفاه النفسي؛ التعليم الثانوي؛ المناخ المدرسي.

1. Introduction

High school years represent a critical stage in adolescents' social and emotional development. At this age, students are not only concerned with academic achievement but also with building their identity, forming friendships, and seeking acceptance within their peer groups. Positive peer relationships during this period are strongly associated with higher levels of wellbeing, emotional stability, and academic engagement (Mishna et al., 2016). Research has shown that the quality of these relationships plays an essential role in shaping students' sense of belonging, self-worth, and psychological resilience (Arató et al., 2022).

These connections can serve as a protective factor when they provide encouragement, empathy, and social support, but they can also become harmful when they lead to exclusion, hostility, or various forms of bullying, particularly in socially competitive environments (Kahi, 2024). With the rapid expansion of digital communication, student interactions have shifted from face-to-face conversations to online platforms. While digital tools have made it easier for teenagers to stay connected, they have also exposed them to new risks—most notably cyberbullying. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is not limited to school hours or physical spaces; it often follows students into their homes and personal devices, making it persistent and emotionally taxing (Lee & Chun, 2022).

At the same time, peer support has emerged as a powerful protective factor, helping adolescents cope with emotional challenges and fostering a stronger sense of safety within the school community. Supportive friendships and positive teacher–student relationships are linked to lower stress levels, higher motivation, and greater participation in school life (Mishna et al., 2016).

This article explores the nature of student relationships in secondary schools and examines the tension between the risks of cyberbullying and the benefits of social support. It aims to highlight how schools, teachers, and students themselves can transform peer relationships from a potential source of harm into a powerful source of emotional strength, resilience, and academic motivation.

Methodology

This article is based on a systematic review of recent literature (2020-2025) on cyberbullying and social support in secondary schools. The search was conducted on several academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, and ScienceDirect. The search terms included "cyberbullying", "social support", "adolescents", "secondary schools", "peer relationships", and "mental health". The selected articles were analyzed to identify the main themes, findings, and recommendations related to the topic.

2. The Nature of Student Relationships in Secondary Schools

High school is a transformative stage where students move from the dependence of childhood toward the early stages of emotional and social maturity. During this period, relationships with peers become central to their lives, contributing to identity formation, belonging, and social approval. Acceptance, emotional support, and recognition are not merely social desires but psychological needs that significantly influence students' self-esteem, emotional stability, and motivation to learn (Arató et al., 2022).

Positive peer relationships help adolescents develop communication skills, empathy, and cooperation. When students feel respected and valued by their peers, they are more likely to engage in classroom activities, participate in collaborative learning, and express their opinions with confidence, which in turn protects them from loneliness, stress, and academic disengagement (Mishna et al., 2016).

However, relationships in secondary school environments are complex and dynamic. They are shaped not only by personality traits and shared interests but also by social expectations, competition, and the pressures of digital identity. Some relationships provide emotional support and encouragement, while others may involve exclusion, mockery, or attempts to gain popularity at the expense of others (Kahi, 2024). The fear of rejection or public embarrassment often leads students to alter their behavior to conform to group norms, even when such conformity conflicts with their personal values or emotional comfort.

In this sensitive environment, students are continuously negotiating their social identity—seeking to balance individuality with the need for group belonging. This makes peer relationships a powerful source of emotional growth, but also a potential source of psychological vulnerability (Lee & Chun, 2022).

3. Understanding Cyberbullying in Secondary Schools

The widespread use of smartphones, messaging applications, and social media has transformed the way adolescents communicate. Digital spaces have become extensions of their social life, allowing them to connect, share, and express themselves. However, these platforms have also created new forms of aggression that are often less visible to adults but deeply harmful to students—most notably cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined as the intentional and repeated use of digital communication technologies to harm, intimidate, or socially exclude others (Kahi, 2024).

Recent studies indicate that cyberbullying among adolescents has increased in both prevalence and severity, especially in secondary education, where peer approval and social image hold significant importance (Lee & Chun, 2022). Unlike traditional bullying, which typically occurs in specific physical locations such as classrooms or playgrounds, cyberbullying can take place at any time and place. It follows students into their homes via mobile devices, resulting in continuous emotional distress, without providing victims a “safe space” to recover (Arató et al., 2022).

One of the most damaging aspects of cyberbullying is its public and persistent nature. Hurtful messages, edited images, or mocking comments can be shared instantly with a wide audience, intensifying humiliation and making it difficult for the victim to escape the experience (Kahi, 2024). Prolonged exposure to cyberbullying has been linked to anxiety, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, sleep disturbances, and decreased academic engagement (Mishna et al., 2016; Nixon, 2014).

Moreover, victims often blame themselves or feel powerless to stop the situation, especially when the aggressor uses anonymous accounts or group chats—common behaviors among teenagers seeking popularity or group acceptance (Lee & Chun, 2022). In some cases, the emotional impact of cyberbullying is even greater than face-to-face bullying, due to its constant accessibility, wider audience, and invisibility to teachers or parents (Kahi, 2024).

Cyberbullying is not merely a technological phenomenon—it is a relational and psychological issue that reflects students’ social needs, insecurities, and challenges in managing peer dynamics in both physical and digital environments.

Why Do Students Bully Online?

Understanding why adolescents engage in cyberbullying requires examining the emotional and social motivations behind their behavior. One major driver is the desire for social recognition and popularity. Teenagers often seek validation through likes, reposts, or group inclusion, and some may harm others online as a way to gain attention, control, or influence within their peer group (Mishna et al., 2016).

Another key factor is anonymity and emotional distance. Digital platforms allow students to hide behind screens or fake accounts, which reduces empathy and increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior, as adolescents do not directly witness the target's emotional reaction (Kahi, 2024).

Cyberbullying can also be a misguided coping mechanism. Some students who have experienced bullying themselves may attempt to protect their social image or avoid becoming victims again by taking on the role of aggressor (Lee & Chun, 2022).

Furthermore, the absence of adult supervision in digital communication gives students the impression that online behaviors are less regulated, decreasing accountability and increasing the tendency toward harmful interactions. Peer pressure also plays a significant role. When group norms normalize mocking, gossiping, or excluding others, many students may join in, even if they personally disagree, out of fear of social rejection (Arató et al., 2022).

In essence, students do not bully online simply because digital tools allow it, but because of social pressure, identity struggles, the search for approval, emotional insecurity, and a lack of guidance in responsible digital behavior.

4. Social Support as a Protective Factor

Social support is widely recognized as one of the most effective protective factors against the emotional harm caused by cyberbullying and other forms of peer aggression. When adolescents feel understood, valued, and supported, whether by peers, teachers, or family members, they are more resilient in coping with emotional stress, rejection, or digital victimization (Mishna et al., 2016) (World Health Organization, 2024). Supportive relationships act as a psychological buffer, reducing the negative impact of online harassment and strengthening students' emotional stability, self-esteem, and sense of belonging (Arató et al., 2022).

Peer support, in particular, plays a central role in secondary schools. When classmates offer empathy, stand up for victims, or include them in social activities, they help reduce feelings of isolation and shame, which are commonly associated with cyberbullying (Lee & Chun, 2022). Students who feel socially included are less likely to experience anxiety or disengage from school, even if they have been targeted by online aggression. Research has shown that the presence of even one supportive friend can significantly reduce the emotional and academic consequences of cyberbullying (Mishna et al., 2016; Espinoza, 2017).

Teacher–student relationships also serve as a crucial protective layer. Adolescents are more likely to seek emotional help or disclose experiences of cyberbullying when they trust their teachers and perceive them as caring, open, and understanding. Creating a psychologically safe classroom environment encourages students to report harmful behaviors and engage positively in peer relationships (Arató et al., 2022). Furthermore, teachers can actively guide students in understanding digital ethics, empathy, and responsible communication, which contributes to a healthier relational climate both online and offline.

Family involvement is equally vital. Emotional support from parents, open communication, and monitoring of online behavior can help adolescents interpret cyberbullying experiences more accurately, respond effectively, and avoid internalizing harmful messages (Kahi, 2024; Garaigordobil & Martínez-Valderrey, 2017). When parents validate their children's emotions and provide reassurance, adolescents are more likely to maintain their self-worth despite negative online experiences.

Ultimately, social support functions not only as a response to cyberbullying but also as a preventive mechanism. When schools cultivate a culture of inclusion, empathy, and

constructive peer interaction, the likelihood of cyberbullying decreases, and students' sense of safety and connection increases (Lee & Chun, 2022). Social support transforms peer relationships from a potential source of emotional harm into a foundation for wellbeing, resilience, and academic motivation.

5. Cyberbullying vs. Social Support: A Comparative Perspective

Cyberbullying and social support represent two opposite forces that shape the emotional and social experiences of adolescents in secondary schools. While cyberbullying undermines students' emotional safety, self-worth, and sense of belonging, social support acts as a protective and restorative factor that helps repair emotional harm, rebuild confidence, and strengthen resilience (Mishna et al., 2016). These two elements coexist within the same school environment, reflecting contrasting realities: one characterized by exclusion and aggression, and the other by empathy, inclusion, and connection.

Cyberbullying typically creates a negative social climate where students feel unsafe, judged, or isolated. In such environments, students are more likely to experience academic disengagement, stress, and emotional withdrawal (Lee & Chun, 2022). Conversely, environments that promote social support, through peer empathy, teacher connection, and family involvement, contribute to a positive school climate, where students feel accepted, emotionally secure, and academically motivated (Arató et al., 2022).

At the social interaction level, cyberbullying breaks down trust and damages relationships among students, whereas social support strengthens those relationships and encourages cooperation, peer bonding, and emotional expression (Kahi, 2024). Students who feel supported are less likely to internalize harmful messages or develop negative self-perceptions, even if they experience online aggression (Mishna et al., 2016).

From a psychological perspective, cyberbullying increases emotional vulnerability, leading to anxiety, shame, or depressive symptoms. Social support, on the other hand, promotes emotional recovery by reinforcing feelings of worth, belonging, and competence. In fact, adolescents who maintain even one supportive relationship, whether with a friend, parent, or teacher, show significantly higher emotional resilience and school engagement (Arató et al., 2022).

In short, while cyberbullying reinforces fear, isolation, and emotional instability, social support promotes connection, well-being, and confidence. This contrast highlights the critical role of schools in cultivating supportive environments that protect students from psychological harm and help transform peer relationships into sources of emotional strength.

Feature	Cyberbullying	Social Support
Psychological Impact	Increases anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem	Fosters resilience, self-worth, and emotional stability
Social Climate	Creates a climate of fear, isolation, and mistrust	Promotes a sense of safety, belonging, and inclusion
Academic Engagement	Leads to disengagement, poor concentration, and absenteeism	Enhances motivation, participation, and academic performance
Peer Relationships	Damages trust and encourages social exclusion	Strengthens bonds, empathy, and prosocial behavior
Long-term Outcome	Risk of chronic mental health issues and social maladjustment	Development of strong coping skills and positive social networks

6. Discussion

The findings of this review have significant implications for educational practice and policy. The dual role of peer relationships as both a risk factor (cyberbullying) and a protective factor (social support) highlights the need for a holistic approach to promoting student wellbeing in secondary schools. While traditional anti-bullying programs have focused on punitive measures, the evidence suggests that a proactive and relational approach is more effective. This involves not only addressing the negative behaviors associated with cyberbullying but also actively cultivating a culture of empathy, respect, and support.

The role of the school climate is paramount. A positive school climate, characterized by trusting relationships between students and teachers, clear expectations for behavior, and a sense of community, can buffer the negative effects of cyberbullying and promote prosocial behavior. This aligns with the concept of "relational schools," where the quality of relationships is seen as central to the learning process.

Furthermore, the importance of digital citizenship education cannot be overstated. As adolescents' social lives increasingly play out in online spaces, they need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to navigate these environments safely and responsibly. This includes understanding the impact of their online actions, developing empathy for others, and knowing how to seek help when they or their peers are in trouble.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of a multi-tiered system of support that involves students, teachers, parents, and the wider community. Empowering students to be leaders in creating a positive school culture, providing teachers with the training and resources to support students' social and emotional needs, and engaging parents as partners in promoting digital wellness are all critical components of a comprehensive approach to preventing cyberbullying and fostering resilience.

8. Practical Implications and Recommendations

Schools serve not only as academic institutions but also as social environments where students learn how to interact, build relationships, and develop emotional competencies. The way a school manages peer interactions can determine whether relationships become a source of risk—such as cyberbullying, exclusion, and social anxiety—or a source of protection that promotes trust, well-being, and resilience (Mishna et al., 2016). Transforming peer relations from harmful to supportive requires intentional efforts in school culture, teacher involvement, and student empowerment.

First, schools can create a protective relational climate by promoting norms of empathy, inclusion, and mutual respect. When students are explicitly taught how to communicate responsibly, resolve conflict peacefully, and understand the emotional consequences of online actions, they are less likely to engage in harmful digital behavior (Lee & Chun, 2022). Establishing clear policies and open reporting systems also helps students feel safe to speak up when they witness or experience cyberbullying—reducing secrecy and silence around harmful behaviors.

Second, teachers play a vital role in shaping peer dynamics. A teacher who fosters a supportive classroom environment, models empathetic behavior, and builds trusting relationships with students can significantly reduce the likelihood of bullying (Cantone et al., 2015). When teachers are trained to recognize the signs of cyberbullying and intervene effectively, they can provide immediate support to victims and guide aggressors toward more constructive behaviors.

Third, empowering students to become agents of positive change is a powerful strategy. Peer-

led initiatives, such as anti-bullying campaigns, peer mentoring programs, and digital citizenship workshops, can foster a sense of shared responsibility and encourage students to stand up for one another (Zych et al., 2015). When students are actively involved in creating a positive school culture, they are more likely to internalize and promote prosocial norms.

Finally, schools must engage with parents and the wider community to create a unified front against cyberbullying. Workshops for parents on digital literacy, online safety, and the importance of open communication can help bridge the gap between home and school, ensuring that students receive consistent support and guidance (Garaigordobil & Martínez-Valderrey, 2017).

By implementing these strategies, schools can transform peer relationships from a potential source of harm into a powerful engine for emotional resilience, social connection, and academic success.

9. Conclusion

Peer relationships are a cornerstone of adolescent development, but in the digital age, they present a dual potential: they can be a source of profound support or a conduit for relentless cyberbullying. This article has explored the complex interplay between these two forces, highlighting how cyberbullying can inflict significant psychological harm, while social support from peers, teachers, and family can serve as a powerful protective buffer. The evidence suggests that the negative impacts of cyberbullying—such as anxiety, depression, and academic disengagement—can be mitigated by fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment.

The transformation of peer relations from risk to protection is not a passive process but an active and intentional one. It requires a multi-faceted approach that includes cultivating a positive school climate, educating students about digital responsibility, empowering them to support one another, and fostering strong partnerships between schools and families. By prioritizing the development of empathetic, respectful, and supportive relationships, schools can create environments where adolescents feel safe, valued, and connected. Ultimately, building a culture of social support is not just a strategy to combat cyberbullying; it is a fundamental investment in the emotional well-being, resilience, and future success of all students.

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