Original Article

# Self-Esteem and Relational Aggression in Students' Social Life

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**Abstrak.** The phenomenon of relational aggression among students is increasingly evident in peer interactions. This condition is often associated with students' levels of self-esteem, as individuals with lower self-esteem tend to be more vulnerable to displaying relationally aggressive behaviors. This research aims to examine the relationship between relational aggression and self-esteem among students at SMP Negeri 95 Jakarta Utara, as well as to describe the overall patterns of both variables. This research employed a descriptive quantitative approach, involving a sample of 180 students from SMP Negeri 95 Jakarta Utara. The measurement tools consisted of two questionnaires developed by the researcher. Validity testing indicated that all items in both instruments were valid, and the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha yielded coefficients of 0.87 for the self-esteem questionnaire and 0.88 for the relational aggression questionnaire, indicating strong reliability. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 with a correlational technique. The findings revealed a significant relationship between self-esteem (X) and relational aggression (Y). The correlation between the two variables was categorized as weak, with a negative coefficient of –0.255, indicating that higher self-esteem is associated with lower levels of relational aggression among students.

## Introduction

The development of aggression in adolescents is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various factors. During early adulthood, individuals begin to focus on forming relationships with others (Putri et al., 2023). Within these relationships, the possibility of aggression remains. Aggression refers to intentional behavior aimed at harming another individual (Kenrick et al., 2007). One vulnerability experienced by adolescents that may lead to such behavior is relational aggression.

Relational aggression is a form of social manipulation in which an individual harms others without direct involvement. This type of aggression is carried out by excluding someone from their peer group, undermining the victim's self-confidence, spreading harmful rumors, or manipulating others to dislike the targeted individual (Priyatna, 2010; Syahputra, 2024). According to the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), from January to September 2023, there were 1,800 cases related to the fulfillment of children's rights (1,237 cases) and special child protection (563 cases). Cases involving physical and/or psychological violence accounted for 141 instances, or 7.8%, making it the second most frequent category after sexual violence. In the domain of education, leisure, and cultural activities, cases reached 7.9%, ranking second after those related to family environment and caregiving.

This behavior is more common among adolescent girls through gossiping, spreading rumors, humiliation, creating hurtful nicknames, social exclusion, covert harassment, slander, intimidation, and similar actions (Priyatna, 2010). Females are more likely than males to follow a trajectory of increasing relational aggression and are less likely to engage in overt aggression (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2023). Additionally, Coyne (2020) examined the relationship between exposure to relational aggression on television, the development of gossip behavior, and the socialization of relational aggression from adolescence to young adulthood, providing valuable insights into the social dynamics of such behaviors (Coyne et al., 2020).

Aggression is an uncontrolled emotional response resulting in destructive, attacking, or harmful behaviors. Aggression is classified into direct and indirect forms. Indirect aggression refers to behaviors aimed at damaging relationships or causing emotional harm without physical contact (Nur, 2022). Aggressiveness is further classified into four aspects physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility based on three fundamental dimensions: motoric, affective, and cognitive (Buss & Perry, 1992).

The development of relational aggression is influenced by various factors, including gender differences, language skills, peer social networks, and media exposure. Peer social networks impact relational aggression among children and adolescents, influencing various forms of relational aggression, including gossiping, social rejection, and betrayal of trust. The relationship between relational and physical aggression pathways in children, along with peer connections, varies by type of aggression, gender, and age (Ettekal & Ladd, 2015).

Teachers also play a role in addressing relational aggression. Addressing relational aggression in childhood has been found to be adopted by children, indicating the need for effective intervention strategies (Dereli, 2020). The influence of media, particularly violent media, on aggression shows that exposure to media violence increases aggression and violence in both immediate/short-term and long-term contexts (Hariyani & Syahputra, 2019; Hasan, 2017; Syahputra & Afdal, 2022).

The phenomenon of relational aggression has also been found in Indonesia. One form of relational aggression is cyberbullying (Johnson, 2009). Akamai in Margono, Yi, & Raikundalia 2019 stated that Indonesia has the worst cyberbullying rates compared to China and the United States. The percentage of cyberbullying in Indonesia increased from 21 percent to 38 percent (Margono et al., 2015).

Based on the results of a pre-study conducted with 30 eighth-grade students at SMP 95 North Jakarta, data obtained showed that the majority of the self-esteem frequency distribution of eighth-grade students at SMP 95 North Jakarta was in the low category, with a percentage of 43.3%. Referring to the pre-study results, the data obtained showed that the majority of the aggressive behavior frequency distribution of eighth-grade students at SMP 95 North Jakarta was in the high and very high categories, with percentages of 30% each.

Acts of relational aggression perpetrated by perpetrators can hinder others from developing harmonious relationships with them. This impacts the potential for peer rejection of the perpetrator of relational aggression. This rejection is one factor that influences an individual's self-esteem (Mruk, 2006). If an individual experiences rejection from those around them, it can lower their self-esteem. In other words, the self-esteem of perpetrators of relational aggression may decline.

Low self-esteem is believed to indicate individuals experiencing psychological distress or even depression. According to Mruk in 2006, "research shows that those who experience this type of low self-esteem tend to reject positive feedback, focus on negative information about themselves, avoid risk, and so forth." This means that individuals with low self-esteem view the world through a more negative filter and dislike the general perception of everything around them. One factor that influences self-esteem is failure (Mruk, 2006).

Furthermore, self-esteem is influenced by gender differences. Canning et al (2017) found that in women, the relationship between low global self-esteem and self-reported aggression was stronger than in men. This also results in physical hostility (Devi, 2019).

Individuals, especially adolescents, seek recognition by their environment by striving to become part of it. The need for recognition leads adolescents with high self-esteem to bully their juniors at school (Luthfiah, 2007). Furthermore, failure can make individuals feel hopeless. Another factor that can influence aggression in individuals is hopelessness (Mruk, 2006). This makes them vulnerable to frustration. On the other hand, this frustration can also trigger anger, leading to aggressive behavior (Myers, 2013).

Self-esteem can lead to social rejection, which students experience in four forms: teasing (using "stupid," "geeky," "bad words," or calling parents names), facial expressions (staring and avoiding), limiting access to play (never being invited to hang out and being ignored), and physical rejection (kicking, hitting, and pinching) (Zetina, 2023). Self-esteem can lead to social rejection, which students experience in four forms: teasing (using "stupid," "geeky," "bad words," or calling parents names), facial expressions (staring and avoiding), limiting access to play (never being invited to hang out and being ignored), and physical rejection (kicking, hitting, and pinching) (Anggadewi, 2020). Individuals experiencing despair want to release their suppressed anger, which may be expressed through aggressive behavior toward others (Myers, 2013). Meanwhile, low self-esteem leads to shyness, insecurity, and underachievement, which can negatively impact the victims (Refnadi, 2018). The implementation of guidance services for students has a significant impact on student self-esteem. This service improves self-esteem by utilizing a variety of effective counseling techniques to enhance students' self-esteem (Kasmawati & Alam, 2021).

The above explanation provides evidence that the relationship between relational aggression and self-esteem has been the subject of extensive research, with findings demonstrating a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship. Baumister et al. found that the relationship between aggression and self-esteem is complex, with individuals with high self-esteem also exhibiting aggressive behavior (Ishak, 2016).

Several studies suggest that low self-esteem is associated with aggression, even when separated from narcissism, and this relationship is stronger when distinguishing between healthy self-esteem and narcissistic self-perceptions (Donnellan et al., 2005). Several studies suggest that low self-esteem is associated with aggression, even when separated from narcissism, and this relationship is stronger when distinguishing between healthy self-esteem and narcissistic self-perceptions (Babore et al., 2017).

Based on the description, low self-esteem needs to be handled specifically, so that low self-esteem can be improved, so that researchers are interested in researching the relationship between self-esteem and correlational aggression in students through Counseling Services at SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta.

## Method

This research was conducted using a descriptive quantitative research method. According to Sugiyono (2020) a descriptive quantitative method is a method used to describe data numerically with the aim of providing an overview of the phenomena of a research object. This descriptive quantitative research was conducted to describe the picture of self-esteem and relational aggression in junior high school students.

### Participants

The population in this study was all students of SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta, divided into three classes, from grades VII to IX. Sugiyono (2020) defines a population as the entire research object that has certain characteristics and is the focus of the research. Therefore, in this study, the population in this study was all students of SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta.

### Sampling Procedure

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling. According to Sugiyono (2020), purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling that selects respondents based on

specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. Therefore, the research sample consisted of 180 students, consisting of 103, or 57.1%, boys and 77, or 42.9%, girls, with an age range of 14-16 years. Basic characteristics such as age, gender, and educational level were identified to ensure data relevance and support the generalizability of the research results.

### Instruments

This research instrument consisted of two questionnaires developed by the researchers: a self-esteem questionnaire and a relational aggression questionnaire. The self-esteem questionnaire was based on Rosenberg's (1965) theory and consisted of two aspects with a total of 30 statements. Meanwhile, the relational aggression questionnaire was based on Voulgaridou & Kokkinos' (2015) theory and consisted of 20 statements.

In the instrument development process, validity plays a fundamental role because it relates to the accuracy and validity of the test in reflecting the variables being studied. The higher the validity, the more accurately the instrument describes the phenomenon being measured (Syahputra et al., 2025). Validity tests showed that all items in both questionnaires had calculated r values greater than the table r, thus all items were declared valid. Furthermore, reliability tests using Cronbach's Alpha showed that the self-esteem questionnaire had a reliability value of 0.87, while the relational aggression questionnaire had a reliability value of 0.88. Thus, both instruments were declared reliable.

### Procedure

This research was conducted at SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta, with the assistance of guidance and counseling teachers in coordinating the distribution of the questionnaire via Google Form. The Likert scale used had five alternative answers: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. At the beginning of the form, respondents were required to check a consent statement to indicate their willingness to provide data voluntarily after reading the explanation of the research objectives and data confidentiality. After data collection, the data were analyzed to determine whether there was a relationship between self-esteem and relational aggression in junior high school students.

### Data Analysis

This study used a quantitative descriptive approach to examine students' self-esteem and relational aggression. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and correlation tests to examine the relationship between the two variables.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the distribution of a self-esteem questionnaire to 180 students at SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta, consisting of 30 items, the lowest score was 67 and the highest score was 120, with an average score of 101.7. These scores were then used as the basis for determining the categorization of the self-esteem data, presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Description of Self Esteem Values

| Score Interval | Category | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0 – 29 | Very Low | 0 | 0 |
| 30 – 59 | Low | 0 | 0 |
| 60 – 89 | Moderate | 29 | 16,12 |
| 90– 119 | High | 141 | 78,33 |
| ≥ 120 | Very High | 10 | 5,55 |

Based on the table above, it is known that the very high category is 10 students (5.55%), the high category is 141 students (78.33%), the moderate category is 29 students (16.11%), and the moderate category is 0 students (0%), and 0 students (0%) are in the very low category. This means that the average self-esteem of students is in the high category. Based on the distribution of rational aggression questionnaires to 180 students of SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta with 17 statement items, the lowest value was 17 and the highest value was 57 with an average of 31.35. Determination of the categorization of rational aggression data is presented in table 2.

**Table 2.** Description of Relational Aggression

| Score Interval | Category | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 – 16 | Very Low | 0 | 0 |
| 17 – 33 | Low | 89 | 49,44 |
| 34 – 89 | Moderate | 76 | 42,22 |
| 51– 67 | High | 6 | 3,34 |
| $\geq 68$ | Very High | 0 | 0 |

Based on the table above, 0 students (0%) were in the very high category, 6 students (3.34%) in the high category, 76 students (42.22%) in the medium category, 89 students (49.44%) in the low category, and 0 students (0%) in the very low category. This means that the average rational aggression of students is in the low category. Using valid instruments, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between self-esteem and rational aggression in students at SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta. Based on the Pearson correlation analysis using SPSS 27 software, the following results were obtained

**Table 3.** Pearson Correlation Results

| | | SelfEsteem | Agresi Relasional |
|---|---|---|---|
| Self-Esteem | Pearson Correlation | 1 | -.255[**] |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .001 |
| | N | 180 | 180 |
| Rational Aggression | Pearson Correlation | -.255[**] | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 | |
| | N | 180 | 180 |

Based on the research correlation test, a correlation value of -0.255 was obtained with a significance of 0.001 <0.05, so it is known that there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and rational aggression. Then we can see in the Pearson correlation value, the self-esteem variable has a value of -0.255 and the relational aggression variable has a value of -0.255, there is a negative sign on both variables, so it can be said that the form of the relationship between the two variables is a negative relationship. Based on the guidelines for the degree of relationship with a value of 0.255 has a weak correlation value. It can be concluded that the variables of self-esteem and relational aggression have a correlation with a weak degree of correlation and a weak form of relationship. So Ha is accepted, namely there is a relationship between relational aggression and self-esteem in grade VIII students at SMP 95 North Jakarta. The correlation value is negative, indicating that the higher the student's self-esteem (X) then the student's rational aggression (Y) will be lower and vice versa, the lower the self-esteem (X) then the rational aggression will be higher subject (Y).

## Discussion

Based on the results of a study at SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta, obtained from two variables processed using SPSS version 27 on 180 respondents from eight classes, the significance value was 0.001 < 0.05, indicating a correlation between self-esteem and rational aggression. This means that H1 is accepted and H0 is rejected. The results of the hypothesis

testing using the Pearson correlation technique showed a Sig. (2-tailed) value of -0.255 for both variables. This indicates that the hypothesis in this study is significant and indicates a relationship between self-esteem and rational aggression. The following is a scot plot of the dynamics of self-esteem and rational aggression. The data reveal interesting changes that highlight the relationship between self-esteem and rational aggression among students.
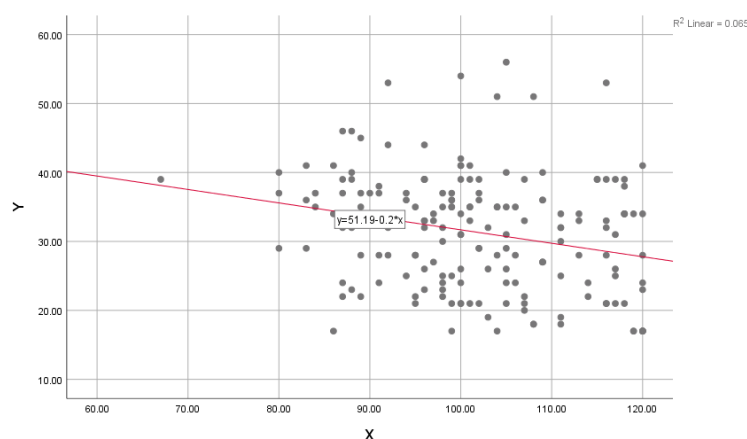


**Figure 1.** Scatter Plot

Based on the descriptive analysis, the self-esteem level of students at SMP Negeri 95 North Jakarta is in the high category with an average score of 101.7. Most students (78.33%) are in the high category and only 5.55% are in the very high category, while no students are in the low or very low category. These findings indicate that in general, students have a positive self-perception, feel capable, and have quite good self-esteem. Rosenberg (1965) explained that adolescents with high self-esteem tend to have better emotional regulation so they are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior. Meanwhile, the descriptive results on the relational aggression variable show that the average score is in the low category with an average of 31.35. The majority of students are in the low (49.44%) and medium (42.22%) categories. This indicates that students relatively rarely engage in relational aggression such as ostracizing friends, spreading gossip, or manipulating social relationships. Voulgaridou & Kokkinos (2015) stated that low relational aggression is usually associated with good social skills and more stable peer acceptance. Overall, this descriptive picture shows that the school social context is in an adaptive condition, so that relational aggressive behavior tends to be low while self-esteem tends to be high.

Based on correlation testing or hypothesis testing, the relationship between self-esteem and relational aggression is weakly correlated. This is in line with research by Makbul et al (2016) whose results showed no significant relationship between self-esteem and aggressive behavior. This contradicts research by Harianto et al (2017) which found no significant correlation between the two, and by Fransiska (2015) which showed no negative relationship between self-esteem and aggressive tendencies.

The results of the study, which showed a significance value of 0.001 < 0.05 and a Pearson correlation value of -0.255, indicate a significant but weak negative relationship between self-esteem and relational aggression. Self-esteem is an individual's subjective assessment of themselves, which includes self-confidence, competence, and personal worth. On the other hand, relational aggression is a form of aggression that focuses on damaging social relationships. These findings suggest that as a person's self-esteem increases, their tendency to engage in relational aggression tends to decrease, although this relationship is not very strong. The weak correlation between self-esteem and relational aggression indicates that other factors may be more dominant in influencing relational aggression. Factors such as family environment,

friendship dynamics, social pressure, and emotional states may play a more significant role. Low self-esteem may be only one of many factors contributing to relationally aggressive behavior. Therefore, it is important to consider the complexity and multifactoriality of this aggressive behavior. The results of this study align with those of Normalasari et al (2025) who found that relational aggression has a negative relationship with students' psychological well-being. This pattern suggests that individuals with negative well-being, including low self-esteem, are more likely to suppress relational aggression.

Furthermore, these results are supported by those of Syahputra et al (2024) who found that relational aggression is associated with decreased self-esteem, increased feelings of loneliness, and other social problems. This study demonstrated that adolescents who engage in relational aggression tend to have low self-esteem and unhealthy interpersonal relationships. This confirms that self-esteem is an important psychological factor in determining a person's tendency to engage in relational aggression.

Furthermore, research by Faisyah et al (2025) demonstrated that low self-esteem is associated with the emergence of maladaptive social behavior. Maladaptive behavior has been shown to significantly lower students' self-esteem, and students with lower self-esteem are more sensitive to negative behavior. This pattern supports research findings that low self-esteem can give rise to defensive behavior in social relationships, including the use of relational aggression as a form of self-defense mechanism.

Although the correlation was weak, the negative relationship found was still significant. Improving self-esteem has the potential to be a strategy for reducing relational aggression. Intervention programs designed to improve self-esteem, such as social skills training, individual counseling, and activities that support self-development, may be helpful in reducing relationally aggressive behavior. However, because this relationship is weak, such interventions may need to be combined with other strategies that more directly target aggressive behavior.

Understanding why self-esteem can influence relational aggression also requires a more in-depth approach. High self-esteem can provide individuals with a sense of security and a reduced need to degrade others to improve their social standing. Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem may be more susceptible to feelings of insecurity and envy, which can lead them to use relational aggression as a defense or compensation mechanism. This research opens the door to exploring the interaction between self-esteem and other factors in influencing relational aggression. It should be noted that the weak relationship found in this study suggests that increasing self-esteem alone is not sufficient to significantly reduce relational aggression. Therefore, a more holistic approach is needed, including education on empathy, conflict resolution, and emotion management. These programs could be designed to not only improve self-esteem but also teach the skills necessary for building healthy and positive social relationships.

## Conclusion

Based on the results of the research conducted, the relationship between self-esteem and relational aggression is highly statistically significant. Although this relationship is statistically significant, its strength is weak, meaning self-esteem only explains a small portion of the variation in relational aggression. This finding has several important implications: given the significant but weak relationship, interventions to improve self-esteem may have only a limited effect on reducing relational aggression. A more comprehensive approach that includes other factors may be needed. Further research is needed to explore other factors that may contribute more strongly to relational aggression. These could include variables such as the social environment, childhood experiences, and other mental health conditions.

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