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Students' perceived social support in the transition from primary to secondary education: Grade-related trends and association with cybervictimization



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of perceived social support in cybervictimization and differences according to educational level in a sample of 654 students from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary education ($M_{age} = 12.80$, $SD = 1.64$) in Galicia, Spain. Participants aged 9 to 17 years, identified as girls (48.8%), boys (50%), and non-binary (1.2%) and came from public schools (60.7%) and government-dependent private schools (39.3%) in rural (43.2%) and urban areas (56.8%). The data analysis included ANOVA to explore differences in social support by grade, multiple regression analysis to evaluate the relationship between sources of support (family, peers, close friends, and teachers) and cybervictimization, and mediation analyses to examine indirect and interaction effects. The results show that family support is the primary source of support in the earlier grades, but its influence decreases during adolescence, while peer support remains stable. All sources of support were negatively associated with cybervictimization, although the effects varied by grade: the effect of perceived family support diminished in higher grades, while the effect of perceived peer support increased. It is crucial to develop preventive strategies that strengthen different sources of social support, prioritizing family support during childhood and promoting peer support in adolescence while maintaining the continuous facilitative role of teachers.

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Apoyo social percibido por el alumnado en la transición de educación primaria a secundaria: tendencias en función del curso y asociación con cibervictimización

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza el papel del apoyo social percibido en la cibervictimización y las diferencias según el nivel educativo en una muestra de 654 estudiantes de 5^º de Educación Primaria a 4^º de Educación Secundaria ($M_{edad} = 12.80$, $DT = 1.64$) de Galicia, España. Los participantes, de entre 9 y 17 años, se identifican como chicas (48.8%), chicos (50%) y género binario (1.2%), y provienen de colegios públicos (60.7%) y concertados (39.3%), en entornos rurales (43.2%) y urbanos (56.8%). El análisis de datos incluye ANOVA para explorar diferencias en el apoyo social según el curso, análisis de regresión múltiple para evaluar la relación entre las fuentes de apoyo (familia, compañeros, amigos y docentes) y la cibervictimización, y análisis de mediación para examinar efectos indirectos y de interacción. Los resultados muestran que el apoyo familiar es la principal fuente de apoyo en los primeros cursos, pero esta influencia decrece en la adolescencia, mientras que el apoyo de los iguales se mantiene estable. Todas las fuentes de apoyo se asocian negativamente con la cibervictimización, aunque los efectos varían según el curso: El efecto del apoyo familiar percibido disminuye en los cursos superiores, mientras que el apoyo entre iguales

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percibido aumenta. Resulta crucial desarrollar estrategias preventivas que fortalezcan diferentes fuentes de apoyo social, priorizando el apoyo familiar en la infancia y promoviendo el apoyo entre iguales en la adolescencia, sin descuidar el rol facilitador continuo de los docentes.

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Introduction

The robustness of the results found by the research supports the seriousness of bullying, both in face-to-face modalities and in those perpetrated through digital means, known as cyberbullying. These phenomena have serious and lasting negative effects, which can even be more harmful than those resulting from child maltreatment inflicted by adults (Lereya et al., 2015).

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is often defined as one or more acts of intentional aggression carried out online by one or more individuals who repeatedly target other individuals who cannot easily defend themselves (Kowalski et al., 2014). In Spain, 10.3% of the students from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary education report having experienced some kind of cyberbullying situation frequently (Díaz-Aguado et al., 2024). A recent meta-analysis conducted on 42 studies, which encompassed data from 266,888 participants from different countries, found a similar average prevalence of cyberbullying victimization (11.1%) (Li et al., 2024). A large number of studies indicate that the prevalence of cyberbullying begins to increase during the last years of primary education (ages 10–12), reaching its peak in secondary education (Álvarez-García et al., 2018; Arnarsson et al., 2020; Yudes et al., 2020). However, some recent studies have found higher prevalences at younger ages (Aizenkot & Kashy-Rosenbaum, 2021). A possible explanation is the greater access to technology by primary school students. Most studies have explored the phenomenon of cyberbullying primarily among secondary school students, with fewer studies addressing the transition between primary and secondary education (Vismara et al., 2022).

In addition, levels of unsupervised Internet access and social-media use among 5th- and 1st-grade students have risen sharply in recent years (e.g., 47.7% access without supervision and 50.8% social-network accounts in 5th grade; 58.1% and 70% in 6th grade; Díaz-Aguado et al., 2024). This underscores the need to re-examine cybervictimization and social support in today's technologically saturated context, rather than relying on earlier datasets when digital penetration among young students was substantially lower. There is a causal relationship between suffering cyberbullying and the subsequent development of mental health problems, suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, and poor overall health (Moore et al., 2017). Specifically, cyberbullying increases suicidal thoughts by 14.5% and suicide attempts by 8.7% (Nikolaou, 2017). Cybervictimization has also been associated with physical self-harm (Azami & Taremian, 2020; Kwan et al., 2020) and digital self-harm (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017). Furthermore, it is associated with a higher likelihood of developing generalized anxiety (Álvarez-García et al., 2025; Gong et al., 2022), depression (Álvarez-Marín et al., 2022; Balluerka et al., 2023), social stress (Garthe et al., 2023), and posttraumatic stress (Liu et al., 2020). Additionally, it implies a greater likelihood of developing Internet addiction (Aktaş Terzioğlu & Büber, 2024), sleep problems (Mang et al., 2023) and eating disorders (Cheng et al., 2023).

Social support in preadolescence and adolescence

Social support is defined as the perception or experience of being cared for and valued and of being part of a social group that offers and enjoys interdependent relationships of affection and socio-emotional support (Taylor, 2011). There is consistent evidence that social support plays a key role in the prevention of a large number of physical and psychological diseases at any age (Chang et al., 2023; Galindo-Domínguez & Losada, 2023; Jameel et al., 2024; McLean et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Social support enhances immune function, and is associated with greater longevity and a better ability to cope with adverse life events (Vila, 2021).

Despite its profound impact, the transition from childhood to adolescence has received comparatively little attention relative to later adolescence (ages 15–19) (Blum et al., 2014). This period is marked by significant physical, psychological, and social changes: the child with more “childish” traits develops a more adult appearance, enhanced cognitive capacities, and social relationships in which peers assume greater importance (Papalia & Martorell, 2024). Until this point, the family typically serves as the primary source of support, but with the onset of adolescence, peers and close friends gradually exert greater influence on emotional well-being and the development of social skills. This dynamic can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which situates the individual within interrelated systems—microsystem (family, peers, school), mesosystem (interactions among these), exosystem (broader social contexts) and macrosystem (cultural values)—where perceived social support is a resource continually shaped by the quality of relationships across these levels. At these ages, social support primarily stems from four key sources: family, teachers, classmates, and friends (Harter, 2012). Adopting such a global, ecological perspective helps explain why certain sources of support gain prominence at distinct stages of the school trajectory and how their combined reinforcement can serve to prevent cybervictimization.

First, the family, parents, or other close members are the primary sources of support and care. They provide emotional security, material sustenance, and moral guidance (Michaelson et al., 2021; Tan & Yasin, 2020). Older children and adolescents progressively seek greater autonomy from their family. However, family support remains fundamental for their proper development (De Meulenaere et al., 2022). A strong attachment to the family is a protective factor against many problems both in childhood and adulthood (Khairunnisa et al., 2024; Rawatlal et al., 2015) and, additionally, a significant buffering factor against the negative effects of cyberbullying (Heilfeldt et al., 2020). The absence of adequate family support is associated with difficulties in socio-emotional and academic development (Chan et al., 2022).

Children and young people spend a significant part of their lives at school. Teachers not only facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and academic abilities, but they also act as role models and sources of emotional support (García-Rodríguez et al., 2023). They can help students develop a healthy and resilient personality that aids them in facing personal, social, and academic challenges at

all educational stages (Pakarinen et al., 2020; Roorda et al., 2021; Wentzel, 2022). The role of teachers can be even more critical in cases where students lack adequate family support (Burdick & Corr, 2024). The relationship of children and adolescents with parents and teachers is asymmetrical. In contrast, peer relationships allow for the natural learning of social skills for conflict resolution, cooperation, respect, setting boundaries, and developing empathy (Eccles, 1999; Ogden & Hagen, 2018). Moreover, it fosters the construction of a social identity that is gradually differentiated from that of their family (Reitz et al., 2014). Feeling supported or rejected by peers has important implications for the healthy development of children and adolescents (Wentzel, 2022).

Finally, relationships with close friends are essential for proper socio-emotional development (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005). They provide a safe environment where young people can freely express their most personal emotions and thoughts and receive close support in a context of symmetry (Krammer et al., 2023). Not having close friends at any stage of life is associated with poorer physical and emotional health (Allen et al., 2022; Howick et al., 2019).

Social support and cyberbullying

Social support is a key factor in the prevention of traditional school bullying. Many studies have found that students with high levels of social support are victimized less (Holt & Espelage, 2007; Murphy et al., 2017; Rothon et al., 2011; Shaheen et al., 2019). Furthermore, social support appears to have a buffering effect on the psychological consequences of bullying (Lee et al., 2022; Rothon et al., 2011). However, few studies have examined the relationship of social support with cyberbullying. Additionally, some of the valuable efforts made regarding this have not considered the evaluation of relevant sources of support at these ages, such as peers (Arató et al., 2022; Hellfeldt et al., 2020), focusing solely on secondary school students (Jaskulska et al., 2022) or presenting limitations that may be significant.

Although prior research has documented the decline in perceived family support and the rise of perceived peer support during adolescence, very few studies have focused specially on the transition from primary to secondary school or have simultaneously examined multiple sources of support (family, teachers, classmates, and close friends) in relation to cybervictimization. Our study fills this gap by assessing perceived social support across a wide age span (5th grade of primary to 4th grade of secondary education), comparing in a single model the protective effects of these four distinct sources, exploring both direct and indirect pathways as well as interactions with school grade, and focusing explicitly on cybervictimization during this critical transition. Moreover, to ensure methodological rigor, we employ standardized, validated instruments for both social support and cybervictimization.

The present study

Thus, the present study is based on two main objectives. The first aim is to analyze the level of perceived social support and potential differences across grades, in a sample of students from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary compulsory education in Galicia, Spain. According to our first hypothesis, we expect that in the earlier grades, family will be the primary source of perceived social support, which will gradually lose prominence in favor of peer groups (close friends and classmates) as students advance through school. The second aim is to examine the effect of four sources of social support—parents, peers, teachers, and close friends—on the likelihood of being a victim of peer cyberbullying within the sample, as well as the possible moderating role of grade in this relationship. According to our second hypothesis, we

expect that students who feel less social support from any of the four sources will report higher levels of cybervictimization, and that grade will influence these effects. As students move from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary compulsory education, the protective role of adults, like parents and teachers, will become less important, while support from peers will become more important.

Method

Participants

Participants were 654 students from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary education, aged 9 to 17 ($M_{age} = 12.80$, $SD = 1.64$). According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012), the Spanish 5th and 6th grades of primary education correspond to ISCED Level 1 (primary education, typically covering ages 6 to 12), while 1st to 4th grades of secondary education correspond to ISCED Level 2 (lower secondary education, typically covering ages 12 to 16). Participants were recruited via convenience sampling from six schools located in different provinces of Galicia (Spain). Schools were selected to ensure representation of both rural and urban settings. Concerning gender, 48.8% identified as girls, 50% as boys, and 1.2% as non-binary. Of the students, 60.7% were enrolled in public schools (government-funded and managed) and 39.3% in government-dependent private schools (schools under the administration of private entities with public/government funding). Additionally, 43.2% attended rural schools, and 56.8% attended urban schools. Socio-demographic information (gender, age, and school attended) was obtained through a multiple-choice item for gender and two open-ended items in which students specified their age and the school they attended.

Instruments

An adapted version of the *Social Support Scale for Children* (SSSC; Harter, 1985) was used, based on a previous adaptation by Pastor et al. (2012) and taking into account the observations of Lipski et al. (2014) and Malecki and Demaray (2002). This 24-item scale evaluates children's and adolescents' perceptions of social support through four subscales corresponding to four sources of support: *parents, classmates, teachers, and close friends*. Each of the four SSSC subscales consists of 6 items, with a four-point response format ranging from 1 = very false to 4 = very true. Thus, scores could range between 6 and 24, with higher values indicating the reporting student's greater perception of social support in the specific target area.

The validation of this adapted version (Rodríguez-Enríquez et al., in press), used in the present study, showed that the factorial structure that best fit the data from the tests conducted is composed of four subscales or types of perceived social support, which are interrelated. The items of the *Parent(s)' Social Support* (PSS) subscale specifically measure the degree to which respondents perceive that their parents understand them, show interest in them, and value their importance (e.g., "I feel that my parents really understand me"). The *classmates' social support* (CSS) subscale measures the extent to which they feel accepted, valued, and heard by their peers (e.g., "I have classmates who pay attention to what I say"). The *teacher(s)' social support* (TSS) subscale measures the degree to which teachers show interest, treat students equitably, and offer help for their development (e.g., "If I feel unwell, there is a teacher who cares about me"). Lastly, the *close friends' social support* (FSS) subscale measures the extent to which they perceive they have a close friend they can trust and share their experiences and concerns with (e.g., "I have a close friend who truly

understands me"). Although the model comprising these four inter-related types of perceived social support demonstrated the best fit to the data, a hierarchical model-consisting of these four factors as first-order dimensions and a general second-order factor-also provided an adequate fit (Rodríguez-Enríquez et al., in press). In the present work, the general score of total *social support* (SS) based on the scores of the 24 items will also be used, due to its summarizing nature. This general score provides information about the extent to which the child or adolescent feels supported by all sources of support. In this case, the minimum score is 24 points, and the maximum is 96. The reliability of the scores obtained on the four subscales in the present study, in terms of internal consistency, was high or very high (PSS: $\alpha = .820$, $\omega = .850$, composite reliability = .845; CSS: $\alpha = .804$, $\omega = .810$, Composite reliability = .858; TSS: $\alpha = .855$, $\omega = .858$, composite reliability = .924; FSS: $\alpha = .922$, $\omega = .924$, composite reliability = .808). The internal consistency of the scores on the overall scale was moderate ($\alpha = .877$, $\omega = .886$, composite reliability = .674). Convergent validity, analyzed in terms of average variance extracted, is adequate ($AVE_{TSS} = .671$, $AVE_{CSS} = .504$) or slightly below the threshold typically considered for this purpose ($AVE_{PSS} = .479$, $AVE_{FSS} = .425$) in its subscales. In contrast, the AVE is lower in the second-order factor ($AVE_{SS} = .345$), which is nevertheless retained for analyses in this study due to its sufficient internal consistency and informative value.

An adapted version (Rodríguez-Enríquez et al., 2025) of the Cyberbullying Test by Garaigordobil (2013) was applied. Specifically, this work will analyze the results of the *cybervictimization scale* from the *cyberbullying* section. This scale consists of 15 items that measure the level of *cyberbullying* experienced by the informant in the last three months (e.g., *Has anyone pretended to be you, making defamatory comments, lies, or sharing your secrets on social media or the Internet?*). The items are rated on a 4-point response format ranging from 0 = never to 3 = always. The score ranges from 0 to 45, with higher scores indicating elevated levels of *cybervictimization* perceived by the informant. The internal consistency of the scores obtained with the complete scale was high ($\alpha = .880$, $\omega = .886$, composite reliability = .876). However, its convergent validity, assessed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), was modest (.330).

Procedure

First, a meeting was arranged with the school managers to inform them about the objectives and characteristics of the study, as well as the voluntary nature, anonymity, and confidentiality of the data to be collected. After obtaining authorization from the management teams, the same information was sent to the families in writing, offering them contact information of the research team and encouraging them to ask any questions they deemed necessary to decide whether to authorize the student's participation. Prior to each application in the classroom, about 5-10 minutes were dedicated to providing the students with information about the characteristics of the study (anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntariness), emphasizing the importance of answering sincerely. They were also encouraged to raise any concerns or questions they might have, allowing enough time to clarify them. The average time to complete the tests was 30 minutes, although flexibility was prioritized, especially considering the specific age of the group, the questions raised, or the presence of students with cognitive difficulties.

In the 5th- and 6th-grade classrooms (ages 9-12), the characteristics of cyberbullying were briefly enumerated and explained to help them distinguish what is cyberbullying and what is not. This decision was made based on some comprehension difficulties encountered during the pilot application of the test on younger students. This enhanced the clarification of doubts and increased the

chances of obtaining reliable results. The researchers administered the tests to all groups in all the centers during school hours.

All phases of the study followed the International Ethical Code in Humanities and Social Sciences of the Center for Research Ethics & Bioethics, and the protocol of the larger research project of which it is part was approved by the Institutional Ethics and Bioethics Committee (Ref. CE-DCEC-UVIGO-2020-12-02-8129).

Data analysis

First, the reliability of the questionnaires used was analyzed by examining the internal consistency of the scores obtained for each factor. For this purpose, Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, and composite reliability were calculated for each factor. To obtain the composite reliability, the factor loadings were used. These loadings were derived from a confirmatory factor analysis conducted for each of the questionnaires. Given the ordinal nature of the data, the WLSMV estimation method was employed. Internal consistency indices above .70 are generally considered adequate, above .80 high, and above .90 very high. The analysis of the internal consistency of the scores for each factor was complemented by the analysis of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor, as a measure of the factor's convergent validity. An AVE value of .50 is commonly used as the cutoff point to consider the average variance extracted adequate.

Next, descriptive and correlational analyses were conducted to determine the distribution and simple correlations among the scores of the target variables. Skewness and kurtosis indices were analyzed to assess the normality of the distribution of scores for each item. Subsequently, to examine the degree of *perceived social support* and possible *grade-related differences* (the first objective of the study), one-way ANOVAs were performed for each variable of *perceived social support*. Welch's statistic was used for variables with different variances among the groups, and Fisher's statistic for variables with equal variances. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using the Games-Howell test in the case of different variances or Tukey's test in the case of equal variances.

Afterwards, to analyze the effect of the four sources of *social support* on *cybervictimization* and the possible moderating effect of the *grade* (the second objective of the study), a three-step multiple regression analysis was conducted. In the first step, the four types of *social support* were introduced; in the second step, the course was added to the four types of *social support*; and in the third step, interaction effects of the *course* on each of the four types of *social support* were included. Given that some sources of *social support* showed a statistically significant simple correlation with *cybervictimization* but no statistically significant effect in the regression analyses, mediation analyses were subsequently performed to check whether the effect might be indirect rather than direct, mediated through other forms of *social support* that were analyzed with a clearer direct effect. Finally, moderation analyses were conducted to study in greater detail the interaction effects found in the multiple regression analyses. All analyses were conducted using the statistical software Jamovi 2.3.28.

Results

Preliminary descriptive analysis

Table 1 shows a generally moderate to high level of *perceived social support* and a low level of *cybervictimization*, a positive correlation between the different forms of *perceived social support*, a negative correlation of all the analyzed forms of *social support* with reporting being a victim of *cybervictimization*, and a negative correlation of the *grade* with some forms of *social support*.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients among the study variables (N = 654)

	Possible Range	M	SD	Skewness (SE = 0.096)	Kurtosis (SE = 0.191)	Correlation coefficients					
						1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parent(s)' Social Support ¹	6-24	21.64	2.95	-1.670	3.035	-					
2. Classmates' Social Support ¹	6-24	17.08	2.71	-1.296	1.775	.306***	-				
3. Teacher(s)' Social Support ¹	6-24	18.19	4.02	-0.543	-0.197	.323***	.190***	-			
4. Close Friends' Social Support ¹	6-24	21.82	3.64	-2.227	5.255	.261***	.370***	.173***	-		
5. Total Social Support ¹	24-96	78.73	8.94	-1.048	1.659	.674***	.639***	.683***	.682***	-	
6. Cybervictimization ²	0-45	1.44	3.32	4.015	20.541	-.290***	-.262***	-.156***	-.095*	-.289***	-
7. Grade ²	5 th P.E. - 4 th S.E.					-.262***	-.043	-.187***	.020	-.212***	.069

¹Pearson correlation coefficients; ²Spearman correlation coefficients.

P.E. = primary education; S.E. = secondary education.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Regarding *perceived social support*, the average and total levels found in each form of *social support* tended to be high, above the scale's mean value. Students perceived greater *social support* from close friends and family than from teachers and classmates. Despite the scores' tendency to be distributed above the mean, their distribution did not deviate severely from normality. The correlations between the four forms of *social support* were positive and statistically significant. The magnitude of the correlations between *perceived social support* from close friends and classmates, from family and teachers, and from family and classmates was moderate. In the other cases, the correlations were low.

Regarding *cybervictimization*, the distribution of scores deviated significantly from normality, with a significant tendency towards low scores. The correlations of all forms of *perceived social support* with reporting being a victim of peer cyberaggression were negative and statistically significant. The magnitude of the correlation tended to be moderate or low.

Finally, a negative and statistically significant correlation was observed between some forms of *perceived social support* and *grade*. Specifically, student-*perceived social support* from adults (parents and teachers) tended to decrease throughout their school years. In contrast, no significant relationship was observed between *grade* and *social support* from peers (close friends and classmates) or with *cybervictimization*.

Differences as a function of grade in perceived social support

As both the general measure of *perceived social support* and several specific forms of *support* were significantly related to the *grade* (Table 1), we compared *perceived social support* in the different *grades* (from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary education). Table 2 shows statistically significant differences as a function of *grade* in all kinds of *perceived social support*, as well as in the total measure of *social support*. In general, primary students tended to perceive greater *social support* than secondary students. This is more evident in the *social support* from adults (parents and teachers) than from peers (classmates and close friends), where the level of *support* was more stable, indicating fewer differences as a function of *grade*. As shown in Table 2, regarding the score of *total social support*, students in 5th and 6th grade of primary school perceived greater *social support* than those in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade of secondary school. More specifically, concerning parent(s)' *social support*, 5th- and 6th-graders of primary school and 1st-graders of secondary school perceived more parental support than 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-graders of secondary school. Students from 5th grade of primary school perceived more *parental support* than 1st-graders of secondary school. Regarding teacher(s)' *social support*, 6th-graders of primary school perceived more *teacher support* than those in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade of secondary school. Students from 5th grade of primary school perceived more *teacher support* than 3rd-graders of secondary school. Regarding classmates' *social*

support and close friends' *social support*, in both cases, 5th-graders of primary school perceived greater *social support* than 2nd-graders of secondary school. In both grades (5th grade of primary school and 2nd grade of secondary school), students reported the highest and lowest levels, respectively, of *social support* from *peers* and *close friends*.

Effect of social support on cybervictimization

Given that the four forms of *perceived social support* analyzed had negative and statistically significant correlations with *cybervictimization*, but at the same time, they correlated with each other (Table 1), a multiple regression analysis was conducted to more precisely determine the specific effect of each form of *perceived social support* on *cybervictimization*.

The analysis was conducted in three steps (Table 3). In the first step, a model was tested in which the four forms of *perceived social support* were included as independent variables. Two of the variables presented negative and statistically significant regression coefficients (*social support* from family and peers), whereas the other two forms of *support* (teachers and close friends) no longer presented statistically significant coefficients once the effect of the other types of *support* was statistically controlled. The resulting model was statistically significant and explained 16% of the variance in *cybervictimization* scores. In the second step, a model was tested that added the students' *grade* to the variables already included in Step 1. The *grade* did not show a statistically significant effect, nor was there a significant variation in the effect of the other variables included in the model. The increase in the coefficient of determination (R^2) was not statistically significant. Finally, in the third step, a model was tested in which the interactions of the *grade* with each of the forms of *perceived social support* analyzed were added to the independent variables from Step 2 to explore the possible moderating effect of the *grade* on the relationship between *social support* and *cybervictimization*. Two of the interaction effects were statistically significant: the *grade* moderated the effect of both parental and peer *social support* on *cybervictimization*. The statistically significant effect of *social support* both from parents and peers was maintained. The introduction of the interactions between the *grade* and the different forms of *social support* in the model resulted in a small but statistically significant increase in the model's explanatory power (R^2), increasing to 17% of the variance in *cybervictimization* scores.

To explore why *social support* from teachers and close friends did not show a statistically significant relationship when statistically controlling for the other variables and considering that the four types of *social support* correlated with each other (Table 1), mediation analyses were conducted. As shown in Table 4, we observed that the effect of both *social support* from teachers and close friends on *cybervictimization* was not direct but indirect, mediated in both cases by the *social support* of parents and classmates.

Table 2
Differences in perceived social support based on grade (N = 654)

	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	5 th P.E. (n = 38)	M	6 th P.E. (n = 120)	M	1 st S.E. (n = 204)	M	2 nd S.E. (n = 96)	M	3 rd S.E. (n = 85)	M	4 th S.E. (n = 111)	M
Parent(s)' Social Support ¹	23.0	1.38	22.6	2.12	22.1	2.51	20.7	3.55	20.9	3.21	20.7	3.40
Classmates' Social Support ¹	17.8	1.87	17.4	2.49	17.0	2.71	16.2	3.46	17.2	2.52	17.3	2.42
Teacher(s)' Social Support ²	19.7	3.35	19.8	3.60	17.9	4.11	17.5	4.26	17.0	4.12	18.0	3.61
Close Friends' Social Support ¹	22.6	2.31	22.1	3.31	21.6	3.94	20.9	4.16	22.1	3.43	22.3	3.32
Total Social Support ¹	83.1	5.91	81.8	8.20	78.6	8.68	75.4	10.80	77.1	8.72	78.2	7.99

*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.
¹ Unequal variances (Welch and Games-Howell).
² Equal variances (Fisher and Tukey).

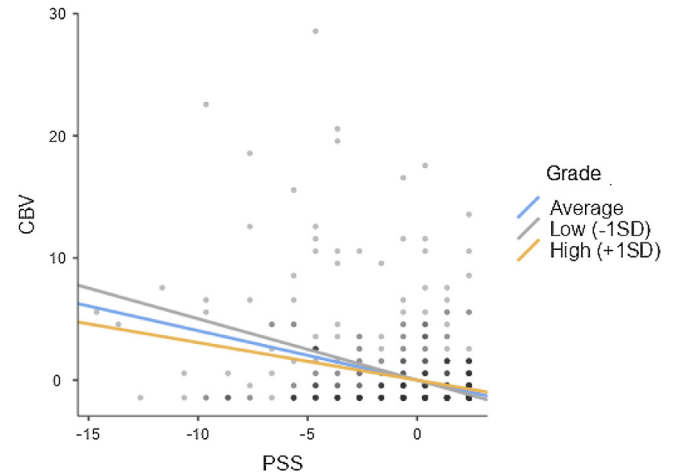


Figure 1. Graphic representation of the effect of parent(s)' social support (PSS) on cybervictimization (CBV) at different levels of the moderator (grade).

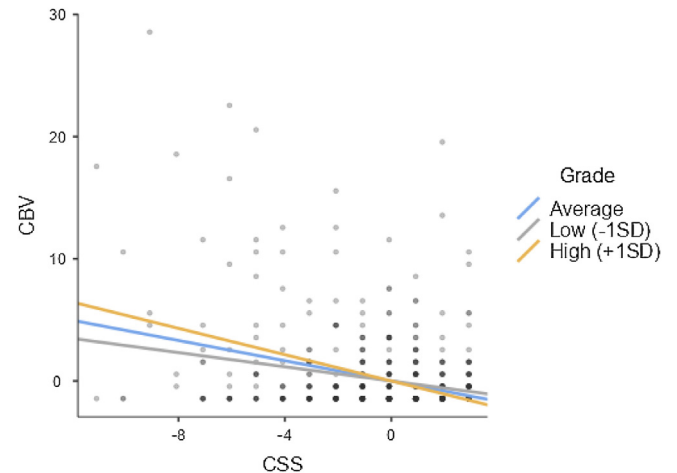


Figure 2. Graphic representation of the effect of classmates' social support (CSS) on cyber-victimization (CBV) at different levels of the moderator (grade).

Finally, moderation analyses were conducted to study in more detail the interaction effect of the *grade* on the *social support* of parents and classmates, as observed in Table 3. As shown in Table 5, the effect of both types of *support* on *cybervictimization* was negative and statistically significant in both lower and medium or higher *grades*. However, the effect of parental *social support* was greater in the earlier *grades* than in the later ones, while the effect of peer *support* was greater in the later *grades* than in the earlier ones (Table 5; Figures 1 and 2).

Discussion

This study has analyzed the perceived social support in a sample of students from 5th grade of primary education to 4th grade of secondary education, exploring its variations according to grade and its relationship with cybervictimization. The results show that cybervictimization is influenced by different sources of support and that this relationship varies based on the grade.

The analysis of perceived social support, the first objective of this study, reveals that in primary education, the main source of support is family, followed by close friends, teachers, and classmates, aligned with the initial hypothesis. However, during the transition to secondary education, the perceived support from adults (family and teachers) decreases, whereas perceived support from peers

Table 3
Results of multiple regression analyses for cybervictimization ($N = 654$)

	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Step 1. Social Support			
Parent(s)	-.239***	-.248***	-.284***
Classmates	-.278***	-.276***	-.265***
Teacher(s)	.014	.011	.016
Close Friend	.016	.018	.023
Step 2. Grade			
Grade	–	-.032	-.026
Step 3. Interactions Social Support x Grade			
Parent(s) x Grade	–	–	.095*
Classmates x Grade	–	–	-.123**
Teacher(s) x Grade	–	–	-.010
Close Friend x Grade	–	–	.013
Adjusted R^2	.16	.16	.17
F	32.4	26.1	15.8
df1	4	5	9
df2	649	648	644
p	< .001	< .001	< .001
ΔR^2	–	9.17e-4	0.0135
F	–	0.714	2.644
df1	–	1	4
df2	–	648	644
p	–	.398	.033

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.**Table 4**
Mediation analyses ($N = 654$)

				95% CI				
Effect Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	β	z	p
<i>Effect of TSS on CBV, mediated by PSS</i>								
Indirect Components	TSS $\rightarrow$ PSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.083	0.014	−0.111	−0.056	−0.101	−5.88	< .001
	TSS $\rightarrow$ PSS	0.237	0.027	0.184	0.291	0.323	8.74	< .001
	PSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.351	0.044	−0.438	−0.265	−0.311	−7.94	< .001
Direct	TSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.011	0.033	−0.074	0.053	−0.013	−0.33	.741
Total		−0.094	0.032	−0.157	−0.031	−0.114	−2.92	.003
<i>Effect of TSS on CBV mediated by CSS</i>								
Indirect Components	TSS $\rightarrow$ CSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.052	0.012	−0.076	−0.029	−0.063	−4.33	< .001
	TSS $\rightarrow$ CSS	0.128	0.026	0.077	0.179	0.190	4.95	< .001
	CSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.408	0.046	−0.498	−0.319	−0.333	−8.90	< .001
Direct	TSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.042	0.031	−0.102	0.019	−0.050	−1.35	0.177
Total		−0.094	0.032	−0.157	−0.031	−0.114	−2.92	0.003
<i>Effect of FSS on CBV mediated by PSS</i>								
Indirect Components	FSS $\rightarrow$ PSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.071	0.014	−0.098	−0.044	−0.078	−5.16	< .001
	FSS $\rightarrow$ PSS	0.211	0.031	0.152	0.271	0.261	6.91	< .001
	PSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.336	0.043	−0.420	−0.251	−0.298	−7.76	< .001
Direct	FSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.063	0.035	−0.132	0.005	−0.069	−1.81	0.071
Total		−0.134	0.035	−0.204	−0.065	−0.147	−3.79	< .001
<i>Effect of FSS on CBV mediated by CSS</i>								
Indirect Components	FSS $\rightarrow$ CSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.113	0.017	−0.147	−0.079	−0.124	−6.50	< .001
	FSS $\rightarrow$ CSS	0.276	0.027	0.223	0.329	0.370	10.19	< .001
	CSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.410	0.049	−0.505	−0.314	−0.334	−8.44	< .001
Direct	FSS $\rightarrow$ CBV	−0.021	0.036	−0.092	0.050	−0.023	−0.59	0.555
Total		−0.134	0.035	−0.204	−0.065	−0.147	−3.79	< .001

PSS = Parent(s)' Social Support; CSS = Classmates' Social Support; TSS = Teacher(s)' Social Support; FSS = Close Friend's Social Support; CBV = Cybervictimización.

(classmates and close friends) remains stable. In the final years of secondary education, close friends are the primary source of support, followed by family, teachers, and classmates. This change is not the result of increased perceived social support from close friends, but rather from decreased perceived family support. Additionally, secondary education students perceive overall less social support, as support from friendships does not compensate for the decreased support from family and teachers. This may be explained

by the fact that, although relationships with peers become more significant during adolescence, they do not always provide the same level of emotional security as family (Symonds & Galton, 2014). The transition to secondary school, with the breakdown of previous friendships and the formation of new ones, creates instability that may reduce the perception of peer support (Krammer et al., 2023; Weller, 2007). Although today's adolescents are more digitally connected than ever, they also report higher levels of lone-

Table 5

Effect of parent(s)' social support (PSS) and classmates' social support (CSS) on cybervictimization (CBV) at different levels of the moderator (grade) (N = 654)

			95% Confidence Interval			
Level	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	Z	p
Effect of PSS on CBV at different levels of the moderator (Grade)						
Average	−0.404	0.045	−0.491	−0.317	−9.08	< .001
Low (-1SD)	−0.502	0.074	−0.646	−0.357	−6.80	< .001
High (+1SD)	−0.306	0.052	−0.408	−0.205	−5.93	< .001
Effect of CSS on CBV at different levels of the moderator (Grade)						
Average	−0.415	0.045	−0.503	−0.326	−9.18	< .001
Low (-1SD)	−0.290	0.069	−0.426	−0.155	−4.20	< .001
High (+1SD)	−0.539	0.067	−0.669	−0.408	−8.08	< .001

liness (Twenge et al., 2021). This suggests that virtual connectivity does not substitute for real-world emotional support from family and teachers, and in fact may erode the perception of genuine peer closeness.

The lower perceived support from teachers in secondary education, compared to primary education, may be due to the Spanish educational model. In primary school, a single teacher-tutor teaches most subjects, facilitating interaction and bonding. In secondary school, students have several specialized teachers with whom they share few weekly hours, making it difficult to form close relationships that are perceived as a source of support (Francés et al., 2022; Symonds & Galton, 2014).

The second objective was to analyze how these sources of support are associated with the likelihood of cybervictimization. As hypothesized, we observed that all these sources are negatively associated with cybervictimization, with family and peer support standing out as the factors with a clearer direct relationship. The correlations between the different forms of perceived social support and reported cybervictimization, although statistically significant, tend to be moderate or low. This may be due to the low variability in cybervictimization scores, with most students reporting low levels. It may also be related to the complex nature of the relationship between cybervictimization and social support. The protective effect of family decreases as students advance through grades, while that of peers increases. When we compare these findings to earlier work, some methodological caveats emerge.

In the study by Lee et al. (2022), an association was found between family and peer support and face-to-face bullying, but this association was not found with cyberbullying. However, this result should be taken with caution. In this research, a single question was used to assess all sources of social support (*Who are you most likely to turn to for discussing your concerns or difficulties and seeking help or assistance?* The four response options were: *family, peers, institution, and none*) and did not examine possible interactions with ages groups. Hong et al. (2016) found a lower prevalence of traditional bullying victims among adolescents who felt satisfied with their family and friendship relationships. However, this association was not found in the case of cybervictims. It should be noted that, as in the study by Lee et al. (2022), a standardized measure to assess social support was not used. Moreover, the data underpinning that study date from 2005–2006, when both the prevalence and types of social media platforms among young people differed substantially from today, limiting the applicability of its findings to our current digitally saturated context. Martín-Criado et al. (2021) found that parental involvement in monitoring online activities, such as avoiding over-familiarity or inappropriate use of social media, effectively prevented risk behaviors associated with cybervictimization at any age, particularly during early adolescence. Furthermore, family support provides emotional and practical resources to help young people cope with the risk factors associated with cybervictimization (Audrin & Blaya, 2020; Mobin

et al., 2017). Affectionate relationships and open communication with parents are associated with lower anxiety (Al-Atram, 2015; Möller et al., 2016), higher self-esteem (Harris et al., 2015; Keizer et al., 2019), better coping strategies (Morison & Benight, 2022), and a stronger development of social skills (Daud et al., 2019; Salavera & Quílez-Robres, 2022).

The direct protective effect of peers against cybervictimization can be explained by their ability to offer support, which reduces the likelihood of them engaging in aggression and increases the chances of them acting as defenders, also in the online world (Lee et al., 2022). Moreover, peer support also serves as a protective factor against various predictors of cybervictimization, such as social anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Jaskulska et al., 2022; Wit et al., 2011). It is important to note that our “classmates support” measure captures allied peers and confidants, not perpetrators. Research on bystander roles (e.g., Chen et al., 2024; Salmivalli et al., 2011) shows that strong peer cohesion can deter aggressive behavior and foster intervention, thereby reducing cybervictimization. Teacher support has an indirect protective effect. Teachers can foster a positive classroom climate by strengthening positive relationships among students and establishing clear rules against aggression, which promotes the defense of victims (Llorent et al., 2021; Mérida-López et al., 2024). Additionally, they can enhance family support by promoting open communication with families and providing useful information to reduce risk factors (Virtanen et al., 2019). Close Friends' support is shown to be an indirect protective factor that could reinforce peer support by improving social skills and self-esteem and offering opportunities to meet new people (Krammer et al., 2023; Turner et al., 2024). Furthermore, perceiving friendships as a source of support improves emotional well-being and mitigates stress, which could enhance the positive effects of family support (Nguyen et al., 2024; Scheuplein & van Harmelen, 2022).

This study highlights the need to adopt a global and ecological approach to protecting against cybervictimization, where families, schools, and close friends interact to create safe environments.

Practical implications

The results emphasize that, although it decreases during adolescence, perceived family support remains crucial. Thus, it is essential for preventive strategies against cyberbullying to involve families—especially during school transition periods—strengthening their role as agents of emotional and practical support (Holt & Espelage, 2007). Equally important is the cultivation of positive peer networks: programs should empower classmates as defenders and foster genuine, offline social bonds to counteract the isolating effects of excessive online interaction. In the school context, interventions should focus on strengthening peer bonds, given their key role during adolescence. Some educational models dedicate the first weeks of secondary education to strengthening positive

relationships among students, promoting a positive classroom climate, and mitigating risk factors associated with victimization, successfully reducing its prevalence (Virtanen et al., 2019). Therefore, training teachers to act as facilitators of these relationships and promoters of anti-aggression norms is fundamental. Outside of school, it is important to promote and nurture friendships, as they complement family and school support and reinforce social skills and self-esteem (Hong et al., 2016). Finally, preventive measures must be adapted to the educational level. In childhood, they should focus on strengthening family support, while in adolescence, healthy peer relationships should be prioritized, without neglecting the ongoing role of family and teachers. This approach will allow for the design of strategies that address both risk and protective factors, optimizing the prevention of cyberbullying and improving school well-being.

Limitations

Although this study enriches the understanding of cybervictimization and social support, several limitations must also be considered. Firstly, the explanatory power of the social support variables analyzed in relation to cybervictimization tends to be low. This may be because these variables represent only a small part of the set of factors, and their interactions, that explain the likelihood of being a cybervictim. Future studies should expand the explanatory model by incorporating other relevant factors to improve its predictive capacity. Secondly, the use of a cross-sectional methodology is not the most suitable for analyzing the evolution of the phenomenon over time. Although this work is exploratory, future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how the relationships between various sources of social support and cybervictimization change at different educational stages. Thirdly, the student groups by grade do not have equal sizes. This lack of homogeneity in group sizes may affect the robustness of the statistical analyses. However, precautions were taken to minimize this potential bias, such as checking for homogeneity of variances and using robust tests when necessary. In future replications of this study, it would be advisable to ensure that group sizes are similar. Fourthly, the measures used were based on self-reports to assess both social support and cybervictimization. Although this method is particularly suitable for detecting phenomena like bullying that often occur privately, it is subject to possible memory biases or social desirability. Future research could combine self-reports with other complementary methodologies to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, although some subscales presented AVE values marginally below the recommended cut-off, this limitation does not compromise the validity of the results or the use of the questionnaires, given their strong internal consistency and reliability. Nonetheless, this aspect should be considered in future studies.

CrediT Autorship Contribution Statement

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