

# The subtle aggression of social exclusion in education: a scale for its measurement among young people

*La sutil agresión de la exclusión social en la escuela: una escala de medida para adolescentes*

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## ABSTRACT

The scientific literature has extensively addressed the study of social exclusion. However, there are few studies focusing on social exclusion among schoolchildren from the perspective and feelings of its victims, as well as its possible manifestations within the framework of school coexistence. Even fewer investigations have been conducted with this focus on preadolescents and adolescents. Nevertheless, existing literature suggests the presence of two distinct forms of victimization through exclusion among schoolchildren: manifest and subtle. The aim of this study was to describe the nuances of these potential forms of the phenomenon and to design and validate a scale for their measurement. A total of 1013 primary and secondary school students from educational institutions in Córdoba participated in this research. The study was conducted in two phases: the first explored the suitability and structure of an instrument on social exclusion that captures the affective and behavioral nuances related to the victims' feelings regarding different types of exclusion. In the second phase, through a confirmatory factor analysis, the factorial structure of a measurement scale was established, demonstrating strong psychometric properties for evaluating the construct of social exclusion. As a result, a bidimensional scale of social exclusion –manifest exclusion and subtle exclusion– was obtained. The findings are discussed concerning the instrument's suitability, and conclusions are drawn regarding the article's contribution to the understanding of the construct, as well as its potential to support preventive and remedial educational interventions for this type of peer aggression.

**Keywords:** aggression, victimization, scales, social discrimination, adolescents, education

## RESUMEN

La literatura científica ha abordado ampliamente el estudio de la exclusión social. Sin embargo, son escasos los estudios que ponen el foco en la exclusión social entre escolares desde la percepción y sentimientos de sus víctimas y sobre sus posibles formas en el marco de la convivencia escolar. Aun son menos las investigaciones que con este foco se realizan sobre preadolescentes y adolescentes. Aun así, la literatura previa aporta aproximaciones que sustentan la expectativa de que existen dos formas de victimización por exclusión entre escolares: manifiesta y sutil. El objetivo de este trabajo ha sido describir los matices de estas posibles formas del fenómeno y diseñar y validar una escala para su medida. En este trabajo participaron 1013 estudiantes de Educación Primaria y Secundaria de centros educativos de Córdoba. La investigación se desarrolló en dos fases: la primera exploró la idoneidad y la estructura de un instrumento sobre exclusión social que recoge los matices afectivos y conductuales referidos a los sentimientos de la víctima de los diferentes tipos de exclusión. En la segunda, mediante un análisis factorial confirmatorio se establece la estructura factorial de una escala de medida que evidencia buenas cualidades psicométricas para la evaluación del constructo exclusión social. Así se obtiene una escala de dos factores: exclusión manifiesta y exclusión sutil. Se discuten los

resultados en relación con la idoneidad del instrumento y se expresan las conclusiones en orden tanto a la aportación que el artículo hace a la comprensión del constructo como a su virtualidad para favorecer intervenciones educativas preventivas y paliativas de este tipo de agresión entre iguales.

**Palabras clave:** agresión, victimización, escalas, discriminación social, adolescentes, educación

## INTRODUCTION

The desire to create and maintain positive peer relationships is a fundamental and universal human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, for various reasons, individuals do not always succeed in achieving such relationships in everyday social life. This can lead to distress and anxiety for individuals who feel unsuccessful in their efforts. Numerous studies over the past two decades have shown that episodes of rejection, ostracism, and social exclusion—particularly common in childhood and adolescence—affect well-being and the quality of coexistence and classroom life in various ways (Satici, 2020). Some forms of rejection are included within the broader phenomenon of school bullying, but exclusion also appears as a specific phenomenon beyond unjustified aggression like bullying. Both types of social exclusion have negative effects on victims, such as anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, demotivation toward school activities, low academic performance, school dropout, internalizing or externalizing problems, increased aggressive behaviour, and overall reduced emotional well-being, sometimes even leading to severe consequences such as depression or suicide (Arslan, 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Williams, 2001). All forms of peer maltreatment negatively affect personal development and disrupt the socialization process. Peer relationships require the formation of emotional bonds that support balanced social integration and the creation of a sense of belonging to a community. This sense of belonging is essential for developing full citizenship (Rodríguez-Hidalgo & Ortega-Ruiz, 2017). Among all negative interpersonal dynamics caused by peer mistreatment, social exclusion among school-aged peers is perhaps the least studied. This is partly because it often involves subtle forms of aggression with low expressiveness and limited visibility. Marginalizing a peer from direct contact (e.g., social isolation) or seeking their psychological exclusion (e.g., being ignored or told they are not wanted) is not always perceived as a form of aggression by others or even the surrounding environment. It is often not recognized as an intentional act of harm, yet for the victim, it remains painful and can have a profoundly aversive emotional and mental impact, potentially becoming a traumatic experience with severe consequences (Yu et al., 2023; Zadow et al., 2024).

## SOCIAL EXCLUSION AMONG SCHOOLCHILDREN

Social exclusion is a complex phenomenon that can be approached from different perspectives. In recent years, significant contributions have emerged from psychology and pedagogy (e.g., Kaufman & Killen, 2022; Riva & Eck, 2016; Satici, 2020; Vanhalst et al., 2015; Wesselmann et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023; Zadow et al., 2024). Scientific literature uses different terms to refer to this phenomenon—such as ostracism, rejection, or isolation—which are often used interchangeably with social exclusion. However, important differences among them must be distinguished to better understand the construct (Wesselmann et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2005).

From a psychosocial perspective, social exclusion—often referred to as ostracism (Williams, 2001)—is understood as being physically or emotionally separated from others (Riva & Eck, 2016). Physical separation involves explicit and active interpersonal rejection (Leary, 2005), while emotional exclusion is less evident and includes experiences such as being ignored, feeling unwanted, receiving no attention or affection, or being treated with disrespect (Molden et al., 2009). Riva and Eck (2016) proposed a hierarchical model of the construct that identifies two key experiences: social rejection and ostracism.

Isolation, in contrast to rejection, is defined as a state or situation characterized by the absence of social relationships, lack of contact with others, or exclusion from interactive activities. Self-assessments of isolation are often associated with the density of social relationships (Vanhalst et al., 2015). This suggests that the perception of social isolation can vary by individual interpretation, involving a subjective component that must be considered. Isolation deprives individuals of tangible group benefits, leading to feelings of injustice or deprivation of rights. Emotional processes, along with objective and measurable factors, influence the perception of this situation, making it a complex psychological and educational phenomenon. Unlike rejection or being ignored, isolation is sometimes a state that is desired and actively sought by the individual (Kaufman & Killen, 2022). Even so, self-perception of isolation—whether imposed by others or self-initiated—tends to be experienced as negative and painful (Arslan, 2018). Loneliness represents the final stage of a dynamic process in which the individual becomes aware of living in a socially isolated condition. For most people, this process is distressing, especially in childhood or adolescence, where social interaction is vital (Zadow et al., 2024).

Explicit social rejection, often manifested through verbal expressions, can lead to isolation and encompasses forms of social discrimination that are clearly perceived by the targeted individual as unjust. This perceived social discrimination is particularly impactful during the years of compulsory education, when social

interaction is not optional, but rather normative and part of everyday life. However, most research on this topic has focused on adults (McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). In recent decades, studies involving youth within educational contexts have offered valuable insights (Satici, 2020; Yu et al., 2023). From this perspective, social exclusion is described as a type of direct relational aggression that occurs within bullying dynamics, involving unjustified, intentional, and repeated behaviors framed in the context of a social power imbalance (Rodríguez-Hidalgo & Ortega-Ruiz, 2017). Statements such as “You can’t play with us” or “You’re not invited to the party” exemplify how victims may be socially targeted through group-aligned, collective rejection.

An emerging line of research on social aggression focuses on the stigma triggered by certain aspects of ethnic-cultural diversity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability, among others. These factors can result in subtle forms of aggression—such as xenophobia—and may involve rejection or even hate-driven expressions directed at stigmatizing those perceived as different (Wessermann et al., 2023). Falla and Ortega-Ruiz (2019) highlighted high rates of exclusion and bullying experienced by students with disabilities. Rodríguez-Hidalgo and colleagues (2014) examined ethno-cultural victimization in a large and culturally diverse sample of schoolchildren, finding that both immigrant and Roma students are at high risk of exclusion.

Ultimately, scientific literature increasingly describes social exclusion as a multidimensional construct with specific psychosocial and psychoeducational features. Early detection is crucial to prevent the victim’s suffering from escalating into mental health risks during critical developmental periods like preadolescence and adolescence. This construct appears to encompass significant elements of discrimination and rejection (Banki, 2012; Freedman et al., 2016; Wiltgren, 2023). Most of the scientific and educational communities agree on the urgent need to better understand social exclusion among schoolchildren, with the aim of mitigating and preventing it due to its serious consequences.

## **TYPES OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

In the school context, peer social exclusion has often been studied within the broader phenomenon of bullying and, to a lesser extent, as a specific form of unjustified and morally cruel aggression. The element of intentionality in social exclusion has led some researchers to distinguish between various possible forms of exclusion. When social exclusion occurs as part of bullying—clearly involving intentional, repeated behaviour within a power imbalance—it is consistently regarded as aggressive and harmful, both due to its moral implications and its consequences (García-Díaz et al., 2023). However, when exclusion takes place

independently of bullying dynamics, it becomes more difficult to determine whether there is clear intent to harm or unjustly punish the victim. In such cases, the person excluding others and even observers involved may not recognize the behaviour as immoral or unjust (Ortega, 2010). Freedman et al. (2016) suggest that social exclusion sometimes arises because it is not always realistic or possible to include everyone. People often must make elective decisions—for instance, when choosing friends. This involves excluding some peers from a close friendship circle but not necessarily from the larger classroom group. Students organize themselves in various groupings, sometimes task-related, other times based on affinities; and friendship itself is a form of affinity (Bravo et al., 2022). Any decision involving selection may result in exclusion without intent to cause harm. Research shows that in many everyday school situations, exclusion is normalized and even viewed positively—for example, when selecting group members for a task requiring certain skills, or when limiting team size (Kaufman & Killen, 2022). Studies on peer relationships indicate that children justify social exclusion differently depending on age and social identity (Cooley et al., 2019). However, even when peer exclusion is unintentional, the excluded student may still perceive it as painful and feel victimized.

These contributions lead us to view social exclusion as a complex concept with many dimensions (Riva & Eck, 2016). When focusing specifically on exclusion perceived as aggressive or harmful, most studies distinguish between two primary experiences or types. The labels and nuances used to describe these subtypes are not always consistent or conclusive. For example, Prendergast and Schubert (2020) describe a duality of explicit versus implicit social exclusion, without necessarily evaluating that both forms can elicit negative feelings and harmful emotions. Others, such as Wesselmann et al. (2023), distinguish between rejection (direct negative attention suggesting one is unwanted) and ostracism (primarily defined by being ignored). Molden et al. (2009) made a similar distinction when examining how emotions and motivations differ in response to being rejected versus being ignored. These same forms—being rejected and being ignored—were also identified by Arslan (2018) in studies of social exclusion in schools, focusing on students' subjective experiences. On an emotional level, recent studies show that many exclusion scenarios among students are difficult to detect yet cause serious challenges in social integration. Examples include: peers avoiding sitting next to you; refusing to work with you; deliberately hiding information; refusing friendship; discrimination; stigmatization; mocking; spreading rumours; or avoiding eye contact, among others (Banki, 2012; Wiltgren, 2023). Such behaviours—often referred to as microaggressions (Wesselmann et al., 2023)—are frequently experienced by members of minority groups and may be enacted either consciously and explicitly or unconsciously and implicitly (Cooley et al.,

2019). These seemingly harmless social behaviours, often unnoticed by others, can generate deeply harmful feelings in those targeted, who are typically left to face the exclusion on their own.

Despite variation in the definition of its subtypes, the scientific literature provides valuable insights that contribute to advancing the conceptualization of peer social exclusion. It suggests that the phenomenon may occur in two broad forms: one that is more direct, explicit, and overtly aversive; and another more indirect, implicit, and subtle. Accurately measuring these types of exclusion is essential for two key reasons: (1) to capture the full spectrum of peer victimization associated with rejection, discrimination, and ostracism; and (2) to assess the quality of peer social networks, which is a recognized indicator of school climate and, therefore, a foundational component of education quality (Ortega, 2010).

## **MEASUREMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF THE CONSTRUCT OF PEER SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

The tradition of using sociometric methods has played an important role in distinguishing socially accepted individuals from those who are socially excluded (Cillessen, 2009). However, this method does not capture the emotional experience of being excluded within peer relational contexts during childhood and/or adolescence, nor the various forms of peer exclusion victimization, which is the core construct of the present study. For instance, the Social Inclusion Scale for Adolescents (SIAS; Moyano et al., 2022) was developed to evaluate social inclusion/exclusion among Spanish and foreign adults based on five sociodemographic factors: basic needs, self-efficacy, social support, employment training, and social integration. Also available is the Experiencing Social Exclusion Scale (ESE; Semenova et al., 2022), designed to assess the volume and intensity of social exclusion experiences in romantic and small-group adult relationships. These contributions are valuable but diverge from the specific construct examined in this study. There are other tools that more closely align with the construct in question. For example, the Bull-S Test (Cerezo, 2000) identifies aggression–victimization dynamics related to bullying in school settings through the use of sociograms, but it does not measure perceived exclusion. One of the first instruments specifically targeting social exclusion was the Ostracism Needs Threat Scale by Williams (2001), which explored ostracism experiences in relation to four core psychological needs: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Later, the Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents (OES-A; Gilman et al., 2013)—the first tool designed to evaluate two of the most common ostracism experiences perceived by adolescents: being actively excluded or being ignored within a group—focused on the perception of exclusion, although it did not register

perceived victimization. This instrument was validated among youths aged 17–18, which limits early detection—something that many authors argue is essential to prevent more serious adverse effects (Bravo et al., 2022). Most instruments approximating measures of sociability incorporate weighted indicators of social exclusion. The General Belongingness Scale (GBS; Malone et al., 2012) was used to assess acceptance or rejection across various domains, without addressing how social affinities impact the personalities of those accepted or rejected. Other tools such as the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995) assess group affiliation levels, while the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1978) is typically used for specific purposes that do not focus on rejection-related victimization. For example, the Classmates Social Isolation Questionnaire (CSIQ; Alivernini & Manganelli, 2016) can be used to register isolation.

Nevertheless, there is currently no specific instrument capable of capturing how adolescents perceive their own experiences of social exclusion by peers—or whether such experiences are perceived with precision, as these perceptions may differently influence the emotional impact of the experience. This absence is especially significant considering the substantial body of evidence documenting the emotional, cognitive, and social harm caused by social exclusion. The importance of contextual conditions, and, in particular, the nuances with which social exclusion is presented to victims (Wesselmann et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2005), underlines the need for measurement tools capable of differentiating these effects and thereby enriching the epistemological framework of the construct.

The present study aims to create a suitable instrument to evaluate peer social exclusion as perceived by preadolescent and adolescent victims. Given that recent literature points to two potential forms of school-based exclusion—one more direct, explicit, and aversive, and the other more indirect, implicit, and subtle (e.g., Arslan, 2018; Molden et al., 2009; Prendergast & Schubert, 2020; Wesselmann et al., 2023)—this study seeks to design and validate a scale that measures peer victimization through both manifest and subtle forms of social exclusion: the Manifest and Subtle Social Exclusion Scale for Preadolescents and Adolescents (ESMASU). The specific objectives are: (1) To identify whether there are distinct types of perceived peer exclusion victimization based on the emotional harm felt by the victim (manifest victimization vs. subtle victimization); and (2) To design and validate the ESMASU Scale with a sample of students aged 10 to 17. The hypothesis under study is: There are two forms of peer social exclusion victimization—manifest and subtle.



## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 1,013 students from 14 primary and secondary education centres located in the provinces of Córdoba and Seville participated in the present study. The sampling procedure was incidental, based on accessibility. The final sample was divided into two subsamples (see Table 1): an exploratory analysis sample composed of 496 students (49%) and a confirmatory analysis sample composed of 517 students (48.7% boys and 51.3% girls), aged between 10 and 17 years ( $M = 11.86$ ;  $SD = 1.703$ ).

**Table 1**

*Description of the study sample based on sociodemographic data*

Stage	Grade	Gender		Total
		Boys	Girls	
Primary	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	171	168	339
	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	123	121	244
Secondary	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	53	53	106
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	46	59	105
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	42	62	104
	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	58	57	115
Total		493	520	1013

### Instrumento

An ad hoc questionnaire was developed consisting of 20 items (see Appendix 1), including exploratory questions about possible experiences of social exclusion within participants' reference social groups (school, classroom, classmates, and friends), as well as items related to sociodemographic aspects (e.g., educational centre, grade, gender). Variables related to experiences of social exclusion were measured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). All items were written from the victim's point of view and began with prompts such as: "I feel that..." or "My classmates..." (see Appendix 2).

## Procedure and Data Analysis

To initiate the data collection process, a research team from the University of Cordoba first contacted the educational institutions in order to obtain permission to carry out the study. A date was then arranged for administering the questionnaires in the participating schools. During the administration process, researchers distributed the questionnaires in paper format and informed participants about the voluntary, anonymous, and confidential nature of the data. All doubts were addressed by the research team, which also documented any incidents or difficulties encountered by students during completion. The completion time was approximately 15 minutes.

After piloting the instrument, several items were revised or eliminated due to identified difficulties—such as issues with comprehension or grammatical errors involving participant gender (e.g., replacing “compañero” with “compañero/a”). The suitability of the items was confirmed, and the study was conducted in two phases: the first phase involved conducting the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), and the second phase involved a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).

The EFA was carried out using the responses from the designated subsample, aiming to identify the number of underlying factors or dimensions (using Factor program version 10.9.02). Due to the ordinal nature and non-normality of the data, a polychoric correlation matrix was generated (Flora & Curran, 2004), and the Unweighted Least Squares (ULS) extraction method was used. Promin oblique rotation was applied, which is well-suited for exploratory studies and is recommended by several authors (Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2014; Lloret et al., 2017). Items from the original 20-item scale were removed during the EFA if their factor loadings were below .40 (Lloret et al., 2017).

In the second phase, the EQS program was used to conduct the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with the second study sample. The estimation method used was Robust, given the detection of non-normal distribution indices. To assess model fit, the Satorra-Bentler chi-square ( $\chi^2$ S-B), chi-square divided by degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2$ S-B/df)—with values  $\leq 5$  considered acceptable and  $\leq 3$  considered optimal—were used, along with sample-size independent indices: NNFI (Non-Normed Fit Index), NFI (Normed Fit Index), CFI (Comparative Fit Index), and IFI (Incremental Fit Index). Good model fit was defined by values  $\geq .95$  (Bentler, 1992). For RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), values between .05 and .08 were considered indicative of good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The procedure was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (CEIH) of the University of Cordoba (PSI2016-74871-R, April 18, 2018).

## RESULTS

### Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Social Exclusion Scale

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) indicated a lack of normality in the data (Mardia's coefficient = 379.466). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test measure of sampling adequacy (KMO = .925) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett's test = 2582.1;  $p < .001$ ) yielded satisfactory values, supporting the suitability of the data for factor analysis and justifying the application of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The resulting factorial structure explained 80.2% of the total variance. Simplicity (S index) and loading simplicity (LS index) (Lorenzo-Seva, 2003) showed appropriate values ( $S = .99$ ;  $LS = .54$ ), suggesting a simple factor structure in which the items predominantly loaded onto a single dimension. Table 2 displays the factor loadings and the assignment of each item to its corresponding factor. The two resulting factors were labelled as follows: a) F1 or Manifest Exclusion (MEx); and b) F2 or Subtle Exclusion (SEx). The correlation between the factors was .824.

**Table 2**

*Univariate descriptive analysis, factor loadings, and communalities from the EFA*

Nº	Item	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.	MEx	SEx	Com.
Ex1	I feel like my classmates are sidelining or excluding me	1.19	.516	3.167	11.253	.901		.827
Ex2	My classmates make me feel different from them	1.19	.527	3.249	11.670	.931		.789
Ex3	My classmates reject me to make me suffer	1.41	.700	1.766	2.724	.734		.794
Ex4	I feel that my classmates reject me	1.29	.608	2.300	5.411	.461		.699
Ex5	My classmates exclude me to hurt me	1.18	.492	3.326	12.444	.643		.773
Ex6	I feel undervalued by my classmates	1.29	.644	2.521	6.458		.681	.709
Ex7	I feel odd among my classmates	1.17	.491	3.551	14.254		.891	.757

Nº	Item	M	SD	Skew.	Kurt.	MEx	SEx	Com.
Ex8	I feel like I don't have a place in the group of my classmates	1.18	.480	3.004	10.006		.991	.787
Ex9	I feel like my classmates ignore me	1.30	.588	2.036	4.057		.963	.731
Ex10	I feel like I'm not welcomed by my classmates	1.30	.658	2.550	6.573		.726	.687

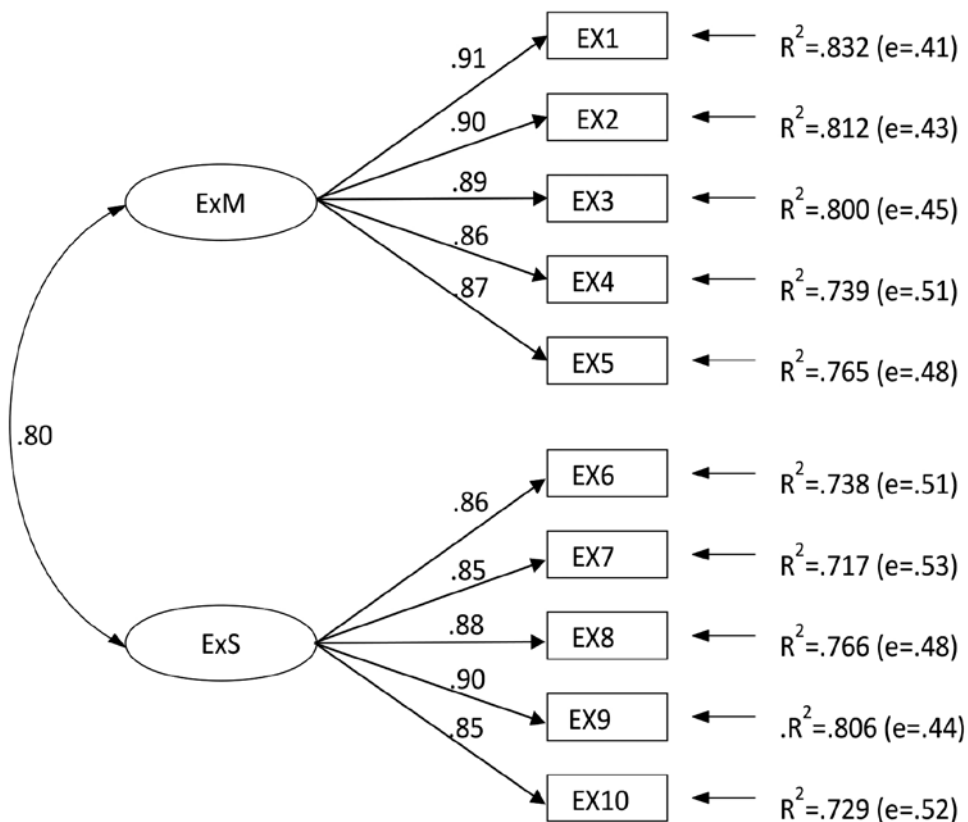
### Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Social Exclusion Scale

A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the hypothesized two-factor structure of the Social Exclusion Scale. Given the non-normal distribution of the data (Mardia's coefficient = 261.3507), robust maximum likelihood estimation was applied.

For the two-factor model, the Satorra-Bentler chi-square was significant ( $\chi^2$ S-B [34] = 84.94,  $p < .001$ ), and the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ( $\chi^2$ S-B/df) was below 3, indicating an optimal fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Goodness-of-fit indices, which are less affected by sample size and assess the relative fit of the model, all exceeded the .95 threshold (NFI = .99; NNFI = .99; CFI = .99; IFI = .99), and the RMSEA value was below .08 (RMSEA = .058), supporting a good model fit. For comparison purposes, the two-factor model was contrasted with a unidimensional item-clustering model, which showed a poorer fit [ $\chi^2$ S-B (35) = 1030.50;  $p < .001$ ], and a  $\chi^2$ S-B/df ratio greater than 3, considered acceptable but not optimal (Hu & Bentler, 1999). While the unidimensional model yielded goodness-of-fit indices above .95 (NFI = .99; NNFI = .99; CFI = .99; IFI = .99), the RMSEA value was .08, indicating a poorer fit compared to the two-factor model.

The results revealed a positive correlation between factors (see Figure 1),  $r = .796$ . The item-factor correlation scores ranged from .85 (item Ex7: "I feel odd among my classmates") to .91 (item Ex1: "I feel that my classmates want to hurt me").

**Figure 1**  
Model CFA for the Social Exclusion Scale



The results showed direct polychoric correlations between the items comprising the Social Exclusion Scale (see Table 3), ranging from .58 to .82.

**Table 3***Polychoric Correlation Matrix Among Social Exclusion Items*

	Ex1	Ex2	Ex3	Ex4	Ex5	Ex6	Ex7	Ex8	Ex9	Ex10
Ex1	1									
Ex2	.82	1								
Ex3	.82	.81	1							
Ex4	.78	.78	.77	1						
Ex5	.80	.79	.78	.75	1					
Ex6	.62	.62	.61	.59	.60	1				
Ex7	.62	.61	.60	.58	.59	.73	1			
Ex8	.64	.63	.62	.60	.61	.75	.74	1		
Ex9	.65	.64	.64	.62	.63	.77	.76	.79	1	
Ex10	.62	.61	.61	.58	.59	.73	.72	.75	.77	1

The internal consistency index revealed satisfactory reliability levels for the instrument ( $\alpha = .932$ ) as well as for each of its dimensions: a) F1 or Manifest Exclusion (MEx):  $\alpha = .906$ ; and b) F2 or Subtle Exclusion (SEx):  $\alpha = .896$ .

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The first objective of this study was to identify whether two perceived types of social exclusion victimization could be empirically distinguished: manifest and subtle. Results from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) provide evidence that social exclusion, when observed through the feelings of those who experience it, emerges in two distinct forms: the perception of manifest social exclusion and subtle social exclusion. The latter is also recognized as a form of aggression and unjust discrimination. Based on these results, the second objective of the study was also achieved. A new instrument –ESMASU– has been developed and validated, demonstrating strong psychometric properties for assessing social exclusion across two dimensions: manifest and subtle.

The review of previous literature has contributed to the conceptualization of social exclusion as a dichotomous phenomenon, depending on how it is exercised: one form is more direct, explicit, and aversive, and the other is more indirect, implicit, and less evident (e.g., Arslan, 2018; Molden et al., 2009; Prendergast & Schubert, 2020; Wesselmann et al., 2023). This supported the hypothesis that social exclusion

victimization among peers can occur through both manifest and subtle forms. The findings confirm this hypothesis: one subtle but harmful form and another manifest and equally harmful form—each with distinctive characteristics. In this regard, the victim's perceptions and emotions are crucial in determining the severity of each type of exclusion and in ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the different forms of social exclusion that can occur and be experienced. The newly developed instrument shows suitable psychometric properties, including good model fit, optimal reliability values, and strong internal consistency. According to the results, the instrument is viable for measuring this construct among preadolescent and adolescent students. Several researchers recommend the use of self-report instruments to assess social exclusion, as the construct inherently involves social perception and self-perception (Gilman et al., 2013). Therefore, ESMASU may serve as an excellent complement to traditional sociometric methods of peer evaluation, enabling researchers and educators to more accurately approach the multifaceted construct of social exclusion.

An analysis of how ESMASU items cluster within the two factors reveals key nuances that differentiate the two forms of exclusion. Accordingly, the labels “subtle social exclusion” and “manifest social exclusion” were adopted. Subtle social exclusion is characterized as a type of social aggression, reported by the victim and defined by feelings of being ignored or unappreciated. In contrast, manifest social exclusion is experienced as active rejection, perceived by the victim as intentionally harmful, with a clear aversive intent.

Subtle social exclusion is understood as the victim's subjective perception of being excluded from the reference group. Youth often report feelings such as being different, feeling out of place among classmates, not being listened to, lacking understanding from peers, feeling unappreciated or unwelcome, or experiencing indifference. As a result, the student becomes a victim of subtle social exclusion, although not always perceiving clear intent to harm from the perpetrator—yet still suffering emotional distress. Related items include: “I feel odd among my classmates,” “I feel like I don't have a place in the group of classmates,” and “I feel like my classmates ignore me.” Victims often experience helplessness and vulnerability, realizing that their experience is not easily observable or condemnable, which complicates efforts to reverse the situation (Banki, 2012; Wiltgren, 2023).

In the case of manifest social exclusion, results show that preadolescents and adolescents aged 10 to 17 are capable of perceiving the aggressor's intention to exclude them from the class group, with a clear desire to inflict harm. Items in this dimension include: “I feel my classmates reject me,” “My classmates reject me to make me suffer,” “My classmates exclude me to hurt me,” and “I feel like my classmates are sidelining or excluding me.” These responses suggest that victims perceive clear aversion intent from their peers, leading to manifest social

exclusion—a more overt form of exclusion that is easier to identify and, therefore, more likely to prompt intervention from the victim’s social environment (Arslan, 2018).

ESMASU, with its two subtypes of exclusion—subtle and manifest—is consistent with categorical approaches in the literature that point to two distinct exclusion experiences (e.g., Gilman et al., 2013; Prendergast & Schubert, 2020). However, ESMASU contributes added value by evaluating adolescents’ own feelings about their experiences of social exclusion. The manifest exclusion identified aligns with the notion of explicit rejection (Wesselmann et al., 2023) and direct rejection (Leary, 2005). For example, Freedman et al. (2016) classified social exclusion into explicit rejection, ostracism (being ignored), and ambiguous rejection. The subtle exclusion in this study is related to the ostracism dimension (Freedman et al., 2016), defined as silent treatment without explanation. It also aligns with the recently described concept of “polite exclusion” in classroom settings (Wiltgren, 2022), highlighting the difficulty of detecting such subtle forms. The manifest exclusion found in this research is also consistent with peer bullying, as it represents intentional harm that negatively impacts the victim emotionally and cognitively (Falla & Ortega-Ruiz, 2019; García-Díaz et al., 2023; Ortega, 2010; Williams, 2005).

In conclusion, this study offers valuable contributions. ESMASU stands out for its parsimony and simplicity (10 items) and demonstrates excellent psychometric properties. Importantly, it underscores that social exclusion, independent of bullying, is a distinct phenomenon with aggressive potential that can be harmful for numerous reasons. The scientific study of these subtle and sometimes unintentional forms of exclusion is of great importance for preventing the full range of social exclusion experienced among youth.

Detecting, preventing, and addressing the various forms of social exclusion—especially those subtle behaviors that go unnoticed in school settings but are perceived and suffered by victims—is essential for improving socialization processes and mitigating future mental health issues among adolescents. Instruments such as ESMASU can greatly contribute to this aim.

The development and validation of the ESMASU scale open the door to further research on the different forms of social exclusion based on victimization experiences. Nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Expanding the sample to include other populations (e.g., different student groups or regions) would allow for a broader understanding of the prevalence and impact of the phenomenon. Future studies should delve deeper into these perceived types of exclusion to determine whether they lead to different outcomes. Finally, it would be of great scientific interest to explore the developmental trajectory of social exclusion by examining the emotions it elicits in victims across various ages and



educational stages. Conducting longitudinal research will constitute the next step in advancing this line of inquiry.

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## APPENDIX

## Appendix 1

*Original Ad Hoc Questionnaire: 20 Items on Feelings of Social Exclusion Victimization*

Code 1st Phase (EFA)	Code 2nd Phase (CFA)	Final Code	Description	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly
Ex18	-	-	I feel that I have no friends in class.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex17	-	-	I feel that my classmates do not listen to me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex15	-	-	I feel different from my peers.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex13	-	-	I feel alone during school recess.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex19	-	-	I feel that classmates don't care about me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex20	-	-	I feel that my classmates don't understand me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex1	-	-	I feel that my classmates want to hurt me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex12	Ex2	1	My classmates make me feel different from them.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex16	-	-	I feel that my classmates want to make me suffer.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex6	Ex6	2	I feel undervalued by my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex2	-	-	My classmates avoid being with me in order to make me suffer.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex7	Ex7	3	I feel odd among my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex14	Ex4	4	I feel that my classmates reject me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex3	Ex3	5	My classmates exclude me to hurt me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex8	Ex8	6	I feel like I don't have a place in the group of my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex4	-	-	I feel that my classmates hate me.	SD	D	A	SA

Código 1ª Fase (AFE)	Código 2ª Fase (AFC)	Código definitivo	Descripción	Muy en desacuerdo	En desacuerdo	De acuerdo	Muy de acuerdo
Ex5	Ex5	7	My classmates reject me to make me suffer.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex9	Ex9	8	I feel like my classmates ignore me.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex10	Ex10	9	I feel like I'm not welcomed by my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
Ex11	Ex1	10	I feel like my classmates are sidelining or excluding me.	SD	D	A	SA

## Appendix 2

### *Manifest and Subtle Social Exclusion Scale (ESMASU)*

Final Code	Description	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly
agree	My classmates make me feel different from them.	SD	D	A	SA
2	I feel undervalued by my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
3	I feel odd among my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
4	I feel that my classmates are rejecting me.	SD	D	A	SA
5	My classmates reject me to make me suffer.	SD	D	A	SA
6	I feel like I don't have a place in the group of classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
7	My classmates exclude me to hurt me.	SD	D	A	SA
8	I feel like my classmates ignore me.	SD	D	A	SA
9	I feel like I'm not welcomed by my classmates.	SD	D	A	SA
10	I feel like my classmates are sidelining or excluding me.	SD	D	A	SA

