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Understanding Psychosocial Determinants of Adolescent Bullying in Türkiye

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Received: 19 August 2025; Accepted: 12 November 2025; Published: 28 January 2026

ABSTRACT: Background: Bullying during adolescence is shaped by numerous psychosocial factors such as family dynamics, attachment, and peer relationships. This study aims to examine parental acceptance-rejection, attachment styles, and social exclusion factors as key psychosocial variables predicting bullying behavior in adolescents. **Methods:** In a cross-sectional study conducted with 349 high school students in Hakkari, Türkiye. Data were collected using the Olweus Bullying Scale, the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Scale, the Social Exclusion Scale, and the Three-Dimensional Attachment Styles Scale. Independent samples *t*-tests, one-way ANOVAs, Pearson correlations, and hierarchical regression analyses were performed. **Results:** Research findings reveal that peer bullying varies significantly according to gender, class level, parents' educational level, and socio-economic status. Furthermore, our findings indicate that social exclusion ($\beta = 0.506, p < 0.01$) and avoidant attachment ($\beta = 0.162, p < 0.01$) positively predict peer bullying, while secure attachment ($\beta = -0.205, p < 0.01$), maternal ($\beta = -0.385, p < 0.01$) and paternal ($\beta = -0.217, p < 0.01$) acceptance/rejection negatively predict bullying. The final regression model explains approximately 55% of the variance in bullying. **Conclusion:** Our findings indicate that social exclusion, parental acceptance/rejection, and secure or avoidant attachment patterns may be associated with bullying behaviour in adolescents. These findings emphasise the necessity of family- and peer-focused interventions to combat bullying.

KEYWORDS: Adolescent; bullying; parental rejection; attachment styles; social exclusion

1 Introduction

Adolescence is a unique developmental stage in which individuals undergo intense physical and psychosocial changes, and communication patterns are reshaped. This period ends with the completion of physical, cognitive, and psychological maturation [1]. During this process, in which physical changes are integrated into identity development, psychological and behavioral transformations also become apparent. In this stage, where social interactions diversify, fluctuations in emotional regulation skills can pave the way for risky behaviors such as conflict, loneliness, exclusion, and bullying [2,3].

In this context, the relationships between bullying behaviors and adolescents' experiences of exclusion, attachment patterns, and parental attitudes are increasingly being researched [4]. For example, Huang noted that bullying behaviors increase in individuals with low attachment levels [5]. Attachment quality emerges as a mediating variable predicting bullying behaviors [6], and secure attachment style is defined as a protective factor [7]. A study conducted in the Turkish context has shown that there is a reciprocal interaction between attachment, social exclusion, and risky behaviors [8].

Bullying has been defined in various ways in the literature. Olweus describes it as intentional and persistent harmful behavior [9], while Sullivan defines it as repetitive behaviors based on a power imbalance [10]. Systematic reviews indicate that bullies may be emotionally neglected, socially inadequate, and have low empathy levels beyond being aggressive [11]. It has been reported that adolescents exposed to bullying frequently experience problems such as depression, anxiety, lack of self-confidence, school phobia, and low self-esteem [12,13]. On the other hand, some individuals' tendencies toward bullying behavior may be related to attachment styles and family structure [14].

Attachment theory proposes that the attachment styles developed by individuals in early childhood form the basis for lifelong social relationships [15]. The relationship between these patterns and peer relationships and bullying behaviors, particularly during adolescence, is an important area of research. Secure attachment is associated with cooperative, empathetic, and emotionally balanced relationships, while avoidant attachment is associated with distancing, suppressing emotions, and a tendency toward aggression [16]. In a study by Bizzi and Pace, it was found that more than 80% of children had an insecure attachment style, which was concentrated in dismissive or disorganized patterns [17]. Systematic reviews show that secure attachment can prevent aggressive behavior by supporting empathy and social competence [18].

The family's influence on the child is not limited to attachment styles alone, as the Parental Acceptance and Rejection Theory states that the warmth, interest, and love parents show their children affect the individual's psychosocial adjustment and social behavior [19]. A rejecting parental attitude can undermine self-perception, paving the way for both internalized (depression, anxiety) and externalized (aggression, bullying) behaviors [20]. A systematic study has revealed that parental rejection is indirectly associated with bullying behaviors and social exclusion [21].

Social exclusion can both pave the way for bullying and emerge as a result of bullying. Research shows that there is a reciprocal interaction between these two phenomena [22]. When adolescents are ignored, made to feel worthless, or excluded from social groups, their psychological well-being is damaged, and this situation may cause them to express themselves through bullying behavior [23]. Children involved in bullying tend to have weak friendships and exhibit negative behavioral patterns such as increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness [24]. Furthermore, responses to social exclusion may vary depending on attachment patterns and the level of acceptance within the family [25]. Kljakovic and Hunt's meta-analysis study revealed that the cycle of bullying is associated with behavioral and social problems, school difficulties, and developmental factors [26].

Although research on peer bullying in Turkey has grown in recent years, it is still relatively limited. Existing findings suggest that bullying levels in the country remain high [27]. For instance, a study conducted among high school students in the southeastern region reported that 34.2% of participants had experienced bullying, while 13.9% had engaged in bullying behaviors [28]. The PISA 2022 report also revealed that Turkey has the highest rates of bullying among OECD countries [29]. Research in this area makes important contributions to understanding the effects of bullying and raises awareness of the issue [30].

In this regard, this study theoretically examines attachment styles, parental acceptance–rejection, and the effect of the social environment on adolescent behavior based on the approaches of Bowlby [15], Rohner et al. [20], and Bronfenbrenner [31]. Recent studies conducted within this framework show that insecure attachment can increase anger levels in adolescents [16] and that parental rejection is significantly related to bullying behaviors [32]. From an ecological systems perspective, an individual's behavioral development is influenced not only by family dynamics but also by interactions within the school environment, peer

relationships, and broader cultural norms. Grounded in this comprehensive framework, the present study investigated the contributions of attachment styles, parental acceptance–rejection, and social exclusion as key psychosocial factors shaping bullying behaviors in adolescents, and addressed the following research questions:

1. Does peer bullying among adolescents differ significantly according to gender, grade level, parental education, family income level, and number of siblings?
2. Do parental acceptance–rejection, attachment styles, and social exclusion predict peer bullying?

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The study included 349 high school students from five schools located in the central district of Hakkâri, Turkey. To determine an adequate sample size, an a priori power analysis was carried out. Using $\alpha = 0.05$, $1-\beta = 0.80$, and an expected effect size of 0.15 for a two-tailed correlation test, the minimum required sample size was estimated as 343. Prior to initiating data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Hakkari University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Ethics Committee Approval: 21.07.2023-58076).

A sampling pool was first established in cooperation with local education authorities to identify schools eligible for inclusion. During this process, factors such as student population, academic performance levels, and the schools' socioeconomic characteristics were considered. Schools were then grouped based on these criteria, and a random selection was made from each cluster to form the study sample. Administrators of the selected schools were contacted and informed about the study's aims and procedures, and high school students from schools that agreed to participate voluntarily were included in the research.

Research data was collected between 10 October 2023 and 10 January 2024. The data collection process was conducted through online survey forms. Survey links were sent to students via the principals of schools that accepted voluntary participation. The purpose of the study was explained in the introduction section of the survey form, and an informed consent form was included to ensure voluntary participation. Participants were also assured that their confidentiality would be protected. Only students who read and approved the consent form were able to proceed to the rest of the survey and participate in the data collection process. However, due to possible data loss, it was intended to collect data from more participants than the sample size. In this context, responses were obtained from 365 students, and 16 data forms that appeared to have been filled out randomly were excluded from the analysis. Data analysis was performed on the data of 349 participants. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

2.2 Data Collection Tools

2.2.1 Olweus Bullying Scale

The measurement tool employed in this study was first developed by Olweus [9] and subsequently adapted into Turkish by Tıprıdamaz-Sipahi [33]. The scale contains 39 items and is structured around two subdimensions: 'Bully' and 'Victim'. In the Turkish validation study, the overall Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.81, with coefficients of 0.80 for the bully subscale and 0.82 for the victim subscale [33]. For the purposes of this research, only the bully subscale items were used to evaluate students' bullying tendencies. In the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha value for this subscale was found to be 0.81. Scores on the subscale range between 0 and 44, where higher scores reflect elevated levels of peer bullying behavior.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of demographic characteristics of students participating in the study.

| Demographic Characteristics | | n | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|----------------|
| Gender | Girl | 171 | 49.0 |
| | Boy | 178 | 51.0 |
| Class Level | 9 | 24 | 6.9 |
| | 10 | 79 | 22.6 |
| | 11 | 63 | 18.1 |
| | 12 | 183 | 52.4 |
| Mother's Educational Status | Illiterate | 87 | 24.9 |
| | Elementary School | 91 | 26.1 |
| | Middle School | 83 | 23.8 |
| | High School | 46 | 13.2 |
| | Bachelor's Degree and Above | 42 | 12.0 |
| Father's Educational Status | Illiterate | 14 | 4.0 |
| | Elementary School | 83 | 23.8 |
| | Middle School | 93 | 26.6 |
| | High School | 112 | 32.1 |
| | Bachelor's Degree and Above | 47 | 13.5 |
| Family Income Status | Poor | 39 | 11.2 |
| | Average | 191 | 54.7 |
| | Good | 119 | 34.1 |
| Number of Siblings | Only Child | 10 | 2.9 |
| | 2 Siblings | 50 | 14.3 |
| | 3 Siblings | 82 | 23.5 |
| | 4 Siblings | 85 | 24.3 |
| | 5 Siblings and Above | 122 | 35.0 |
| Total | | 349 | 100.0 |

2.2.2 Parental Acceptance and Rejection Scale

The scale was initially developed by Rohner [34] as a comprehensive 60-item long form and was later refined into a more concise short form to enhance practicality and ease of administration [30]. The Turkish adaptation, including validity and reliability analyses of the short form, was carried out by Dedeler et al. [35]. The instrument consists of two parallel forms—one for mothers and one for fathers—each comprising 24 items and four core subdimensions: 'Warmth', 'Hostility/Aggression', 'Neglect and Indifference', and 'Undifferentiated Rejection'. In the study conducted by Dedeler and Akun, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as 0.76 for the mother form and 0.81 for the father form. In the current research, internal consistency analyses yielded coefficients of 0.79 for the mother acceptance–rejection form and 0.82 for the father form. The possible score range on the short form extends from 24 to 96 [35]. Lower scores reflect a stronger perception of parental acceptance, whereas higher scores indicate an increased perception of parental rejection.

2.2.3 Social Exclusion Scale

The scale originally developed by Gilman et al. [36] and later adapted into Turkish by Akın et al. [37] consists of 11 items grouped under two subdimensions: 'Ignoring' and 'Exclusion'. In the Turkish adaptation study, high internal consistency was reported, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.94 for the 'Ignoring' subdimension and 0.93 for the 'Exclusion' subdimension. In the present research, the overall reliability coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.84, while the 'Ignoring' and 'Exclusion' subdimensions demonstrated alpha values of 0.87 and 0.83, respectively. The scale yields scores between 11 and 55, where higher scores reflect a greater level of perceived social exclusion. In this study, statistical analyses were based on the total scores obtained from the scale.

2.2.4 Three-Dimensional Attachment Styles Scale

The attachment scale developed by Erzen [38] consists of 18 items and is organized into three distinct subscales: 'Avoidant,' 'Anxious/Indecisive,' and 'Secure.' Each subscale assesses a different attachment orientation, and scores are interpreted independently. Higher scores on a given subscale indicate a stronger predominance of the corresponding attachment style in the individual's relational patterns. In the original development study of the scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as 0.80 for the Avoidant subscale, 0.71 for the Anxious/Ambivalent subscale, and 0.69 for the Secure subscale. In the present research, internal consistency analyses revealed reliability coefficients of 0.79 for the Avoidant subscale, 0.73 for the Anxious/Indecisive subscale, and 0.71 for the Secure subscale. These values indicate that the scale maintained an acceptable level of reliability within the current sample.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analyses were performed using the SPSS 25.0 statistical software package. Before selecting the analytical procedures, assumptions regarding the distribution of the data were evaluated. In this context, skewness and kurtosis coefficients were examined, as values falling between -1.5 and $+1.5$ are generally accepted as indicators of a normal distribution [39]. The obtained values for all measurement tools were within these thresholds, demonstrating that the dataset met the normality assumption. Following the confirmation of normality, descriptive statistics were generated to provide an overview of the sample characteristics and variable distributions. For group comparisons, an independent samples t-test was applied when two groups were involved, whereas a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was utilized for comparisons across three or more groups. When ANOVA results indicated significant differences, the Tukey post-hoc test was conducted to determine which specific groups differed from one another. To evaluate the magnitude of these group differences, eta-squared (η^2) effect size values were calculated. Eta-squared reflects the proportion of total variance attributable to group membership, and effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's guidelines, with $\eta^2 = 0.01$ classified as a small effect, $\eta^2 = 0.06$ as a medium effect, and $\eta^2 = 0.14$ as a large effect [40]. In addition, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships between continuous variables. To further explore the predictive power of the study variables, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. This analysis was structured in six sequential steps, allowing for the examination of the incremental contribution of each block of predictors in explaining the variance in the dependent variable. In Model 1, the control variables (gender, grade level, mother's education, father's education, and family income status) were entered. In Model 2, Social exclusion was added to test its direct effect. In Model 3, father acceptance–rejection was entered; in Model 4, mother acceptance–rejection was entered. In Model 5, secure attachment was included, and in Model 6, avoidant attachment was entered to test the final model. For each model, the increment in explained variance (ΔR^2) and the statistical significance of the standardized regression coefficients (β) were evaluated. This hierarchical approach demonstrated the additional explanatory power of each new block of variables on peer bullying.

3 Results

The findings section begins with descriptive statistics related to the research variables. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation values of the research variables and the results of the correlation analysis. According to the correlation analysis results, there is a moderate positive relationship between adolescents' peer bullying and social exclusion levels ($r = 0.600$; $p < 0.01$), a weak positive relationship between father acceptance/rejection levels and peer bullying ($r = 0.274$; $p < 0.01$), a moderate positive correlation between

maternal acceptance/rejection level and social exclusion level ($r = 0.403$; $p < 0.01$), a moderate negative correlation between secure attachment level and bullying behavior ($r = -0.297$; $p < 0.01$), and a moderate positive correlation between avoidant attachment level and bullying behavior ($r = 0.309$; $p < 0.01$). According to these findings, as adolescents' levels of social exclusion and parental rejection increase, their bullying behaviors also increase; as secure attachment levels increase, bullying behaviors decrease; and as avoidant attachment levels increase, bullying behaviors also increase. On the other hand, no significant relationship was found between peer bullying and anxious/avoidant attachment levels ($r = 0.041$; $p > 0.05$).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics.

| Scales | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|---------|----------|----------|----------|---------|-------|---|
| (1) Social Exclusion | 29.39 | 7.60 | 1 | | | | | | |
| (2) Father Acceptance/Rejection | 67.94 | 16.85 | 0.144** | 1 | | | | | |
| (3) Mother Acceptance/Rejection | 68.73 | 16.42 | 0.247** | 0.867** | 1 | | | | |
| (4) Secure Attachment | 17.26 | 4.20 | 0.019 | -0.179** | -0.204** | 1 | | | |
| (5) Avoidant Attachment | 19.77 | 6.48 | 0.262** | 0.179** | 0.087 | -0.070 | 1 | | |
| (6) Anxious/Ambivalent Attachment | 19.31 | 5.53 | 0.134* | 0.215** | 0.135* | -0.002 | 0.588** | 1 | |
| (7) Peer Bullying | 13.29 | 12.08 | 0.600** | 0.274** | 0.403** | -0.297** | 0.309** | 0.041 | 1 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. SD, standard deviation.

The comparison of peer bullying scores according to the socio-demographic characteristics of adolescent students is presented in Table 3. According to the analysis results, adolescent peer bullying levels differ significantly by gender ($t = 5.907$; $p < 0.01$). Based on this result, it was determined that male students' peer bullying levels are higher than those of female students. Adolescents' peer bullying levels also differ significantly according to grade level ($F = 10.702$; $p < 0.01$). The Scheffé post-hoc test revealed that 9th grade students engage in peer bullying at a higher level than students in other grade levels. Peer bullying levels also showed significant differences according to the mother's educational status ($F = 15.390$; $p < 0.01$). According to the Scheffé post-hoc test results, students whose mothers were illiterate were found to engage in more peer bullying than other groups. Peer bullying levels also showed significant differences according to the educational status of the father ($F = 5.491$; $p < 0.01$). According to the results of the Scheffé post-hoc test, students whose fathers were illiterate were found to engage in peer bullying at a higher level than students in the other group. Significant differences in peer bullying levels were also found according to income status ($F = 22.680$; $p < 0.01$). According to the results of the Scheffé post-hoc test, students with a good income status were found to engage in more peer bullying than students with poor and medium income statuses. On the other hand, peer bullying scores did not differ significantly according to the number of siblings ($F = 0.516$; $p > 0.05$).

Table 3: Comparison of bullying scores according to adolescents' backgrounds and demographic characteristics.

| Variables | n | Peer Bullying (Mean \pm SD) | TEST |
|--------------------|-----|-------------------------------|--|
| Gender | | | $t = 5.907$; $p < 0.01$; $\eta^2 = 0.093$ |
| Male | 171 | 17.05 \pm 14.34 | |
| Female | 178 | 9.68 \pm 7.92 | |
| Class Level | | | $F = 10.702$; $p < 0.01$; $1 > 2, 3, 4$; $\eta^2 = 0.085$ |
| (1) 9th grade | 24 | 20.75 \pm 16.14 | |
| (2) 10th grade | 79 | 11.58 \pm 5.20 | |
| (3) 11th grade | 63 | 11.22 \pm 10.51 | |
| (4) 12th grade | 183 | 12.80 \pm 13.16 | |

Table 3: Cont.

| Variables | n | Peer Bullying (Mean \pm SD) | TEST |
|------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|--|
| Mother's Educational Status | | | $F = 15.390; p < 0.01; 1 > 2, 3, 4, 5; \eta^2 = 0.152$ |
| (1) Illiterate | 87 | 21.60 \pm 9.35 | |
| (2) Elementary school | 91 | 10.22 \pm 8.26 | |
| (3) Middle school | 83 | 12.42 \pm 14.29 | |
| (4) High school | 46 | 12.59 \pm 6.00 | |
| (5) Bachelor's degree and above | 42 | 11.62 \pm 16.43 | |
| Father's Educational Status | | | $F = 5.491; p < 0.01; 1 > 2, 3, 4, 5; \eta^2 = 0.060$ |
| (1) Illiterate | 14 | 26.14 \pm 16.65 | |
| (2) Elementary school | 83 | 11.94 \pm 9.55 | |
| (3) Middle school | 93 | 11.10 \pm 8.82 | |
| (4) High school | 112 | 14.38 \pm 13.91 | |
| (5) Bachelor's degree and above | 47 | 13.57 \pm 13.24 | |
| Family Income Status | | | $F = 22.680; p < 0.01; 3 > 1, 2; \eta^2 = 0.116$ |
| (1) Low | 39 | 13.26 \pm 16.97 | |
| (2) Medium | 191 | 12.98 \pm 8.23 | |
| (3) Good | 119 | 21.66 \pm 13.38 | |
| Number of Siblings | | | $F = 0.516; p = 0.724$ |
| (1) Only child | 10 | 12.70 \pm 8.17 | |
| (2) 2 Siblings | 50 | 14.12 \pm 13.94 | |
| (3) 3 Siblings | 82 | 12.11 \pm 11.96 | |
| (4) 4 Siblings | 85 | 12.62 \pm 10.25 | |
| (5) 5 Siblings and above | 122 | 14.25 \pm 12.84 | |

Note: t, Independent Groups *t*-test; F, One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA); SD, Standard Deviation; η^2 , Eta Square.

Table 4 shows the results of the hierarchical regression conducted to test which variables predict peer bullying. Demographic variables showing significant differences in the model (gender, grade, mother and father education status, and income status) were held as control variables, and the hierarchical regression model was constructed in steps progressing from social exclusion to attachment. The control variables of the study were entered in the first step (Model 1). The control variables explain 10.7% of the variance in the dependent variable (peer bullying). Gender ($\beta = -0.300, p < 0.01$) and class level ($\beta = 0.135, p < 0.05$) were found to be significant predictors of peer bullying. In the next step, the social exclusion variable was added (Model 2). The addition of the social exclusion variable resulted in a significant change in the explained variance ratio ($\Delta R^2 = 0.340$). The social exclusion variable was found to be a significant positive predictor of peer bullying ($\beta = 0.629, p < 0.01$). The father acceptance/rejection variable was added in the third step (Model 3). Adding the father acceptance/rejection variable resulted in a significant change in the explained variance ratio ($\Delta R^2 = 0.023$). Furthermore, the father acceptance/rejection variable was found to be a significant negative predictor of peer bullying ($\beta = -0.160, p < 0.01$). The fourth step added the mother acceptance/rejection variable (Model 4). Adding the mother acceptance/rejection variable resulted in a significant change in the explained variance ratio ($\Delta R^2 = 0.025$). Furthermore, the mother acceptance/rejection variable was found to be a significant negative predictor of peer bullying ($\beta = -0.343, p < 0.01$). The secure attachment variable was added in the fifth step (Model 5). The addition of the secure attachment variable resulted in a significant change in the explained variance ratio ($\Delta R^2 = 0.037$). The secure attachment variable was found to be a significant predictor of peer bullying in the negative direction ($\beta = -0.214, p < 0.01$). The avoidant attachment variable was added in the final step (Model 6). Adding the avoidant attachment variable resulted in a significant change in the explained variance ratio ($\Delta R^2 = 0.022$). The avoidant attachment variable was found to be a significant positive predictor of peer bullying ($\beta = 0.162,$

$p < 0.01$). Furthermore, the father acceptance/rejection variable, which was not a significant predictor in the fourth and fifth models, was found to be a significant negative predictor in this model ($\beta = -0.217$, $p < 0.01$). The independent variables in the final model explain 55.4% of the variance in peer bullying. Based on this result, the final model can be considered the strongest model.

Table 4: Hierarchical regression analysis results related to peer bullying.

| Standardized Regression Coefficients (β) (n = 349) | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Independent Variables | Model 1 (Control Variables) | Model 2 (95% CI) | Model 3 (95% CI) | Model 4 (95% CI) | Model 5 (95% CI) | Model 6 (95% CI) |
| Social Exclusion | | 0.629** (0.545, 0.713) | 0.596** (0.512, 0.680) | 0.553** (0.469, 0.637) | 0.558** (0.476, 0.640) | 0.506** (0.422, 0.590) |
| Father Accept/Reject | | | -0.160** (-0.220, -0.100) | -0.125 (-0.260, -0.010) | -0.133 (-0.260, -0.010) | -0.217* (-0.360, -0.070) |
| Mother Accept/Reject | | | | -0.343** (-0.460, -0.230) | -0.309** (-0.420, -0.200) | -0.385** (-0.490, -0.280) |
| Secure Connection | | | | | -0.214** (-0.260, -0.160) | -0.205** (-0.280, -0.130) |
| Avoidant Attachment | | | | | | 0.162** (0.900, 0.230) |
| <i>F</i> | 9.322** | 47.938** | 45.111** | 43.621** | 44.983** | 44.234** |
| <i>R</i> | 0.346 | 0.676 | 0.693 | 0.712 | 0.738 | 0.753 |
| <i>R</i> ² (Adjusted) | 0.107 | 0.447 | 0.470 | 0.495 | 0.532 | 0.554 |
| ΔR^2 | | 0.340** | 0.023** | 0.025** | 0.037** | 0.022** |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. β , Standardized Regression Coefficient; ΔR^2 , Delta R-Squared (Change); CI, Confidence Interval.

4 Discussion

Based on the findings of the study, the aim was to evaluate the effects of parental attitudes, adolescents' attachment styles, and experiences of social exclusion on bullying behavior and to compare these findings with existing findings in the literature. In our research, we sought answers to the research questions based on data obtained from 349 high school students. The first finding obtained in this context is directed toward comparing adolescents' levels of bullying according to demographic characteristics. The findings revealed that adolescents' levels of bullying showed significant differences according to gender, grade level, mother and father's educational status, and family income level.

In the gender-based assessment, it was found that male students had higher levels of bullying than female students. This finding is supported by studies in the literature. For example, Çankaya determined that male students engaged in physical bullying at a higher rate than female students [41]. Similarly, many studies emphasize that male students are more involved in aggressive behavior than female students [42–45]. It is also stated that male students are more involved in direct bullying behaviors [46,47]. The literature emphasizes that healthy peer relationships and supportive parental attitudes play an important role in reducing bullying behaviors [48]. In our study, when evaluated by grade level, it was found that peer bullying was most prevalent in the 9th grade. Although it is stated that there is a decrease in the tendency

to resort to peer bullying as age increases, it is observed that 9th grade students are more prone to bullying behaviors, especially when compared to similar age groups. One of the main reasons for this is the tendency to “see oneself as different”, which is a typical characteristic of adolescence, and the behavior of establishing psychological distance before getting to know individuals [49].

Findings regarding the educational level of parents show that peer bullying levels decrease as the educational level of parents increases. It has been determined that children of parents with low educational levels are more likely to engage in peer bullying [50]. This finding can be explained by the fact that parents with low educational levels are unable to adequately support their children’s social development and that coercive parenting styles are more common [51]. The relationship between bullying behaviors and socioeconomic status (SES) can manifest in different ways in both low- and high-income groups. While low socioeconomic status is often associated with risky behaviors due to stress, limited resources, and adverse environmental conditions, bullying behaviors can also be seen in children from high-income families due to reasons such as the pursuit of status, power, and the need for control. This can be explained by the desire to gain social superiority and attract attention within the group. Furthermore, the excessive emphasis on success and competition in high-income families may lead children to grow up with values focused on superiority rather than empathy. Similarly, Choi emphasized that economic privilege reinforces “power and control”-focused behavior patterns in individuals, which can increase tendencies toward aggression and bullying [52]. Research shows that parenting styles—particularly authoritarian or neglectful attitudes—can increase bullying regardless of income level. However, it should not be forgotten that socioeconomic power is also influenced by cultural context; societies’ understandings of success, status, and competition can significantly shape how children perceive power in social relationships and how they express bullying behaviors. Jiang and Liang found in their study that low socioeconomic status increases the risk of being bullied; however, this effect varies depending on the cultural context, and parental emotional support significantly reduces this negative effect [53]. However, in a comprehensive review study conducted by Tippet and Wolke, 22 studies examining the relationship between status and bullying were examined. Eleven of these studies reported a significant relationship between increased social status and bullying [54].

Our analyses show that social exclusion significantly predicts bullying among adolescents when variables such as gender, class, parental education, and income level are controlled for. In other words, adolescents with high levels of social exclusion are more likely to exhibit bullying behavior. Additionally, social exclusion was found to have the greatest effect among other predictor variables. It is well-known that adolescents need to be accepted and loved by their peers. Peer acceptance contributes to positive emotions, while rejection and exclusion lead to increased stress and anxiety levels [55].

Social exclusion is a situation that individuals generally try to avoid because this process can directly or indirectly affect individuals negatively [56]. Being excluded by peers can sometimes lead to hostile behavior [57]. The feeling of exclusion triggers a sense of broken social bonds in individuals, threatening their need to belong [58]. Leary et al. [59] and Maden et al. [27] emphasized that excluded individuals may exhibit aggressive behavior when they fail to obtain the social acceptance they expect. Williams et al. [60] have stated that the experience of exclusion in adolescents can be described as a “social death”. Various studies in the literature indicate that exclusion can lead to antisocial behavior in individuals [59,61–63]. In the process of social exclusion, the individual is ignored and exposed to exclusion; this situation leads not only to psychological distress but also to emotional pain [28,64].

Social exclusion is reported to cause anger [27], feelings of inadequacy [65], loneliness [66], negative behaviors and emotions [67] in individuals. Eliot emphasized the importance of exclusion from the group when classifying peer bullying. Social exclusion is an important factor not only for those who are bullied

but also for those who bully others [68]. It is known that victims generally have fewer friends [69]. On the other hand, some studies have shown that adolescents in a bullying position are less excluded by their peers [70]. Kobak et al. [71] have noted that belonging to a peer group can increase an adolescent's aggressive behavior. Gardner and Zimmer-Gembeck have linked this situation to insecure attachment [21].

The results of the study showed that parents' levels of acceptance negatively predicted bullying among adolescents. This means that adolescents who were highly accepted by their parents tended to exhibit lower levels of bullying. Many researchers in the literature have pointed out that bullying stems from familial and social factors [72–75]. The family includes the child's parents in particular, and the communication the child establishes with their parents and the experiences they have can affect all areas of their life [76]. In this context, the importance of the parent's acceptance or rejection of the child becomes apparent. The individual's perception of parental rejection is considered one of the most powerful factors in the psychological problems they encounter in life. In individuals who experience parental rejection, personality traits such as insensitivity, hostility, and aggression are more pronounced [77].

Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to better understand the direction and reciprocal effects of relationships between variables over time [78]. In particular, cross-lagged panel analyses can reveal how parental rejection experienced in early childhood affects avoidant or anxious attachment styles in later life and how these attachment tendencies relate to bullying behaviors [79]. Such an approach would also better reflect processes such as autonomy, peer relationships, and identity development in adolescence [80]. Furthermore, the use of multiple sources of information, such as peer, teacher, and parent assessments, will strengthen the validity of the findings. Such longitudinal and multidimensional studies also offer the opportunity to examine the mediating or moderating roles of factors such as social exclusion and attachment insecurity. However, it should be noted that cultural factors may also influence these relationships, particularly as parenting styles and attachment dynamics are significantly influenced by cultural context [81].

Our research has revealed that secure attachment negatively predicts bullying in adolescents, while avoidant attachment positively predicts bullying. In other words, adolescents with a high level of secure attachment are less likely to exhibit bullying behavior, while adolescents with a high level of avoidant attachment are more likely to engage in bullying.

Attachment styles are considered to be an important determinant in individuals' relationships and experiences [82]. Establishing a healthy relationship with parents during childhood can positively influence the quality of relationships formed with peers during adolescence [55]. It has been noted that children who grow up in a safe and supportive environment from infancy have better emotional and social adjustment [83]. Adolescents who develop a secure attachment with their parents generally have high self-confidence and self-esteem. This situation also positively reflects on the quality of their friendships [84]. On the other hand, it is stated that adolescents with an insecure attachment style experience more problems in family relationships, their empathy skills are not sufficiently developed, and this situation can trigger aggressive behavior [25]. It has been determined that adolescents with insecure attachment have difficulty controlling their emotions and behaviors and exhibit aggressive behaviors [85].

Research shows that adolescents with high empathy skills generally exhibit more prosocial behavior and have lower tendencies toward aggressive behavior [86,87]. It is predicted that adolescents with insecure attachment patterns may have underdeveloped empathy skills and may therefore be more prone to aggressive behavior [71].

Individuals with a secure attachment style are able to reflect this healthy attachment pattern in their friendships during adolescence because the internal representations they form with their caregivers are

solid and reliable [21]. Those with a secure attachment pattern can set boundaries in their relationships and thus develop ways to protect themselves from peer bullying [88]. Additionally, it has been observed that individuals with secure attachment can approach life problems with a more constructive perspective [89]. On the other hand, studies show that individuals with avoidant attachment style are the group that exhibits the highest level of problematic behavior [90]. Individuals with an avoidant attachment pattern may expect harmful behaviors from others because they struggle to trust them, and this situation can lead to the emergence of aggressive attitudes [91].

According to attachment theory, insecure attachment styles—particularly avoidant and anxious attachment—affect bullying and aggressive behaviors seen in adolescence in different ways. Individuals with avoidant attachment may exhibit distant, controlling, and aggressive behaviors in peer relationships due to their tendency to avoid emotional closeness, struggle to form trust, and suppress their emotions [92,93]. In contrast, individuals with anxious attachment are more associated with inward-directed problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) and victimization due to excessive need for approval, fear of rejection, and dependent relationship patterns [94]. Research shows that avoidant attachment is indirectly related to bullying through low empathy and poor anger control, while anxious attachment is indirectly related to bullying through low self-esteem and high sensitivity to rejection. Furthermore, the effects of these attachment styles are significantly influenced by cultural factors; parenting styles, forms of emotional expression, and socially acceptable behaviors vary across cultures, shaping how attachment dynamics reflect on bullying [95].

This study has some limitations. First, since the study has a cross-sectional design, caution should be exercised when interpreting the relationships between variables in a causal context. Second, since the study sample consisted only of high school students in Hakkari province, the generalizability of the findings to different countries, regions, or age groups is limited. More research is needed in these different cultural contexts. Third, the use of self-report measurement tools may have increased the likelihood of participants giving socially desirable responses. In future research, it would be useful to collect information from different data sources, such as parents, teachers, or peers, in order to reduce this limitation. Finally, the study examined only the basic effects of certain psychosocial variables and did not examine interaction effects. Although it controlled for some demographic variables, other factors that could influence bullying behavior were not considered. In future studies, it is important to use longitudinal designs with larger and more diverse samples that examine different variables to broaden the scope of the research.

5 Conclusions

This study has revealed important findings by examining how peer bullying among adolescents is shaped by individual, familial, and social factors. The findings emphasize the impact of variables such as gender, maternal education status, and social exclusion on bullying behaviors; in particular, they show that social exclusion is the strongest predictor of bullying tendencies. Additionally, it was determined that parental attitudes and attachment styles also exhibit meaningful relationships with adolescents' levels of bullying. In this context, it was found that avoidant attachment and parental acceptance-rejection perceptions have an increasing effect on bullying behaviors; conversely, secure attachment was found to have a reducing (buffering) effect on bullying behaviors. The study's findings align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of adolescents' need for acceptance by their social environment and how exclusion can exacerbate aggressive tendencies. In this regard, increasing individual awareness in the fight against bullying, supporting parents in establishing healthy relationships with their children, and creating inclusive social environments in schools are of critical importance. Future research is expected to contribute

to the development of more comprehensive preventive strategies in this area by thoroughly examining other psychosocial factors that influence bullying behavior.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thanks, our participants who participated in our study for their contribution to the studies.

Funding Statement: The authors received no specific funding for this study.

Author Contributions: Ramazan İnci, Davut Açar, Osman Tayyar Çelik and Yunus Tunç designed the study; Ramazan İnci and Davut Açar collected the data; Ramazan İnci, Davut Açar and Osman Tayyar Çelik drafted the manuscript; Osman Tayyar Çelik conducted the analysis and interpreted the results; Ramazan İnci, Davut Açar, Osman Tayyar Çelik and Yunus tunç reviewed the final manuscript and gave their consent. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials: The data supporting the findings of this study are not openly accessible for sensitivity reasons and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: This study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Hakkari University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Ethics Committee Approval: 21.07.2023-58076).

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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