

Bullying Perpetration in Adolescents: The Impact of Self-Esteem and Moral Disengagement

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Abstract. Bullying in Indonesia poses serious risks to social relationships, academic performance, and psychological well-being. This study examined the roles of self-esteem and moral disengagement in bullying involvement among adolescent perpetrators. Using a cross-sectional design, the study involved 71 adolescents identified as bullying perpetrators who participated anonymously. Data were collected using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = 0.749$), the Moral Disengagement Scale by Hymel et al. ($\alpha = 0.826$), and the Bullying Scale by Hidayati and Istiqomah ($\alpha = 0.969$). Multiple regression analysis showed that self-esteem and moral disengagement significantly predicted bullying behavior ($R^2 = 0.546$). Self-esteem had a significant negative effect ($\beta = 1.007$; $p < 0.01$), while Moral Disengagement–Cognitive Restructuring ($\beta = 2.363$; $p < 0.01$) and Distortion of Behavior ($\beta = 0.901$; $p < 0.05$) had significant positive effects. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening self-esteem and reducing moral disengagement in school-based bullying prevention programs.

Keywords: Bullying, Self Esteem, Moral Disengagement, Perpetrators.

1 Introduction

Bullying remains a persistent and global issue affecting adolescents' psychological well-being and moral development. Defined as deliberate and repeated aggression involving an imbalance of power, bullying can have long-term consequences for both victims and perpetrators. [1]. In recent years, the troubling prevalence of bullying has not only broadened to include various types of aggression that extend past the simple physical clashes usually linked to this behavior, but it has also progressively embraced social and online forms of bullying, thus greatly enhancing its intricacy and intensifying the psychological effects felt by those targeted. [2] [3].

In Indonesia, the phenomenon of bullying among adolescents continues to rise. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported that bullying accounted for a large portion of the 26,000 cases of child violence reported between 2017 and 2022. The problem is particularly concerning in school settings, where peer conformity, hierarchical relationships, and limited moral supervision create fertile ground for aggression [4]. Understanding the psychological mechanisms that drive adolescents to perpetrate bullying is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies. [5]

Bullying is conceptualized as a deliberate and hostile conduct executed by an individual or a collective with the intent to inflict harm, instill fear, or dominate another individual who is regarded as less powerful. This conduct is marked by its recurrent nature and transpires within a framework of power disparity between the aggressor and the target, which may manifest in physical, psychological, or social forms. Smith describe bullying as a form of aggression aimed at maintaining social dominance through physical, verbal, relational, or even digital means [6]. According to Menesini and Salmivalli school bullying represents a complex phenomenon that involves an intention to cause harm, the repetition of actions, and an imbalance of power between those involved [7]. Furthermore, Waseem emphasizes that bullying may have long-term psychological effects on victims, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem [8]. Thus, bullying should not be regarded as a single act of aggression but rather as a deliberate and repetitive behavioral pattern that reflects an unequal power dynamic between the perpetrator and the victim, potentially undermining the victim's psychological well-being.

Self-esteem has been widely recognized as a crucial psychological factor influencing individuals' likelihood of engaging in bullying behavior. Research indicates that perpetrators with unstable or defensive self-esteem may resort to bullying as a means of asserting control or compensating for perceived personal inadequacies [9]. Consequently, low or fragile self-esteem can serve as both a motivator and a manifestation of aggressive conduct, reinforcing the cyclical relationship between self-perception and antisocial behavior [10]. On the contrary, high self-esteem can also lead to aggressive behavior, as individuals with inflated self-worth may feel entitled to act out when their expectations are not met [11]. This suggests that self-esteem, whether low or high, does not inherently dictate one's behavior; rather, it is the context and individual differences that play a crucial role. In Indonesia, research involving high school students has found a connection between bullying incidents and self-esteem levels. Although the study mainly focused on victims, it suggests that bullying perpetrators might also be influenced by their self-esteem—whether it is low or seemingly high but unstable [12].

In addition to self-esteem, moral disengagement plays a pivotal role in enabling individuals to rationalize harmful actions toward others. Bandura explain that moral disengagement mechanisms—such as moral justification, displacement of responsibility, and dehumanization—allow perpetrators to detach from the moral consequences of their behavior [13]. Studies have shown that higher levels of moral disengagement are significantly associated with increased bullying perpetration [14], suggesting that cognitive distortion processes facilitate the maintenance of aggressive and unethical conduct within peer interactions [15] [14]. According to Hymel et al., cognitive restructuring involves the way individuals reinterpret or redefine immoral actions so that these behaviors seem acceptable or morally justified [14]. Misconstruing agency happens when people avoid taking personal responsibility for their actions, often blaming external factors or group dynamics instead of acknowledging their own moral choices. Denying negative effects happens when people downplay, overlook, or twist

the damage their actions cause, persuading themselves that no serious harm occurred or that the victim can handle it. Finally, blaming occurs when people shift the blame for their harmful actions onto the victim or circumstances, thus justifying and excusing their wrongdoing.

The connection between self-esteem and moral disengagement provides a clearer explanation of why some individuals engage in bullying behavior. People with low or unstable self-esteem may use moral disengagement strategies to protect their self-image while justifying harmful actions toward others [16]. This relationship indicates that bullying does not arise only from poor self-esteem or lack of moral awareness, but from the way individuals rationalize their aggressive actions to maintain a sense of power and self-worth. [17] Understanding how these two factors work together can offer valuable insights into the psychological processes that drive bullying and help develop more effective prevention and intervention programs.

Although many studies have discussed how self-esteem and moral disengagement relate to aggressive behavior, only a few have examined how these two factors work together to influence bullying. Most existing research has been conducted among adolescents in Western countries, while studies involving university students or young adults in other cultural settings are still limited [18] [19]. Cultural background may also affect how people view their self-worth and justify harmful behavior, making it important to explore these relationships in different social and cultural contexts.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between self-esteem, moral disengagement, and bullying perpetration behavior among adolescent in Indonesia. This study seeks to identify whether self-esteem and moral disengagement can predict bullying perpetration. The findings are expected to provide a better understanding of the psychological processes that contribute to bullying and offer useful insights for creating prevention and intervention programs suited to the local context.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design. The independent variables in this study are moral disengagement and self-esteem, while the dependent variable is bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of adolescents who have previously engaged in bullying behavior. Since the total population could not be precisely identified, the researcher employed an incidental sampling technique. The measurement instruments were distributed online, and participants who completed the questionnaires were screened. In addition to demographic questions, a bullying scale was administered to determine whether participants had ever acted as perpetrators of bullying. This procedure was conducted to ensure that the research sample met the criteria of the study.

2.3 Research Instruments

This study utilized three measurement instruments: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($\alpha = 0.749$) to assess self-esteem, the Moral Disengagement Scale (Hymel et al.) ($\alpha = 0.826$) to

measure moral disengagement, and the Bullying Scale (Hidayati & Istiqomah) ($\alpha = 0.969$) to evaluate bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators. The Moral Disengagement Scale consists of four dimensions: *Moral Disengagement – Cognitive Restructuring (MDCR)*, *Moral Disengagement – Misconstruing Agency (MDMA)*, *Moral Disengagement – Denying Negative Effects (MDDN)*, and *Moral Disengagement – Blaming (MDB)*. A minimum acceptable Cronbach's Alpha value is 0.6. Therefore, the instruments used in this study demonstrate good reliability. [20]

2.4 Data Analysis

For data analysis, the researcher used the JASP software. To examine the influence of moral disengagement and self-esteem on bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators, a multiple regression analysis was conducted.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Description of Participants

The participants in this study were adolescents who had engaged in bullying behavior. Prior to being selected as the research sample, a screening process was conducted to determine whether each participant was a victim or a perpetrator of bullying. Out of a total of 151 respondents, 71 participants were identified as having previously committed bullying and also reported in the demographic section that they had engaged in such behavior. Among these 71 participants, 61 (86%) were male and 10 (14%) were female.

3.2 Normality and Linearity Tests

The researcher conducted normality and linearity tests as prerequisites for regression analysis. The results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test showed that the residual data were normally distributed (KS Z = 0.100, $p = .077$). Multicollinearity was also examined, and all independent variables demonstrated tolerance values above 0.1 and VIF values ranging from 1.124 to 1.922, which are below 10. This indicates that multicollinearity was not an issue and that the variables were sufficiently independent from one another. Furthermore, the ANOVA results indicated an F-value of 26.756 with a significance level of $p < 0.001$, suggesting that the regression model is statistically significant at the 1% level. These results confirm that the model meets the classical assumptions, making it suitable for further interpretation and analysis.

3.3 Correlation Test of Moral Disengagement, Self-Esteem, and Bullying Perpetration

Table 1 presents the correlation analysis between moral disengagement, self-esteem, and bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators. The researcher employed the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation test to examine the relationships among these three variables. The results indicate that self-esteem ($p < 0.05$, $r = 0.290$) and moral disengagement ($p < 0.05$, $r = 0.426$) have significant correlations with bullying behavior among perpetrators. More specifically, two dimensions of moral disengagement—Moral Disengagement–Cognitive Restructuring ($p < 0.05$, $r = 0.369$) and Moral Disengagement–Distortion of Behavior ($p < 0.05$, $r = -0.517$)—were found to be significantly correlated with bullying behavior. The detailed

results of the correlation analysis between moral disengagement, self-esteem, and bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Correlation Test between Moral Disengagement and Self-Esteem with Bullying Behavior among Adolescent Perpetrators

Variable	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
Self Esteem	0,001	0,426
Moral disengagement	0,014	0,290
Moral Disengagement – Cognitive Restructuring	0,002	0,369
Moral Disengagement –Misconstruing Agency	0,001	0,517
Moral Disengagement –Denying Negative Effects	0,671	0,051
Moral Disengagement – Blaming	0,175	0,163

3.4 Effect of Moral Disengagement and Self-Esteem on Bullying Behavior among Adolescent Perpetrators

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of moral disengagement and self-esteem on bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators. Based on the correlation results, the researcher included self-esteem and two dimensions of moral disengagement—Moral Disengagement–Cognitive Restructuring and Moral Disengagement–Distortion of Behavior—in the multiple regression test. The results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 2. The findings indicate that self-esteem and moral disengagement significantly predict bullying behavior. The R^2 value of 0.546 suggests that self-esteem and moral disengagement explain 54.6% of the variance in bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators, while the remaining 45.4% is accounted for by other factors. Furthermore, the analysis revealed a significant negative effect of self-esteem ($\beta = 1.077$; $p < 0.01$), along with significant positive effects of Moral Disengagement–Cognitive Restructuring ($\beta = 2.363$; $p < 0.01$) and Moral Disengagement–Distortion of Behavior ($\beta = 0.901$; $p < 0.05$) on bullying perpetration.

Table 2. Effect of Moral Disengagement and Self-Esteem on Bullying Behavior among Adolescent Perpetrators

Variable	<i>Unstandardized Coefficients</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	-40.214			
Self Esteem	1,077	-0,308	-3.522	0,001
Moral Disengagement – Cognitive Restructuring (MDCR)	2.363	0,414	3.622	0,001
Moral Disengagement – Distorsion of Behaviour (MDDB)	0.901	0,303	2.676	0,009

Based on the results of the multiple regression analysis, the regression equation obtained is: Bullying Behavior (Perpetrator) = $-40.214 + (1.077) \text{ Self-Esteem} + (2.363) \text{ MDCR} + (0.901) \text{ MDDDB}$. According to this equation, the coefficient value of 1.077 for self-esteem indicates that for every one-point increase in the self-esteem variable, there is an expected increase of 1.077 in bullying behavior. Similarly, the coefficient value of 2.363 for the Moral Disengagement–Cognitive Restructuring (MDCR) dimension shows that each one-point increase in MDCR corresponds to an increase of 2.363 in bullying behavior. In addition, the coefficient value of 0.901 for the Moral Disengagement–Distortion of Behavior (MDDDB) dimension indicates that a one-point increase in MDDDB leads to an increase of 0.901 in bullying behavior.

3.5 Discussion

The present study supports previous findings that both self-esteem and moral disengagement are significant predictors of bullying behavior among adolescents. Consistent with earlier research, found that the two dimensions of moral disengagement Cognitive Restructuring and Distortion of Behaviour—positively influence bullying perpetration [21]. This means that adolescents who tend to justify their aggressive actions or downplay their negative impact are more likely to engage in bullying.

The present study supports previous findings that both self-esteem and moral disengagement are significant predictors of bullying behavior among adolescents. Consistent with earlier research, the results showed that the two dimensions of moral disengagement Cognitive Restructuring and Distortion of Behaviour positively influence bullying perpetration. This suggests that adolescents who tend to rationalize their aggressive actions or minimize the harm they cause are more likely to engage in bullying. Such findings are aligned with Bandura's social cognitive theory of moral agency, which posits that individuals disengage their moral self-regulation through cognitive mechanisms that allow them to behave unethically without self-condemnation. [22] When these mechanisms are activated, adolescents may reinterpret harmful behavior as acceptable or justified, thereby facilitating bullying and Other antisocial acts.

Empirical research has repeatedly shown how moral disengagement helps explain aggressive and bullying actions. For example, Gini et al. (2014) discovered that people with higher moral disengagement were more likely to bully others, even when considering their empathy and moral feelings [16] [17]. Likewise, Thornberg found that changing thoughts and distorting consequences were key factors in predicting school bullying. These results indicate that moral disengagement acts as a mental shield that diminishes feelings of guilt and allows individuals to keep a positive self-image, even when they act harmfully [23]. This relationship underscores the mental complexity behind bullying behavior, where self-assessment and moral thinking both play a role in continuing aggression during adolescence.

The positive association between self-esteem and bullying perpetration suggests that adolescents with low or unstable self-esteem may use bullying as a compensatory strategy to regain a sense of control or social dominance. According to the self-enhancement theory, individuals with fragile self-esteem tend to engage in aggressive acts when their self-image is threatened [24] [25]. Such behavior may temporarily restore feelings of superiority and serve as a defense mechanism against internal insecurity. Studies indicate that bullying can function as a social strategy to gain popularity or maintain peer status [26], and adolescents with

narcissistic traits reflecting inflated but fragile self-views are more likely to engage in bullying to preserve admiration and power [27].

Recent evidence further shows that the quality of self-esteem matters more than its absolute level. High yet unstable or narcissistic self-esteem is consistently linked with aggression, while stable and authentic self-esteem relates to empathy and emotional regulation [10] [28]. Thus, bullying perpetration may reflect maladaptive efforts to regulate threatened self-worth. Interventions should therefore focus not only on raising self-esteem but also on fostering stable and genuine self-evaluation, which could reduce the reliance on aggression as a means of ego protection.

According to Bandura's social-cognitive theory, moral disengagement allows individuals to separate moral standards from their actions through mechanisms such as moral justification, displacement of responsibility, and minimizing harm [29]. Adolescents who show higher moral disengagement may use these cognitive strategies to justify their aggression and protect their moral identity. Self-esteem plays a complementary role in this process, those with fragile or defensive self-esteem might be more likely to use moral disengagement to defend their self-image or cope with feelings of inadequacy [30]. Together, these two factors create a psychological pathway through which adolescents rationalize bullying as acceptable or even necessary behavior.

In the Indonesian cultural setting, these findings have specific implications. The social structure in many schools emphasizes conformity, respect for hierarchy, and peer approval, which may increase adolescents' tendency to rationalize aggressive acts. When Rosyidah found that, it clearly shows that cultural norms can affect moral reasoning, especially by using moral disengagement to maintain social status or group unity[31]. For Indonesian adolescents, bullying may sometimes be viewed as a way to maintain peer cohesion or dominance rather than as an act of cruelty, which may explain the strong relationship between moral disengagement and bullying found in this study.

From a practical standpoint, these results suggest that efforts to prevent bullying should go beyond teaching empathy or reducing aggression. Interventions should also address the cognitive justifications that allow adolescents to disengage morally from their harmful actions. School-based programs that integrate moral education, social-emotional learning, and self-reflection can help students recognize and challenge these justifications. Furthermore, programs that strengthen stable and genuine self-esteem—rather than fragile or exaggerated self-worth—can reduce the psychological need to assert dominance through bullying.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. The cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about causality, and the relatively small, incidentally selected sample may limit generalizability. Future research should use longitudinal approaches to explore causal links among self-esteem, moral disengagement, and bullying behavior[32]. Qualitative or mixed-method research could also provide deeper insights into how adolescents understand moral reasoning and self-concept within their social environment. In addition, using more differentiated measures of self-esteem could help distinguish between healthy and defensive forms of self-worth.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight that bullying among adolescents is not merely a behavioral issue but a complex interaction between moral cognition and emotional self-concept. Addressing both aspects—the cognitive mechanisms that justify aggression and the emotional vulnerabilities tied to self-esteem—can lead to more effective and culturally relevant strategies for reducing bullying in Indonesian schools.

4. Conclusion

The present study reveals that both self-esteem and moral disengagement significantly contribute to bullying behavior among adolescent perpetrators. Higher levels of self-esteem, along with increased tendencies toward moral disengagement—particularly in the dimensions of cognitive restructuring and distortion of behavior—were found to predict greater involvement in bullying. These findings indicate that adolescents who justify or rationalize harmful actions, combined with a fragile or inflated sense of self-worth, are more prone to engage in aggressive behavior toward others. Overall, this study highlights the intertwined role of cognitive and emotional factors in shaping bullying perpetration among youth.

Based on these results, it is recommended that intervention and prevention efforts emphasize the development of moral awareness and the promotion of balanced, healthy self-esteem among adolescents. Educational institutions should design programs that encourage empathy, ethical reasoning, and self-reflection to reduce the use of moral disengagement mechanisms. Future research is also encouraged to include broader and more diverse samples to examine how contextual variables—such as cultural values, peer influence, and family relationships—may further explain the complex interaction between self-esteem, moral disengagement, and bullying behavior.

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