

The Impact of Peer Verbal Aggression on Automatic Negative Thoughts in Adolescent Bullying Victims

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescence is a crucial period for psychosocial development, with peer acceptance playing a central role. Peer verbal aggression, manifested through threats, offensive language, and insults, can act as a stressor for adolescents. These experiences may shape dysfunctional cognitive schemas.

Purpose: This study aimed to analyze the relationship between peer verbal aggression and automatic negative thoughts in adolescent victims of bullying.

Methods: This study employed a quantitative design with a cross-sectional approach. The sample consisted of 92 adolescents who were victims of bullying, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a verbal victimization questionnaire adapted from Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale (MPVS) and the Children's Automatic Thoughts Scale (CATS). Data analysis was performed using the Spearman rank test.

Results: Most respondents were adolescents aged 15-17 years (91.3%), with 42.4% experiencing bullying for more than six months. Peer verbal aggression was predominantly classified as severe (55.4%). Automatic negative thoughts were classified as moderate for physical threat (44.6%), high for social threat (56.5%), high for personal failure (46.7%), and moderate for hostility (39.1%). Bivariate analysis revealed a significant correlation between peer verbal violence and automatic negative thoughts ($p=0.001$), encompassing physical threat ($r=0.524$), social threat ($r=0.788$), personal failure ($r=0.703$), and hostility ($r=0.500$).

Conclusion: Peer verbal aggression is a strong predictor of automatic negative thoughts in adolescent victims of bullying. The implications of this study underscore the need for psychological interventions, such as cognitive restructuring therapies, to reduce automatic negative thoughts.

Keywords: adolescents, automatic negative thoughts, bullying victims, peer relationships, peer verbal aggression

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BACKGROUND

Adolescence is a transitional period characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes. During this phase, adolescents experience an increased dependence on peer groups for self-identity formation and emotional stability (Alap et al., 2025). Furthermore, adolescence is a complex developmental phase in which peers become a highly influential social system and also the group most vulnerable to causing traumatic experiences, such as bullying. Bullying remains a critical and concerning public health issue globally, especially within the adolescent population (Wang, 2024). Verbal abuse is identified as the most dominant form of bullying. Although verbal abuse is often invisible, it can have a deeper psychological impact (Han et al., 2025).

The results of the Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) and the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) Study report that globally, approximately 32% of students experience bullying by their peers at school for one day or more within the last month. According to the GSHS, the prevalence of bullying ranges from 7.1% to 74% across various countries (UNESCO, 2019). Meanwhile, a survey conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicates that the prevalence of bullying in Indonesia reaches 41% among 15-year-old students. Two-thirds of children, both girls and boys, aged between 13 and 17 have experienced bullying at some point in their lives. Furthermore, three-quarters of children and adolescents report that the perpetrators of bullying are their peers (UNICEF, 2020).

Experiencing bullying can have serious short-term and long-term effects, such as the decline in adolescents' psychological health (Lupindo et al., 2025). Bullying occurs due to an imbalance of power. Exposure to verbal violence from peers, including teasing, taunts, threats, insults, negative labeling, and derogatory remarks, can lead to deep psychological wounds (Kodapally et al., 2021; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024). This situation can potentially form negative, maladaptive cognitive patterns that persist into adulthood. Repeated exposure to verbal violence can internalize these negative messages into the adolescent's self-belief (Aydin & Ismail, 2023). The developing process of internalization may adopt the negative perceptions that the bully has towards the victim, thereby leading to the emergence of automatic negative thoughts.

Automatic negative thoughts refer to pessimistic thoughts, self-blame, and cognitive distortions that arise spontaneously, unconsciously, and continuously reinforce negative perceptions about oneself and the environment, without rational evaluation (Alipour et al., 2025). Such thinking patterns can create a negative cycle that worsens psychological vulnerability, increasing the risk of repeated bullying and reinforcing the negative mindset. As a result, it may lead to irrational beliefs that hinder personal growth and well-being (Uniyal & Singh, 2025). Previous research has mostly focused on the outcomes of bullying, such as the emergence of depression and anxiety, but has not explored the underlying cognitive distortions. Therefore, understanding automatic negative thoughts is crucial to analyzing them as a key indicator of the cognitive mechanisms underlying the psychological impacts of verbal bullying.

OBJECTIVE

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between peer verbal aggression and automatic negative thoughts in adolescent victims of bullying.

METHODS

This study is a quantitative correlational research conducted using a cross-sectional

study approach. The study population comprised 120 adolescent students. The Slovin formula was used to determine a sample of 92 students who had experienced peer verbal violence. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria are as follows: 1) Adolescents actively enrolled in senior high school, 2) Adolescents residing in the female dormitory of Pondok Pesantren Zainul Hasan Probolinggo, 3) Adolescents who had experienced verbal bullying were screened using an adapted version of the Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale (MPVS), specifically its verbal victimization subscale. Adolescents who have experienced bullying as victims. The exclusion criteria are as follows: 1) Adolescents who are on leave, transfer to other schools, or drop out of school, 2) Adolescents living at home. The research instruments used include a verbal victimization questionnaire, adapted from one of the indicators of the Multidimensional Peer Victimization Scale (MPVC) developed by Mynard & Joseph (2000). The questionnaire consists of 11 unfavorable items, with a Likert scale rating system of 3 points: 0 = never, 1 = occasionally, and 2 = frequently. The questionnaire underwent validity and reliability testing, with the criterion validity test showing a significant correlation of 0.89, while the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha coefficient resulted in 0.96.

Additionally, an automatic negative thought questionnaire, adapted from the Children's Automatic Thoughts Scale (CATS) developed by Cecen, (2013) was also used. CATS includes four main domains: physical threat, social threat, personal failure, and hostility, with each domain consisting of 10 questions. CATS contains a total of 40 unfavorable items, with a Likert scale rating system of 5 points: 4 = never, 3 = sometimes, 2 = often, 1 = very often, and 0 = all the time. CATS also underwent validity and reliability testing. The criterion validity test showed a significant correlation of 0.85, while the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha coefficient resulted in 0.92, indicating excellent reliability. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and obtained informed consent from the respondents. Subsequently, data on peer verbal aggression and automatic negative thoughts were collected using questionnaires. Descriptive analysis was presented in the form of frequency distribution tables. Data analysis was performed using the Spearman Rank test. This study has been ethically approved with approval number KEPK/158/STIKes-HPZH/VI/2023.

RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of Adolescent Bullying Victims (n=92)

Characteristic	Indicator	f	%
Gender	Female adolescents	92	100
	Total	92	100
Age	Middle adolescents (15-17 years)	84	91.3
	Late adolescents (18-21 years or older)	8	8.7
	Total	92	100
Class	X	67	72.9
	XI	25	27.1
	Total	92	100
Father's Education	No school	22	23.9
	Primary education	20	21.8
	Secondary education	46	50
	Higher education	4	4.3
	Total	92	100
Mother's Education	No school	17	18.5
	Primary education	34	37

	Secondary education	36	39.1
	Higher education	5	5.4
	Total	92	100
Father's Occupation	Employed	84	91.3
	Unemployed	8	8.7
	Total	92	100
Mother's Occupation	Employed	44	47.9
	Unemployed	48	52.1
	Total	92	100
Bullying Intensity	Less than 1 month	11	12
	1-6 months	28	30.4
	More than 6 months	39	42.4
	Ongoing	14	15.2
	Total	92	100

The characteristics of the respondents are as follows predominantly female adolescents (100%), middle adolescents (91.3%), class X (72.9%), fathers with secondary education (50%), mothers with secondary education (39.1%), fathers employed (91.3%), mothers unemployed (52.1%), and bullying lasting more than 6 months (42.4%).

Table 2. Frequency of Peer Verbal Aggression Behavior in Adolescent Bullying Victims (n=92)

Variable	Indicator	Category	f (%)
Peer Verbal Aggression Behavior	Verbal victimization	Light	22 (23.9)
		Moderate	19 (20.7)
		Severe	51 (55.4)

The research results indicate that most verbal victimization behaviors fall into the severe category (55.4%) and the smallest proportion was in the moderate category (20.7%).

Table 3. Frequency of Automatic Negative Thought in Adolescent Bullying Victims (n=92)

Variable	Indicator	Category	f (%)
Automatic negative thought	physical threat	Low	13 (14.1)
		Moderate	41 (44.6)
		High	38 (41.3)
	social threat	Low	16 (17.4)
		Moderate	24 (26.1)
		High	52 (56.5)
	personal failure	Low	23 (25.0)
		Moderate	26 (28.3)
		High	43 (46.7)
	hostility	Low	23 (25.0)
		Moderate	36 (39.1)
		High	33 (35.9)

The results of the study showed that automatic negative thoughts, the physical threat indicator is moderate (44.6%), social threat is high (56.5%), personal failure is high (46.7%), and hostility is moderate (39.1%).

Table 4. Analysis of the Relationship between Peer Verbal Aggression Behavior and Automatic Negative Thoughts in Adolescent Bullying Victims (n=92)

Peer Aggression Behavior	Verbal	Physical Threat			Total (%)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p value
		Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)			
Light		9 (9.8)	8 (8.7)	5 (5.4)	22 (23.9)	0.524	0.001
Moderate		2 (2.2)	17 (18.5)	0 (0)	19 (20.7)		
Severe		2 (2.2)	16 (17.4)	33 (35.9)	51 (55.4)		
Total		13 (14.1)	41 (44.6)	38 (41.3)	92 (100)		
Peer Aggression Behavior	Verbal	Social Threat			Total (%)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p value
		Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)			
Light		15 (16.3)	4 (4.3)	3 (3.3)	22 (23.9)	0.788	0.001
Moderate		1 (1.1)	15 (16.3)	3 (3.3)	19 (20.7)		
Severe		0 (0)	5 (5.4)	46 (50)	51 (55.4)		
Total		16 (17.4)	24 (26.1)	52 (56.5)	92 (100)		
Peer Aggression Behavior	Verbal	Personal Failure			Total (%)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p value
		Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)			
Light		17 (18.5)	5 (5.4)	0 (0)	22 (23.9)	0.703	0.001
Moderate		1 (1.1)	14 (15.2)	4 (4.3)	19 (20.7)		
Severe		5 (5.4)	7 (7.6)	39 (42.4)	51 (55.4)		
Total		23 (25)	26 (28.3)	43 (46.7)	92 (100)		
Peer Aggression Behavior	Verbal	Hostility			Total (%)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p value
		Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)			
Light		12 (13)	8 (8.7)	2 (2.2)	22 (23.9)	0.500	0.001
Moderate		2 (2.2)	17 (18.5)	0 (0)	19 (20.7)		
Severe		9 (9.8)	11 (12)	31 (33.7)	51 (55.4)		
Total		23 (25)	36 (39.1)	33 (35.9)	92 (100)		

The results of the study demonstrate a relationship between peer verbal aggression behavior and physical threat with a p-value of 0.001 and $r = 0.524$, social threat with a p-value of 0.001 and $r = 0.788$, personal failure with a p-value of 0.001 and $r = 0.703$, and hostility with a p-value of 0.001 and $r = 0.500$.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research data, the results show a significant correlation between peer verbal aggression and automatic negative thoughts in adolescent victims of bullying, as indicated by the values for automatic negative thought indicators, which include physical threat, social threat, personal failure, and hostility, all having a p value of 0.001. Repeated unpleasant experiences can form dysfunctional cognitive schemas. Automatic negative thoughts often arise when individuals experience stress, causing them to exhibit negative and pessimistic thoughts about themselves, society, and the future. This situation can weaken cognitive function, making individuals highly susceptible to repeated bullying (Yan et al., 2022). The following is an in-depth analysis that focuses on the manifestation of the four indicators of automatic negative thought physical threat, social threat, personal failure, and hostility as cognitive responses to peer verbal aggression.

The study's results indicate that verbal aggression strongly correlates with the emergence of negative thoughts related to physical threats. Experiences of verbal violence, such as being yelled at with harsh words or mocked, can trigger a response that the individual is in danger. The body has a defense system to face threats through the fight, flight, and

freeze responses. When an individual has the strength to confront, the amygdala and limbic system, along with the prefrontal cortex, activate, stimulating the autonomic nervous system to plan a confrontation against the threat. Conversely, if an individual perceives the best way to ensure safety is to flee, the hippocampus is activated, prompting leg muscles and motor areas in the brain to initiate movement to escape danger. Additionally, there is the freeze response, a passive defense mechanism marked by reduced muscle activity, causing the body to become still. This response occurs to avoid drawing attention, hoping the threat will dissipate on its own. Individuals have different mechanisms for self-defense depending on the level of threat they face (Siligato et al., 2024).

If an individual frequently experiences verbal bullying, it can activate the brain's alarm system, interpreting the situation as a threat to personal security. Repeated experiences lead the brain to stay in high-alert mode, resulting in a manifestation of fear for personal safety. Adolescents begin to develop excessive thinking patterns, leading to cognitive distortions as their negative thoughts are reinforced. Adolescents are prone to imagining negative outcomes, such as predicting danger (Rnic et al., 2016). They are constantly overwhelmed with thoughts like, i feel unsafe here or everyone wants to hurt me. These thoughts emerge as a form of cognitive self-defense, attempting to predict danger and avoid pain. Such thoughts arise automatically and reflexively, even when no threat is present. They become hyper-alert to their surroundings, interpreting normal actions such as movements, tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact as signals of danger. This heightened state of alertness can drain psychological energy, increasing anxiety and making it difficult for bullying victims to concentrate (Hassan et al., 2024).

Social threat is an indicator directly related to bullying by peers. Verbal aggression essentially targets an adolescent's social identity. Victims of bullying internalize these negative messages into their cognitive system, such as, everyone hates me, they must be talking badly about me, if i speak, no one will listen, i have no friends. Thoughts like these create cognitive distortions, including mind reading assuming others have negative judgments about them making negative predictions and overgeneralizing one bad event to all social situations (Rnic et al., 2016). As a result, adolescents withdraw from social environments, avoiding interactions and isolating themselves as a way to anticipate and avoid the pain caused by rejection. This situation makes them vulnerable to feelings of loneliness (Şimşek et al., 2021).

In addition to the physical and social threats posed by verbal aggression, it can also impact self-evaluation and competence, leading to personal failure. Verbal taunts can diminish an individual's self-confidence, creating negative internalizations of personal inadequacy (Ayu et al., 2022). Such negative thoughts include, i can't do anything right, everything i do ends in disappointment. Adolescent victims of bullying begin to internalize the negative labels assigned by the perpetrators. They incorporate these criticisms into their self-view, using them as justifications for their perceived inadequacies and blaming themselves for unpleasant events. This situation makes the bullying victim feel that everything they do will end in failure, leading them to become passive and helpless (Adewoye & Plessis, 2021). If this condition persists, it directly impacts academic motivation, such as giving up before trying and avoiding challenges. As a result, victims are unable to develop their potential and become pessimistic, potentially leading to lower academic performance. Furthermore, they view themselves as incompetent and believe others share the same negative judgment about them. This situation is highly risky and can foster feelings of hopelessness about the future (Sawalha, 2021).

Automatic negative thoughts can also result in excessive vigilance. This situation can trigger dysfunctional thinking, impacting interpersonal behavior, leading to feelings of anger,

frustration, and hostility. The results showed a significant association between peer verbal aggression and hostility, with a p-value of 0.001. Individuals who experienced peer verbal aggression were often unable to resist directly, consequently their pain and anger were manifested as hostile thoughts. Conditions like this can create tendencies to interpret others as having bad intentions and being untrustworthy (Floyd et al., 2025). Negative thoughts such as they must be talking about me. This hostile thinking is seen as a psychological defense mechanism, anticipating bad intentions from others to better prepare and minimize pain. Adolescents tend to respond with cold and passive attitudes, which triggers social rejection.

Thus, this study demonstrates that peer verbal aggression can act as a cognitive trigger that strongly induces automatic negative thoughts, affecting physical threat, social threat, personal failure, and hostility. Verbal aggression becomes an interpersonal trauma that impacts cognition in adolescents, requiring preventive measures and interventions to break the cycle of cognitive distortions.

CONCLUSION

There is a significant correlation between peer verbal aggression and automatic negative thoughts in adolescent bullying victims. The higher the frequency and intensity of verbal aggression experienced by adolescents from their peers, the greater the tendency for automatic negative thoughts to emerge. As a result, this can reinforce negative cognitive patterns, which may trigger maladaptive behaviors in adolescents. This study did not measure the anxiety levels of adolescent bullying victims, a factor that may strengthen automatic negative thoughts. Therefore, the findings of this study can serve as a basis for the development of early intervention programs for adolescents, such as providing individual counseling, to address cognitive distortions and restructure thought patterns.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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