

Unveiling Bullying Dynamics in Islamic Boarding Schools for Adolescent Mental Health Promotion

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bullying in the pesantren environment remains a serious issue in the effort to promote adolescent mental health in Indonesia. This behaviour is often considered part of the character-building tradition, even though it negatively impacts the mental health of the students. This condition highlights the need to understand the factors influencing bullying behaviour in the pesantren environment. **Objective:** This study aims to analyse factors influencing bullying behaviour in Islamic boarding schools as the basis for mental health promotion interventions. **Methods:** This cross-sectional study involved 109 students at Al-Hidayah Islamic Boarding School, Sidoarjo, selected through simple random sampling. Independent variables included age, gender, school level, length of stay, and peer perception. The dependent variable was bullying behaviour. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. **Results:** Most respondents were early adolescents (68.8%) with negative peer perceptions (68.8%). Length of stay and negative peer perception significantly influenced bullying behaviour ($p = 0.004$; $R^2 = 15.4\%$). **Conclusion:** Negative peer perception and length of stay are key factors contributing to bullying. Boarding schools should develop peer mentoring programs, anti-bullying campaigns, and mental health education to promote a safer and more supportive environment for students.

Keywords: Adolescents, Bullying, Health promotion, Islamic boarding school, Peer perception

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is one of the mental health issues that negatively impacts the psychological and social development of adolescents. Pesantren, as a dormitory-based Islamic educational institution, has a unique social system. Santri (the term for students in Pesantren) live together in a structured environment, under the guidance of a Kyai or ustadz. This system aims not only to provide religious and general education but also to shape character, discipline, and independence through intensive social interactions in daily life. However, behind these noble goals, social practices in pesantren sometimes leave behind issues, one of which is the seniority culture that is often interpreted as a tradition of mental formation. In some pesantren, this

practice is carried out through actions that can be categorized as bullying by senior students towards juniors and is often overlooked by the management because it is considered part of discipline training.

Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission recorded that in 2023, there were 3,800 cases of bullying in Indonesia, with nearly half occurring in educational institutions, including Islamic boarding schools (Surabaya, 2024). The Indonesian Education Monitoring Network also reported 573 violence cases in schools and boarding schools in 2024, double the number from the previous year, with 31% involving bullying (Detik.com, 2024). Bullying in Islamic boarding schools is often perceived as a tradition of character-building or "disciplinary training" practiced by senior students toward juniors, which is

frequently overlooked by school authorities (Wahyudi, 2020). The culture of seniority, imbalance between supervisors and students, and lack of supervision exacerbate this situation. This study offers a solution by identifying factors influencing bullying behaviour to develop interventions based on peer relationship management and changing negative peer perceptions. The findings are expected to provide recommendations for effective bullying prevention policies and programs in boarding schools.

Several studies have identified various causes and impacts of bullying. Previous research found that early adolescents are highly vulnerable to peer pressure, which can trigger bullying behaviour (Pepler and others, 2021). Farrell, Bettencourt, and Mehari (2020) highlighted the role of group norms in shaping aggressive behaviour. Other studies showed that male students are more likely to engage in physical and verbal bullying than females (Yang *et.al*, 2019), and negative peer perceptions are a significant factor in justifying bullying behaviour (Retnowuni and Yani, 2019; Butar and Karneli, 2021).

However, most studies have not specifically explored the social dynamics and cultural context of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. There is limited research that simultaneously examines demographic and psychosocial factors, such as age, gender, educational level, length of stay, and peer perceptions, that interact to influence bullying behaviour in these settings. The lack of comprehensive empirical data on boarding schools also poses a challenge in developing effective, evidence-based prevention strategies.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the psychosocial factors influencing bullying behaviour in Islamic boarding schools as a foundation for developing mental health promotion interventions. The findings are expected to provide comprehensive empirical insights and serve as a basis for designing bullying prevention programs that are culturally appropriate, such as peer mentoring, anti-bullying campaigns, and mental health education based on Islamic values.

METHODS

This study uses a cross-sectional design. The research sample consisted of 109 students from Pondok Pesantren Al-Hidayah Sidoarjo, selected using simple random sampling from 10% of the total number of students. Independent variables include age, gender, education level, length of stay at the pesantren, and peer perception. Data collection was conducted using a questionnaire, which consisted of two parts: Respondent characteristics (age, gender, education level, length of stay in the pesantren), Peer perception, and bullying behaviour using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree). Example item for peer perception: "I feel that my friends support excessive teasing behaviour towards juniors." An example item for bullying behaviour, for instance: "I have ever mocked a younger friend at the boarding school." The validity test was conducted using the Pearson Product Moment correlation test, and all items were declared valid with a calculated r value $>$ table r (0.188) at a 5% significance level. The reliability test was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha with a result of $\alpha = 0.832$, indicating a good level of reliability. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression with a significance level of $p < 0.05$, using SPSS software version 25. This research has received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama University Surabaya with the number 0373/EC/KEPK/UNUSA/2024.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to analyze the factors that influence bullying behaviour in the pesantren environment. The analysis was conducted on the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the relationship between independent variables (age, gender, education level, length of stay in the pesantren, and peer perception) and bullying behaviour as the dependent variable. Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression tests to determine which variables had the most significant impact. The results of the analysis are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Characteristic variable

Category of Variable	f	%
Age (X1)		
Early teen (12-16 years old)	72	68.8
Late teen (17-25 years old)	34	31.2
Total	109	100
Gender (X2)		
Male	66	60.6
Female	43	39.4
Total	109	100
School Level (X3)		
Junior High School	56	51.4
Senior High School	53	48.6
Total	109	100
Length Stay in Boarding School (X4)		
1-12 months	17	15.6
13-35 months	35	32.1
>35 month	57	52.3
Total	109	100
Peer Perception (X5)		
Positive perception	34	31.2
Negative perception	75	68.8
Total	109	100
Bullying (Y)		
Low	19	17.4
Always	90	82.6
Total	109	100

Table 1 shows the demographic profile and background of the respondents in this study. Most of the respondents are in early adolescence and are male, which reflects the general representation of students in the pesantren environment. Most of them are in junior high school and have been living in the pesantren for more than 35 months, indicating long-term exposure to the social structures and

traditions prevailing in the pesantren. Moreover, the majority of respondents have a negative perception of their peers, which may reflect challenges in social relationships among students and indicate a high prevalence of bullying experiences among them, highlighting the importance of addressing this issue in boarding school educational environments.

Table 2. Result of multiple linear regression analysis on bullying behaviour

Variable	Regression coefficient	Std.Error	t-value	P value	95% CI (Lower-Upper)	Significance
Age	-0.094	0.060	-1.578	0.118	-0.213 s.d. 0.025	Not Significant
Gender	-0.076	0.056	-1.356	0.178	-0.188 s.d. 0.036	Not Significant
School level	-0.066	0.063	-1.048	0.297	-0.191 s.d. 0.059	Not Significant
Length of stay	0.137	0.068	2.024	0.045	0.003 s.d. 0.270	Significant
Peer Perception	0.250	0.076	3.278	0.002	0.099 s.d. 0.400	Significant
R Square	0.154					
F-value	3.726			0.004		Significant

Table 2 above shows that not all variables influence bullying behaviour; peer perception and length of stay in the pesantren show a significant relationship with bullying behaviour. Conversely, age, gender, and school level do not show significant contributions. The R-square value indicates that the model only explains a small portion of the variation in bullying behaviour, which means that there are still other factors outside this model that have an influence. These results emphasize the importance of social dynamics over demographic attributes in understanding and addressing bullying in the pesantren environment.

The characteristics of the respondents in this study indicate that most of the students are in early adolescence (12-16 years old), male, attending junior high school, and have been living in the pesantren for more than 35 months. This indicates that most respondents are in a psychosocial development phase that is vulnerable to peer pressure and the formation of social identity. The early adolescent phase is a very crucial period of psychosocial development, where individuals are undergoing a transition from dependence on parents to social independence. At this stage, peer pressure and the desire to be accepted in a group become very strong. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, adolescence is marked by the identity versus role confusion crisis, where teenagers seek their place in the social structure (Santrock, 2018). Thus, in this case, adolescents who have not yet been able to form a strong personal identity tend to be more easily influenced by social pressures and group norms, including negative behaviours such as bullying. Research by Pepler et al., 2021, shows that students in early adolescence are more vulnerable to peer pressure compared to older adolescents (Pepler *et al.*, 2021). This is due to the high need for recognition and acceptance within the group, which often serves as the basis for the emergence of aggressive behaviour towards others as a form of conformity. Bullying behaviour among adolescents is closely related to the process of identity search and the influence of peer group norms. Support or pressure from peers can be a driving or inhibiting factor for deviant behaviours such as bullying. This is supported by previous research findings that show that

perceptions of group norms can justify aggressive behaviour (Farrell, Bettencourt and Mehari, 2020).

The research results show that the majority (60.6%) of the respondents are male. In general, several studies indicate that men have a higher tendency to engage in direct forms of bullying, such as physical or verbal violence (Yang *et al.*, 2019). This is related to masculinity norms that emphasize dominance, strength, and superiority, which can be expressed through aggressive behaviour. However, in the regression model of this study, gender does not significantly influence bullying behaviour. This indicates that gender alone is not a determining factor, but rather the interaction between gender and the social environment plays a more significant role. Differences in bullying behaviour based on gender will be more apparent if supported by a school social climate that is permissive of aggression or lacks an effective social control system (Walden and Beran, 2021). In the context of pesantren, social norms and seniority seem to be more determining than biological gender differences.

The education level of the students, most of whom are in junior high school, is also a particular concern. The junior high school period is the early stage of adolescence, where students begin to adapt to a broader and more hierarchical social environment. The transition from elementary school to middle school brings challenges in terms of adjustment, especially when students have to face new social structures that may demand conformity. Previous research shows that middle school students are more vulnerable to peer influence and have higher levels of involvement in peer conflicts compared to high school students (Ma, Wang, and Wang, 2020). This is due to emotional instability, weak self-control, and a higher need for affiliation at this age. In a pesantren environment, where the social structure is often very hierarchical and based on seniority, middle school students have the potential to become either targets or perpetrators of bullying, especially when trying to adapt to the system.

The results of the regression analysis show that out of the five independent variables analyzed, only two variables have a significant relationship with bullying behaviour, namely the length of

stay in the pesantren and the perception of peers. Other variables such as age, gender, and education level do not show a statistically significant influence.

The length of stay in the pesantren has a significant influence on bullying ($p=0.045$), indicating that the longer students are in the pesantren environment, the greater the likelihood they are exposed to or even imitate bullying behaviour, which is considered part of the seniority culture. Previous studies have shown that poorly managed social hierarchies within the boarding school system can perpetuate covert violence disguised as "mentoring" or "disciplinary learning" (Wang, Berry, and Swearer, 2022).

Negative perceptions of peers were found to be the most dominant factor influencing bullying behaviour. In this study, the majority (68.8%) of students had a negative perception of their peers. Negative perceptions of groups tend to increase the tendency for aggressive behaviour due to a lack of empathy and trust between individuals (Chen and Graham, 2018). The results of the regression analysis show that perceptions of peers have a significant influence on bullying behaviour ($p=0.002$). This reinforces the opinion that social norms within peer groups significantly influence students' attitudes towards bullying. When the perception justifies that bullying is seen as a joke, something normal, or even as part of the tradition in a pesantren environment, students tend to condone and tolerate such behaviour. This is in line with previous research, which states that group norms and peer support can reinforce aggressive behaviour, especially in boarding school environments such as pesantren (Saarento, Boulton and Salmivalli, 2015; Garandeau, Lee and Salmivalli, 2021).

On the contrary, the variables of age, gender, and level of education do not show a significant influence on bullying behaviour. This indicates that individual demographic factors such as age and gender may not directly influence the tendency to engage in bullying but rather are influenced by the social and cultural context in which students are situated. Previous research shows that the influence of biological factors on aggressive behaviour tends to be mediated by the social environment, such as reinforcement

from peers or prevailing value systems (Veenstra, Lodder and Baerveldt, 2018).

Another study revealed that although boys and early adolescents generally have a higher tendency to engage in bullying, this does not always occur if it is not supported by group norms or social justifications that facilitate such actions (Walden and Beran, 2021). In the context of pesantren, the hierarchical social construction, as well as the loosely monitored informal traditions, can play a more significant role in encouraging bullying behaviour compared to individual demographic factors.

The insignificance of age and gender in this study emphasizes that bullying behaviour is not solely the result of personal tendencies but rather a product of group culture and social structures formed through daily interactions (Olthof and Goossens, 2020). Therefore, interventions targeting changes in social norms, enhancement of empathy, and strengthening of spiritual values based on Islamic teachings are highly necessary. This intervention can be carried out through peer mentoring programs, anti-bullying campaigns, and integrated mental health education within pesantren activities (Salmivalli *et al.*, 2021).

Thus, attention to the formation of social norms in the pesantren environment becomes very important. Interventions targeting group perception changes, particularly through peer approaches and curricula that address issues of empathy and anti-violence, are relevant and contextual strategies. These efforts not only have the potential to prevent bullying but also to strengthen a healthy and Islamic social climate in the pesantren.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that negative perceptions of peers and the length of stay in the pesantren are the main factors influencing bullying behavior among students. Meanwhile, age, gender, and level of education do not show a significant partial influence. These findings underscore the importance of social development efforts and the reinforcement of positive norms within the pesantren environment. It is hoped that pesantren can develop peer mentoring programs, anti-bullying campaigns, and

mental health education integrated with Islamic values. These efforts are expected to create a safer, more respectful learning environment and support the holistic character development of the students.

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