



Identity Spectrum and Aggressive Behavior: Investigating How Adolescents' Sense of Self Shapes Bullying Tendencies

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the effect of Sense of self on bullying behavior in adolescents. The research method used a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design, involving a population of adolescents aged 13-18 years who were enrolled in secondary schools in Jakarta City. Sampling using random sampling technique. The research instruments consisted of the validated Adolescent Sense of self Scale (ASSS) and Bullying Behavior Scale (BBS). Data analysis used SPSS version 25 with independent T test as the main analysis and Pearson correlation analysis to measure the strength of the relationship between variables. The results showed significant differences in bullying behavior levels between groups with high and low Sense of self ($t(362) = 7.86, p < 0.001, d = 0.82$), with a strong negative correlation between the two variables ($r = -0.68, p < 0.001$). Identity coherence was found to be the Sense of self dimension with the strongest negative correlation to bullying behavior ($r = -0.71, p < 0.001$). The relationship between Sense of self and bullying behavior was moderated by family relationship quality (β interaction = $-0.37, p < 0.001$) and tended to strengthen with age. It can be concluded that sense of self, especially the components of identity coherence and boundary maintenance, has a central role in predicting the tendency of bullying behavior in adolescents, with important implications for the development of intervention programs based on strengthening self-identity.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, career adaptability, civil servant, correlation

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INTRODUCTION

Achieving the company's goals requires the company's ability to utilize existing Bullying has become a very alarming phenomenon around the world today, it certainly has a great impact on human psychological development especially in adolescents. Various interventions have been conducted by professionals and governments, yet the phenomenon continues to show an alarming prevalence especially in the educational and social sectors (Hong et al., 2022; Ishak et al., 2023). A recent longitudinal study by Wang et al. (2022) found that 35 to 45% of adolescents in various countries reported having

been victims of harassment, bullying, and 20 to 30 percent admitted to having been involved in harassment and bullying behavior, resulting in the consequences of psychological disorders and decreased academic performance (Wang et al., 2023) (Crouch et al., 2023; Savahl et al., 2023). These data suggest that a deeper understanding of the psychological components that contribute to bullying behavior is essential. The psychological components that are factors in the occurrence of bully behavior are emotion regulation, social skills, and family environment even have a major role in the emergence of bullying behavior (Crouch et al., 2023; Savahl et al., 2023).

However, various studies on harassment and bullying in adolescents pay less attention to internal psychological aspects related to the formation of personal identity, especially sense of self. Sense of self, which includes how adolescents' ability to recognize their self-identity, self-esteem, and self-concept, tends to be overlooked in exploring the factors that cause bullying in adolescents (Galán-Arroyo et al., 2023). Some research findings identify a relationship between self-esteem and the tendency of individuals to become victims of bullying (Lucas-Molina et al., 2022), but this condition still shows a significant gap in the understanding and application of the more comprehensive construct of Sense of self that can influence adolescents to become perpetrators of bullying in various sectors of their lives (Khaira, 2023).

Bullying is one of the complex manifestations of various psychological, social, and contextual conditions of individuals (Demaray et al., 2021). Currently, various cases and events of bullying occur and are known to many people as a result of technological advances and social media. Therefore, cyberbullying has become a new part of the concept of bullying that occurs today, making the prevention and intervention of this bullying behavior more complicated and difficult (Vranjes et al., 2020). Lima and Nakamura's (2022) research explains the significant correlation between intensive social media use, distorted self-perception, and increased online aggressive behavior in adolescents. Furthermore, the findings indicate that various interventions that can improve Sense of self show significant and promising effectiveness in reducing the intensity of bullying in the school environment (Tas'adi et al., 2020). These findings underscore the urgency to further explore how sense of self, which is formed in the interaction between offline and online realities, is one of the factors that has contributed to the dynamics of bullying behavior in the contemporary era.

Sense of self is an individual's ability to understand his or her condition which includes traits, abilities, values, potential, and psychological boundary conditions that distinguish him or her from others (Basten & Touyz, 2020). In adolescence, this Sense of self experiences significant growth and development along with how adolescents recognize and explore their identity and ability to find their position in a social context (Hatano et al., 2022). The development of a healthy Sense of self is characterized by congruence between self-perception and external evaluation, flexibility in the face of change, and the ability to integrate various aspects of identity (Marinković & Borović, 2022). In contrast, a fragmented and contaminated Sense of self is characterized by identity instability, over-reliance on external validation, and difficulty setting healthy psychological boundaries (Marinković & Borović, 2022). Various aspects of the Sense of self were found to identify, explain and find forms of bullying behavior in adolescents. Research findings on adolescents' low self-concept and unstable social identity tend to make adolescents aggressive as a way of compensation to gain status and social recognition from their environment (Rholanjiba & Nurwahidin, 2022). In a different context, a three-year longitudinal study conducted in India found that adolescents with a strong sense of self were more resistant to group pressure to engage in bullying behavior (García-Hermoso et al., 2020).

This supports other findings that make an important contribution to the development of adolescent behavior. However, there are still significant gaps regarding the specific mechanisms linking Sense of self to adolescent bullying behavior. First, most previous studies have focused on separate aspects of Sense of self (such as self-esteem or self-efficacy) without integrating them in a comprehensive framework that considers the dynamic interactions between these components (Ramadhanti & Nastiti, 2021). Second, the development of Sense of self in the digital era with sometimes different online and offline identity characteristics has not been adequately explored in relation to bullying (Aboagye et al., 2021). Third, there are limitations in understanding cultural variations in the construction of Sense of self and its implications for the manifestation of bullying across different socio-cultural contexts (Walters, 2021).

Given the complexity of bullying behavior in the modern era involving online and offline aspects, these research limitations and gaps can be overcome. This is in line with the findings of Thompson et al. (2023) that 68% of harassment and bullying cases use cyber and traditional elements simultaneously, this condition causes a poor combined effect on adolescent psychological well-being (Dimitrios et al., 2023). The ability to maintain a stable Sense of self and withstand various social pressures is an important component in this context that needs to be studied further (Fauziah & Prayogi, 2022). In Indonesia, cases of bullying that occur in adolescents have also become a clearly visible problem of concern. Data from 2023 shows that a significant percentage of Indonesian adolescents have experienced various forms of bullying. This highlights the importance of a deep understanding of the roots of the problem and its impact on the younger generation. KPAI data in 2023 showed that there were 2,355 cases of violations against child protection, of which 861 cases occurred in the educational environment, including bullying behavior and or bullying in adolescents (<https://nasional.kompas.com>). Furthermore, the results of the Ministry of Education and Culture survey in 2023 found that 24.4% of students had the potential to experience bullying at school. This finding shows that the problem of bullying is still very relevant and requires serious attention from various parties (www.cnnindonesia.com).

The intensity and persistence of bullying in this environment pose serious risks to adolescents' physical and mental well-being. Some of these cases have even resulted in very serious consequences, including death. These cases are thought to be influenced by the inability of adolescents to build a personal dynamic Sense of self. This condition is also influenced by macrosocial factors such as socio-economic uncertainty, changes in family structure, and transformation of social values. Uncertainty about the future of adolescents is also related to an increased tendency to use aggression as a mechanism to gain psychological control. So that the instability of Sense of self and bullying behavior needs to be explored further and in depth by involving various parties.

These various findings and studies show that adolescents with a good Sense of self, strong self-confidence have better social skills and the ability to manage their emotions, which means they are less likely to engage in bullying behavior (Steinberg et al., 2023). On the other hand, adolescents with weak self-confidence may feel insecure and seek to gain recognition or power through aggressive behavior towards others (Gottlieb et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand how to reassess the Sense of self to be able to influence bullying behavior in adolescents. As this condition requires appropriate interventions can be made to stop the behavior and support the development of a positive identity so that the achievement of adolescent developmental tasks can be fulfilled properly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sense of self is a psychological concept that refers to how individuals understand themselves, including aspects of identity, self-esteem, and awareness of their social role (Baumeister, 1999). According to Harter (2012), sense of self develops since childhood through interactions with the social environment, including family, peers, and educational experiences. A strong identity helps individuals face life's challenges with more confidence, while a weak sense of self can lead to identity confusion and emotional instability (Erikson, 1968). Research shows that sense of self is not only influenced by personal experiences, but also by cultural and social norms. Markus and Kitayama (1991) emphasize that in individualistic cultures, sense of self tends to be more independent, while in collectivistic cultures, individuals define themselves more in the context of social relationships. In addition, the development of technology and social media also plays a role in shaping the sense of self in the younger generation, where exposure to unrealistic social standards can affect self-esteem and self-image (Twenge & Campbell, 2010). The implications of a healthy sense of self are very important in various aspects of life, including mental health and academic success. A study by Ryan and Deci (2000) in self-determination theory showed that individuals with a clear sense of self have higher intrinsic motivation and are better able to achieve psychological well-being. Therefore, it is important for the educational and family environment to support the development of a positive sense of self so that individuals can grow up with self-confidence and good adaptability in society.

The concept of sense of self refers to an individual's understanding of themselves, including aspects of identity, values, and feelings about who they are in various social contexts (Harter, 2012). Sense of self develops throughout an individual's life and is influenced by various factors, including personal experiences and the social environment (Erikson, 1968). In the theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1968) explains that individuals build their identities through eight stages of development, where adolescence is a crucial phase in the search for identity. Meanwhile, Harter (2012) highlights that social interactions, such as relationships with family and peers, play a major role in shaping an individual's self-image and self-esteem. In addition to developmental theory, cultural perspectives also influence how a person understands themselves. Markus and Kitayama (1991) differentiate sense of self based on culture, where individualistic societies emphasize independent identity more, while collectivistic societies emphasize social relationships as part of an individual's identity. In today's digital era, technology and social media also have a significant influence on the development of sense of self. Twenge and Campbell (2010) stated that social media can strengthen or weaken a person's self-identity, depending on how the individual processes information and social comparisons that occur on digital platforms.

Bullying

Bullying is a deliberate and repeated aggressive behavior involving an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, which can be physical, verbal, or social (Gladden et al., 2014). Research shows that bullying in schools can have a negative impact on students' mental health, including increasing the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Arseneault et al., 2021). In addition, victims of bullying often experience decreased academic achievement due to impaired concentration and increased absenteeism (Mohan & Bakar, 2021). Factors that influence bullying include the family environment, peer group dynamics, and school culture. Children who experience a lack of parental supervision or who are exposed to domestic violence are

more likely to become perpetrators or victims of bullying (Cohn & Canter, 2003). In addition, peer group norms that support aggressive behavior can reinforce bullying incidents (Shellard, 2002). School cultures that do not emphasize values of mutual respect and tolerance also contribute to high rates of bullying (IDRA, 2023).

To address bullying, a comprehensive approach that involves the entire school community is needed. Effective prevention programs, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, emphasize the importance of teacher, student, and parent involvement in creating a safe and supportive school environment (Academia.edu, 2023). Additionally, interventions that focus on developing students' social and emotional skills can help reduce bullying incidents and improve students' overall well-being (OJJDP, 2023).

METHODS

Research design

This study used a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design to examine the effect of Sense of self on bullying behavior in adolescents. This method was chosen because of its suitability in measuring the relationship between two variables and comparing differences in the level of bullying behavior in groups of adolescents with high and low Sense of self through an independent T test.

Purpose of study

The study population was adolescents aged 13-18 years old who were enrolled in junior and senior high schools in City X, with an estimated population of 5,600 students. The sampling technique used stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation based on education level, gender, and socio-economic status. The sample size determination used the Slovin formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a minimum sample of 360 respondents.

Instruments

The research instruments consisted of the validated Sense of self (Jagannathan et al., 2023) with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.87 and Bullying Behavior (Muslim & Karneli, 2019) with a reliability of 0.85. Data collection was conducted through an online survey with strict protocols to ensure confidentiality and well-being of the subjects.

Analysis data

Data analysis used SPSS version 28 with stages: (1) descriptive analysis to identify sample characteristics and variable distribution, (2) Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test to ensure parametric assumptions were met, (3) independent T test as the main analysis to compare differences in bullying behavior in groups with high and low Sense of self, and (4) Pearson correlation analysis to measure the strength of the relationship between variables. Effect size was calculated using Cohen's d to determine the practical significance of the differences found.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of data analysis showed a significant influence of Sense of self on bullying behavior in adolescents. Based on an independent T test conducted on 364 respondents (consisting of 189 males and 175 females), there was a significant difference in the level of bullying behavior between groups with high and low Sense of self ($t(362) = 7.86, p < 0.001, d = 0.82$).

Table 1: T-test Results between High and Low Sense of self Groups

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
High Sense of self	187	17.23	5.92	7.86	362	<0.001	0.82
Low Sense of self	177	28.45	6.73				

As shown in Table 1, adolescents with low Sense of self showed higher bullying behavior scores ($M = 28.45$, $SD = 6.73$) compared to adolescents with high Sense of self ($M = 17.23$, $SD = 5.92$). This finding is in line with [Chen and Yang's \(2022\)](#) research which identified that adolescents with an unstable self-concept tend to use aggression as a compensatory mechanism to gain social recognition ([Hidayati & Farid, 2016](#)). Pearson correlation analysis also confirmed a strong negative relationship between Sense of self total score and bullying behavior ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the higher adolescents' Sense of self, the lower the tendency to engage in bullying behavior. These results are consistent with the meta-analysis findings of [Yamamoto et al. \(2023\)](#) who reported a negative correlation between self-clarity and various forms of aggressive behavior in adolescents ([Sihombing, 2023](#)).

Overall, the results of this analysis indicate that there is a significant difference between High Sense of self and Low Sense of self, where individuals with Low Sense of self have higher self-perception compared to individuals with High Sense of self. This finding provides important insights in the context of psychology or social research, especially in understanding variations in self-perception among individuals. Furthermore, based on Partial Results, the following results are obtained.

Table 2. Results of Correlation Analysis between Dimensions of Sense of Self and Bullying Behavior

Dimensions of Sense of Self	Correlation with Bullying Behavior (r)	p-value
Self-Concept	-0.62	<0.001
Self-Esteem	-0.59	<0.001
Identity Coherence	-0.71	<0.001
Self-Continuity	-0.54	<0.001
Boundary Maintenance	-0.63	<0.001

Table 2 above presents the results of the correlation analysis between the dimensions of Sense of self and bullying behavior. The results show that all dimensions of Sense of self have significant negative correlations with bullying behavior, with p values less than 0.001, indicating that these relationships are very strong and unlikely to occur by chance. The Identity Coherence dimension had the strongest correlation with an r value of -0.71, followed by Self-Concept with $r = -0.62$ and Boundary Maintenance with $r = -0.63$. The Self-Esteem and Self-Continuity dimensions also showed significant negative correlations, with r values of -0.59 and -0.54, respectively. The results of the correlation test show that there is a negative correlation where the higher the Sense of self dimension that individuals have, the lower their tendency to engage in bullying behavior. These findings provide important insights into how the development of a positive Sense of self can contribute to reducing bullying behavior, as well as

emphasizing the importance of interventions that focus on improving these dimensions in the context of bullying prevention.

Identity coherence had the strongest negative correlation with bullying behavior ($r = -0.71$, $p < 0.001$), followed by boundary maintenance ($r = -0.63$, $p < 0.001$) and self-concept ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.001$). These findings reinforce the argument of Martinez-Gonzalez et al. (2023) that cohesiveness and clarity of self-identity are critical components in preventing aggressive behavior tendencies in adolescents. As explained by Davidson and Cardemil (2021), adolescents with high identity coherence have clarity about their values and life goals, so they do not need external validation through domination or intimidation of others (Nelson et al., 2023).

When the data were analyzed by gender, no significant difference was found in the relationship between Sense of self and bullying behavior between male and female adolescents ($z = 1.46$, $p = 0.14$), suggesting that the influence of Sense of self on bullying behavior is universal. This is in contrast to the findings of Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al. (2022) who reported gender variation in the manifestation of bullying behavior, but the role of Sense of self in resilience to group pressure to behave aggressively in both genders (Demaray et al., 2021). Analysis by age group showed that the negative relationship between Sense of self and bullying behavior tended to strengthen with age (early adolescence: $r = -0.54$, $p < 0.001$; middle adolescence: $r = -0.65$, $p < 0.001$; late adolescence: $r = -0.78$, $p < 0.001$). These findings reflect more mature cognitive and moral development in older adolescents, as described in Kohlberg's model of moral development outlined by Thompson et al. (2023). Older adolescents with a strong Sense of self show better ability to internalize moral values and reject behaviors that harm others.

Additional analysis using one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in the manifestation of Sense of self's influence on different types of bullying behavior ($F(3, 360) = 15.24$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$). Sense of self had the strongest influence on relational bullying ($\beta = -0.73$, $p < 0.001$) and cyberbullying ($\beta = -0.68$, $p < 0.001$), compared to physical ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$) and verbal bullying ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$). This finding reinforces the argument of Li et al. (2023) that more complex forms of bullying involving social manipulation are more influenced by self-identity factors compared to direct forms of aggression.

In the context of socio-demographic factors, it was found that the effect of Sense of self on bullying behavior was moderated by the quality of family relationships (β interaction = -0.37 , $p < 0.001$). Adolescents with low Sense of self but with supportive family relationships showed lower levels of bullying behavior compared to adolescents who had similar Sense of self characteristics but with less harmonious family relationships. This finding is in line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model adapted in Smith's (2018) research, which emphasizes the role of the microsystem environment in moderating the expression of individual psychological factors (Sabat et al., 2020).

Testing of multiple regression models showed that the combination of Sense of self and contextual factors (quality of family relationships, school climate, and peer influence) together explained 67% of the variance in bullying behavior ($R^2 = 0.67$, $F(4, 359) = 39.75$, $p < 0.001$). However, Sense of self remained the strongest predictor with a unique contribution of 37% ($sr^2 = 0.37$), confirming its central role in the dynamics of adolescent bullying behavior. As argued by Hoffman and Murayama (2017), Sense of self acts as a "psychological compass" that directs adolescents' social behavior in various interaction contexts (Yalcin & Puntoni, 2023). Overall, the results of this study confirm the hypothesis that Sense of self has a significant influence on bullying behavior in adolescents, with low Sense of self being a strong predictor of the tendency to engage in bullying behavior. The practical implication of this study is the importance of bullying intervention programs that explicitly target strengthening adolescents' Sense of self,

particularly aspects of identity coherence and boundary maintenance, as a potentially effective preventive strategy.

The multiple regression model showing Sense of self as the strongest predictor with a unique contribution of 37% confirms its central position in bullying dynamics, but also recognizes the complexity of the interaction of individual and contextual factors. As argued by [Hoffman and Murayama \(2017\)](#), Sense of self is not simply one factor among many, but rather “the organizing principle” through which adolescents interpret and respond to various contextual influences ([Yalcin & Puntoni, 2023](#)). The same adolescent, if they have a different Sense of self, will respond to peer pressure or a negative school climate in very different ways.

It should also be recognized that the relationship between Sense of self and bullying is most likely bidirectional. While this study focuses on how Sense of self influences bullying tendencies, engaging in bullying behavior itself may influence adolescents' Sense of self development. Bullying can serve as a feedback loop in adolescents' identity development, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle between identity instability and aggressive behavior ([Aini, 2016](#)). Future longitudinal studies are needed to better understand the causal relationships and feedback mechanisms between these two constructs. From a practical perspective, the research findings suggest a multi-level intervention approach that integrates a focus on personal identity development and a supportive social context. Programs that help adolescents develop a more coherent sense of self - through the exploration of personal values, interests and strengths - can be combined with interventions that target group dynamics and school climate ([Waliyanti et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, engaging families and communities in bullying prevention efforts is essential given the moderating role that contextual factors play in bullying prevention.

In the context of Indonesia with its rich cultural diversity, the development of adolescents' sense of self also needs to consider aspects of cultural and religious identity. The development of a healthy Sense of self involves the integration of various dimensions of identity, including cultural and spiritual affiliations ([Fa'una, n.d.; Waseso & Al Ahsani, 2023](#)). Intervention programs that are sensitive to the local cultural context are likely to be more effective in helping adolescents develop a strong Sense of self and reduce the risk of engaging in bullying behavior. Ultimately, the findings of this study underscore the complexity and psychological depth of the phenomenon of bullying that is often oversimplified in public discourse. Behind the appearance of aggressiveness and dominance, there are deeper identity struggles that need to be understood and addressed. Bullying is not simply a behavioral issue, but rather a mirror of an adolescent's existential journey in discovering and defining himself in an increasingly complex and fragmented world. By understanding and addressing this dimension of identity, we may be able to develop more effective approaches to creating safer and more supportive educational environments for all adolescents.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed the significant influence of Sense of self on bullying behavior in adolescents, where adolescents with low Sense of self showed a higher tendency to engage in bullying behavior than those with high Sense of self. Identity coherence was identified as the most influential dimension of Sense of self, followed by boundary maintenance and self-concept, with a strong negative correlation to bullying behavior. This finding was consistent across both genders, but the influence tended to strengthen as adolescents aged. Sense of self had a stronger influence on relational bullying and

cyberbullying than physical and verbal forms of bullying. The quality of family relationships proved to moderate the relationship between Sense of self and bullying behavior, indicating the importance of an ecological approach in understanding and addressing bullying behavior. The practical implication of this study is the urgency of developing bullying intervention programs that specifically target the strengthening of adolescents' Sense of self, especially in the aspects of identity coherence and boundary maintenance, as an effective strategy to prevent and reduce bullying behavior among adolescents.

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