

THE ROLE OF PEER PRESSURE IN PREDICTING BULLYING BEHAVIOR AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bullying among adolescents is a pressing global issue with significant psychosocial consequences. Peer pressure plays a complex role as both a direct and indirect facilitator of bullying behaviour, alongside other factors that warrant further exploration. Objective: This study aimed to examine the relationship between peer pressure and bullying behaviour among adolescents. Method: A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 274 students aged 12–15 years, selected through random sampling. Data were collected using two validated instruments: the Revised Olweus Bullying/Victim Questionnaire (23 items) and the Peer Pressure Questionnaire (25 items). Data were analysed using Spearman's rank correlation to assess the association between variables. Result: Findings showed that 60.2% of participants exhibited high levels of bullying behaviour, with verbal and non-physical bullying being the most prevalent types. A significant positive correlation was found between peer pressure and bullying behaviour ($r = 0.583$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher peer pressure is associated with increased bullying among adolescents. Conclusion: Peer pressure plays a crucial role in shaping adolescent bullying behaviour. These findings highlight the importance of peer-based interventions and supportive school environments in preventing bullying.

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Perundungan di kalangan remaja adalah masalah global yang mendesak dengan konsekuensi psikososial yang signifikan. Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki hubungan antara pengaruh teman sebaya dan perilaku perundungan di kalangan remaja. Metode: penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kuantitatif dengan pendekatan cross sectional study, melibatkan 274 siswa berusia 12–15 tahun yang dipilih melalui pengambilan sampel acak. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan dua instrumen yang divalidasi: Kuesioner Perundungan/Korban Olweus yang Direvisi (23 item) dan Kuesioner Tekanan Teman Sebaya (25 item). Analisis data menggunakan korelasi peringkat Spearman untuk menilai hubungan antar variabel. Hasil: Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa 60,2% peserta menunjukkan tingkat perilaku perundungan yang tinggi, dengan perundungan verbal dan non-fisik sebagai jenis yang paling umum. Korelasi positif yang signifikan ditemukan antara pengaruh teman sebaya dan perilaku perundungan ($r = 0,583$; $p < 0,001$), yang menunjukkan bahwa tekanan teman sebaya yang lebih tinggi dikaitkan dengan peningkatan perundungan di kalangan remaja. Kesimpulan: tekanan teman sebaya memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk perilaku perundungan remaja. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya intervensi berbasis teman sebaya dan lingkungan sekolah yang suportif dalam mencegah perundungan.

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a global problem that has a significant impact on adolescents' mental and social health. Over the past decade, the prevalence of bullying behaviour among adolescents has shown a considerable increase globally, regionally, and in developing countries such as Indonesia. At the global level, research indicates that around 20% of teenagers report having experienced bullying, with diverse regional variations. In Asia, the prevalence of bullying is reported to range from 10% to 40%, depending on the country and culture (Mohseny et al., 2020; Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2019). In developing countries, studies have reported substantial incidents of bullying, with surveys showing that between 20% and 30% of adolescents experience bullying at school (Çiçek et al., 2022).

The prevalence of bullying behaviour in Indonesia is relatively high and remains a serious concern at various levels of education. The 2015 Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) reported that around 19.9% of Indonesian adolescents had been victims of bullying (Yusuf et al., 2022). In West Sumatra, approximately 32% of adolescents fall into the medium category, 4% into the high category, and nearly 1% into the very high category (Karneli et al., 2023). In East Jakarta, early childhood data indicate that around 35% experience various forms of bullying (Hartati et al., 2020). These findings suggest that bullying behaviour in Indonesia affects children across all age groups and requires serious attention.

Research shows that involvement in bullying, both as a perpetrator and a victim, negatively impacts adolescent mental health, including anxiety, depression, and self-harm behaviours (Çiçek et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2024). Bullying in school has been associated with mental health disturbances, where adolescents who experience bullying are more likely to encounter academic and social difficulties (Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2019).

Beyond its psychological consequences, bullying also contributes to broader social problems such as social isolation and long-term mental health disorders (Solimannejad et al., 2022). Other studies have shown that adolescents who are victims of bullying may engage in self-harm as a coping mechanism for emotional pain (Çiçek et al., 2022; Mohseny et al., 2020). Over time, these effects can persist into adulthood, with victims facing a greater risk of chronic mental health conditions such as prolonged anxiety and depression, as well as a tendency to engage in risky behaviours (K. Yang et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Moreover, research has demonstrated that those who experience bullying during adolescence tend to struggle with forming healthy interpersonal relationships and achieve lower academic and employment outcomes in adulthood (Cole et al., 2020).

Bullying behaviour in adolescents is influenced by multiple factors, including peer pressure, social environment, family dynamics, and individual characteristics. Peer pressure is often identified as a key driver, as adolescents may feel compelled to conform in order to gain acceptance within their peer groups (Ugwu et al., 2024). Unlike other factors, peer pressure is deeply embedded in the social dynamics of adolescent interactions, making it a critical target for interventions that focus on modifying group norms and peer influence processes. Moreover, peer pressure can interact with other elements or moderate bystander behaviours in bullying situations. Understanding peer pressure allows for more targeted and effective prevention strategies that emphasize altering group dynamics and empowering adolescents to resist negative peer influence (Nurhidayah et al., 2021; J. Yang et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Bullying behaviour exerts significant short- and long-term impacts. Adolescence is a developmental stage when peer interactions become more dominant compared to family interactions, making it crucial to understand the patterns of bullying behaviour exhibited by many teenagers today. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the role of peer pressure in adolescent bullying behaviour and to provide insights into the rising prevalence of bullying among adolescents.

METHOD

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design to describe the relationship between the independent variable, peer pressure, and the dependent variable, bullying behaviour among adolescents.

Place and Time of Research

This research was conducted in Makassar City, where the number of bullying incidents has increased annually. According to data from PPA Symphony (2021), bullying cases continue to rise each year, particularly in Makassar City, with 11,057 cases reported in 2019, 11,278 in 2020, and 14,517 in 2021. Data collection took place at SMP Negeri 21 Makassar, a junior high school selected randomly from schools in Makassar City. The data collection period was conducted from May to June 2024.

Population and Sample

The population in this study consisted of all junior high school students in Makassar City. Considering the broad population scope, a random sampling technique was applied to select one school from the list of all schools in the city. The sample size was determined using the Slovin formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in 274 respondents. The inclusion criteria included active junior high school students aged 12–15 years who were willing to participate in the study and had

obtained written consent from their parents or guardians. Respondents who did not complete the questionnaire fully or did not meet the age criteria were excluded from data analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two standardized questionnaires: (1) The Revised Olweus Bullying/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ) — used to measure bullying behaviour. This instrument consists of 23 items covering the physical, verbal, and non-physical/nonverbal dimensions of bullying. Respondents' scores were classified into two categories: high (58–92) and low (23–57), using a four-point Likert scale. (2) The Peer Pressure Questionnaire (PPQ) — used to measure peer influence. This instrument consists of 25 items reflecting the level of social pressure within the peer group, assessed using a five-point Likert scale. Scores were categorised into two levels: high (75–125) and low (25–74). The OBVQ, developed by Gonçalves et al. (2016), has a validity coefficient of 0.30 and a reliability of 0.87, while the PPQ has a validity coefficient of 0.33 and a reliability of 0.77 (Saini Sunil, 2016). Both instruments were translated into Indonesian and underwent cultural adaptation to ensure clarity and suitability for adolescents. Data collection was carried out after obtaining ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, UIN Alauddin Makassar (No. C.046/KEPK/FKIK/V/2024), as well as written permission from the school. Each respondent signed an informed consent form and received an explanation regarding the purpose of the study and data confidentiality.

Data Analysis and Processing

Data were analysed using the Spearman's rank correlation test with the aid of statistical software. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. The interpretation of the correlation analysis results was adjusted according to the established categories of relationship strength.

RESULT

Respondent Characteristics

The results of this study show that most respondents were aged between 12 and 15 years, consisting of 60% male and 40% female students. The description of adolescent bullying behaviour indicates that 60% were in the high category, and 52% had high levels of peer influence. Further details are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age		
12 years old	20	7.3
13 years old	120	43.8
14 years old	113	41.2
15 years old	21	7.7
Gender		
Boys	166	60.6
Girls	108	39.4
Bullying Behaviour		
High	165	60.2
Low	109	39.8
Peer Pressure		
High	141	51.5
Low	133	48.5

Bullying Behaviour Overview

The findings of this study indicate that the most common forms of bullying behaviour were verbal and non-verbal/non-physical bullying.

Table 2. Overview of the Dimensions of Bullying Behaviour

Dimensions of Bullying Behaviour	High		Low	
	f	%	f	%
Verbal Bullying	57	20.8	217	79.2
Physical Bullying	19	6.9	255	93.1
Non-verbal/non-physical Bullying	50	18.2	224	81.8

The ten most frequent bullying behaviours among junior high school students were as follows: (1) yelling at someone; (2) mocking someone because of their skin colour or race/ethnicity; (3) using the internet or mobile phone to hurt or harass someone; (4) inciting classmates to dislike someone; (5) making fun of someone because of their accent; (6) calling someone by a nickname they dislike; (7) shaming someone based on their behaviour; (8) laughing at and pointing at someone; (9) excluding someone from a group of classmates; and (10) ignoring someone.

Peer Pressure on Bullying Behaviour in Adolescents

The analysis results revealed a significant relationship between peer influence and bullying behaviour ($r = 0.583$; $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that greater peer pressure is associated with a higher likelihood of adolescents engaging in bullying behaviour.

Table 3. Peer Pressure and Bullying Behaviour among Adolescents

Peer Pressure	Bullying Behavior				Total		<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
	Low		High					
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Low	92	33.6	41	15	133	48.5	< 0.01	0.583
High	17	6.2	124	45.3	141	51.5		
Total	109	39.8%	165	60.2	274	100		

DISCUSSION

Overview of Bullying Behaviour in Adolescents

The results of this study showed that 60.2% of adolescents fell into the category of high bullying behaviour, with verbal bullying (20.8%) being the most frequently reported type, followed by nonverbal/non-physical bullying (18.2%) and physical bullying (6.9%). Bullying often serves as a distraction from deeper psychological issues, such as dissatisfaction or emotional distress that adolescents experience (K. Yang et al., 2022). Adolescents who feel they have little control over their lives or encounter interpersonal problems tend to engage more frequently in bullying behaviour as a coping mechanism (Shahzad et al., 2023; K. Yang et al., 2022). Conflicts in peer relationships and pressure to maintain a positive self-image can lead adolescents to act aggressively toward others as a means of deflecting their problems (Elliott et al., 2021; Hartas, 2019). In today's adolescent social context, aggressive behaviour has become more acceptable—even normalized—in everyday interactions, with many perceiving bullying as a common or harmless act (Hartas, 2019; Tize et al., 2020). Unsupportive environments, both at school and at home, can exacerbate this situation, making it difficult for adolescents to find healthy coping mechanisms.

The most prevalent forms of bullying among adolescents are verbal and non-physical types, such as cyberbullying. The high incidence of verbal bullying may stem from the perception that it is less harmful compared to physical bullying, as it leaves no visible evidence (Ayu Lestari et al., 2018). Verbal bullying

is a form of direct bullying and is harder to recognise. Verbal bullying is a direct yet subtle form of aggression, often dismissed as “just joking” (Asran, 2021).

Cyberbullying enables perpetrators to harm victims without face-to-face contact, reducing empathy and increasing the likelihood of aggression due to the anonymity of digital platforms (Mohseny et al., 2020; Popat & Tarrant, 2022). Studies have shown that adolescents often compare themselves to unrealistic portrayals on social media, leading to feelings of inadequacy when they fail to meet these standards. Consequently, they may become involved in bullying—either as perpetrators or victims (Mertens et al., 2020; Popat & Tarrant, 2022).

The predominance of verbal and non-physical bullying can also be explained through adolescent social development theory, which posits that during puberty, individuals seek identity and peer recognition. In this process, adolescents may employ social strategies, such as verbal aggression or dominance, to negotiate their status within the group. Therefore, verbal bullying and cyberbullying among adolescents are the result of complex interactions between peer pressure, social media influence, psychological factors, and social context. A deep understanding of these dimensions is essential for designing effective interventions to mitigate bullying among adolescents.

Peer Pressure on Adolescent Bullying Behaviour

The results of the Spearman correlation test revealed a positive and significant relationship between peer influence and bullying behaviour ($r = 0.583$; $p < 0.001$). This correlation falls within the moderate to strong category, indicating that higher levels of peer pressure are associated with a greater likelihood of bullying behaviour among adolescents. Peer groups play a crucial role in shaping social and behavioural norms during adolescence (Veenstra, 2025). Adolescents often seek acceptance and recognition from their peers, which can motivate them to engage in bullying to enhance their social standing or to conform to group expectations (Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2019; Ugwu et al., 2024). Group dynamics may also foster environments where aggressive behaviour is perceived as a means to gain recognition (Ugwu et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of “peer modelling” or behavioural imitation is particularly important in this context. Research indicates that adolescents tend to imitate peer behaviours—both positive and negative (Mertens et al., 2020). When group members display bullying tendencies, such actions are often internalised and replicated by others, perpetuating a cycle of aggression that is difficult to disrupt (Mertens et al., 2020; Zequinão et al., 2022). The presence of peer support or justification may further embolden individuals to act aggressively, even if they would not have done so independently (Ugwu et al., 2024).

Psychological aspects such as low self-esteem and a desire to avoid social exclusion also contribute to increased bullying behaviour among adolescents. To maintain group status and avoid alienation, adolescents may compromise their personal values, creating conditions for bullying as a means of asserting dominance (Addy et al., 2021; Solimannejad et al., 2022). Some studies have also shown that adolescents who experience emotional distress exhibit aggressive behaviour as a defence mechanism to conceal their insecurities (Addy et al., 2021; Söderberg & Björkqvist, 2019).

The findings of this study further show that cyberbullying is the most common form of bullying among adolescents. Social media and digital platforms expand adolescents’ social networks, exposing them to aggressive behaviours that may reinforce harmful social norms and make bullying more visible—and, unfortunately, more acceptable (Cole et al., 2020; K. Yang et al., 2022). This study thus underscores that bullying can occur not only in face-to-face contexts but also in digital spaces, where peer influence plays a pivotal role. Peer influence on adolescent bullying behaviour involves the interplay of social dynamics, imitation, and psychological vulnerability. Understanding these factors is vital for developing effective interventions to reduce bullying among adolescents and foster more positive and inclusive peer environments.

The main limitation of this study is that the data were obtained through self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to recall or social desirability bias. Moreover, the study was limited to one school in Makassar, potentially affecting the generalisability of the findings. Future studies are recommended to employ longitudinal and multi-site designs and to explore digital-based interventions to address bullying more comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that more than half of junior high school adolescents in Makassar City were involved in bullying behaviour, with verbal and non-physical forms being the most dominant. The results of statistical analysis revealed a significant relationship between peer influence and bullying behaviour, reinforcing the crucial role of peer groups in shaping adolescents' social norms and behavioural patterns. These findings highlight the importance of developing peer group-based and school-based interventions as effective strategies for preventing bullying among adolescents. Furthermore, strengthening the role of educators, counsellors, and parents in fostering a supportive and empathetic environment may also contribute to reducing bullying tendencies. Future research is recommended to explore the dynamics of gender roles, the influence of social media, and the potential of digital-based interventions in mitigating bullying behaviour among adolescents

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