

## The Effect of *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* on Depression Levels in Adolescents Experiencing *Cyberbullying*

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Cyberbullying is an aggressive and intentional act of abuse and harassment using any form of digital technology. The prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents in Indonesia is 45%, with abuse occurring through social media. Cyberbullying has emerged as a public health issue, regardless of national economic conditions, with the potential to cause severe physical, mental (depression), and social distress among victims.

**Objectives:** The objective of this study was to determine the effect of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) on depression levels among adolescents experiencing cyberbullying.

**Methods:** The study used a quasi-experimental design with a one group pretest and posttest. The sample consisted of 78 students from Kanisius 1 Junior High School in Surakarta. The measurement tool used was a questionnaire on the severity of cyberbullying.

**Results:** After the cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) intervention was administered, the average cyberbullying score decreased from 46.90 in the pretest to 41.73 in the posttest. Statistical analysis revealed a significant change ( $p < 0.005$ ).

**Conclusions:** Cognitive behavior therapy has proven effective in helping adolescents manage their emotions and aggressive behavior on social media.

**Keywords:** adolescents, cyberbullying, cognitive behaviour therapy

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### Introduction

According to the *World Health Organization*, a person is declared to be a teenager in the age range of 10-19 years who are undergoing physical, emotional and social changes and are susceptible to mental health problems due to exposure to poverty, abuse and violent behavior. (Agisyaputri et al., 2023)

Internet use among teenagers, both in Indonesia and globally, has increased rapidly in recent years. Thus, many experience misinformation or missing *information*. Lack of cognitive maturity in children and adolescents in understanding and interpreting the language used on social media is also a factor causing deviant behavior. (Astuti, et al., 2024)

Based on stating that the pattern of social media use among teenagers is influenced not only by age, but also by gender. Adolescents aged 13-17 years are recorded to account for around 7.1% of the total female users and 6.2% of the total male users. The internet offers many benefits, such as access to information and social interaction and there are also significant negative impacts, one of which is Latifah et al. (2024) *cyberbullying*.

According to a survey from the *Pew Research Center* in 2010(2022), half of U.S. teens have experienced online bullying and abuse, with physical appearance considered a relatively common reason. 46% of teens aged 13 to 17 reported experiencing at least one type of *cyberbullying* behavior, with profanity being the most common (32%) followed by spreading false rumors (22%) and receiving unsolicited explicit images (17%). Behavioral prevalence varies by age and gender, older adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable, with 54% reporting *cyberbullying* experiences compared to adolescent boys.

In the Asian section, China recorded the highest number of cyberbullying cases. In 2021, it was recorded that around 54.6% of Chinese teenagers reported that they had been a victim

of *cyberbullying*, while 18.1% admitted to having *cyberbullied* others. Malaysia is second only to China. According to the latest report, Malaysia ranks fifth in the world for the highest (Zhou, 2021) *rate of cyberbullying*, after Paeru, Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. (Farahin Fadzil, 2024) *The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC)* in 2023 recorded 3,199 complaints related to *cyberbullying*. Of the amount of data that has been mentioned, as many as 2,971 or around 93% have been handled and closed.

According to data from the *United Nations International Children Educational Fund (UNICEF, 2021)* as many as 45% of individuals experience harassment through instant messaging apps, 41% become victims of unauthorized photo or video distribution, while the rest experience other forms of *cyberbullying*.

Findings from the Concern Foundation for Children or the Kakak Foundation revealed that the school environment is the main location for bullying among junior high school students in the city of Solo. Based on the results of the research, as many as 14% of children have been victims of *cyberbullying*. This type of digital bullying most often occurs through the WhatsApp platform at 74%, followed by other social media such as TikTok and X at 15%, Instagram at 8%, and *online games* at 3%. The main perpetrators of bullying on social media are dominated by peers (90%), while the rest are carried out by strangers or unknowns (8%), neighbors (1%), parents (1%), and teachers (1%). This research is the result of a collaboration between the Kakak foundation and the Office of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, Population Control, and Family Planning in Surakarta City (DP3AP2KB) through the Family Learning Center (PUSPAGA), which was carried out in 46 junior high and high school/equivalent schools with a total of 4,139 students. The research was conducted in the period from April to September 2024. The highest number of (BROTHER, 2023) *cyberbullying cases at the junior high school level (equivalent)* was obtained from SMP Kanisius 1 Surakarta with 26 cases of *cyberbullying*, followed by SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta with 23 cases and SMPN 16 Surakarta with 19 cases.

Digital developments such as the use of the internet have become a double-edged sword, this is due to the negative phenomenon that is rampant among teenagers through internet access. (Wei et al., 2022) *Cyberbullying* is a deliberate act to intimidate, provoke, or humiliate a target and can occur in a variety of ways, such as hacking someone's social media account, impersonating that person on social media platforms, spreading rumors and lies about that person, sending offensive, annoying, and threatening text messages, posts, or sexual content or making threatening prank phone calls. Globally, (Khine et al., 2020) *cyberbullying* is emerging as a public health problem, regardless of the national economy, with the potential to cause severe physical, mental (depression), and social distress among victims. (Khadka et al., 2024)

Based on the data of cases that have been reported, depression is the most common psychological disorder as a risk factor. Depression is one of the risk factors for suicide in adolescents, especially in women. This is related to mood disorders that consistently appear in various risk factor analyses especially in children and adolescents with cases of suicide. (Tabares et al., 2024) (Carballo et al., 2020)

Based on the Ministry of National Health (2020), depression is classified as a mood disorder that impacts the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of individuals. Individuals who experience depression generally show symptoms such as deep feelings of sadness, anxiety, loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities, feelings of worthlessness, and the appearance of repeated negative thoughts about themselves, life, and death. This condition can also be accompanied by decreased energy, sleep patterns, changes in appetite, and other somatic complaints.

Based on research conducted by , as many as 4.2% of students in Indonesia have had suicidal thoughts. Among college students, 6.9% reported having suicidal thoughts, while another 23% had attempted suicide. According to the study, teenage girls have a higher chance than teenage boys of becoming cybercriminals, even though both genders have an equal chance of becoming Astuti, et al., (2024) Farrington et al., (2023) *cyber perpetrators*.

Bullying behavior is a form of social deviation that can be reduced through various counseling interventions, including relaxation techniques, *self-management*, *role playing*, *cognitive behaviour therapy*, these behavioral tendencies are often driven by the feeling of satisfaction or pleasure experienced by the perpetrator when performing these actions, so that they are treated with the application of appropriate counseling strategies to reduce the intensity as well as the frequency of *bullying* behavior in a sustainable manner.(Yukafi et al., 2022)

*Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* (CBT) is a counseling approach that focuses on cognitive restructuring to correct distorted mindsets due to negative experiences, both physically and psychologically. This approach emphasizes future orientation rather than tracing the past. The cognitive aspects of CBT include changes in thinking, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and imagination, and aim to help clients recognize and correct their cognitive distortions. Meanwhile, the *behavioral* aspect in *cognitive behaviour therapy* is changing the wrong relationship with the habit of reacting to problems, learning to change behavior, calming the mind and body so that they feel better, and thinking more clearly. Cognitive restructuring techniques focus on the process of recognizing and replacing negative thoughts, adverse self-statements, and irrational beliefs of clients with a more rational and adaptive mindset.

Based on this presentation, the researcher was encouraged to conduct a study on the effectiveness of *Cognitive Behavior Therapy* on the level of depression in adolescents who experienced *cyberbullying* at SMP Kanisius 1 Surakarta.

## Method

This study uses a quantitative approach with a *quasi-experimental* method and a *one-group pretest-posttest design*. This design was used to measure the effect of the effectiveness of *Cognitive Behavior Therapy* on depression levels in adolescents who are victims of *cyberbullying*.

This research has passed the ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of RSUD Dr. Moewardi and is declared to comply with the principles of research ethics according to applicable standards (number: 569/III/HREC/2025)

Systematically, the flow of this research can be described as follows:

**Table 1 Research Design**

Pretest	Intervention	Posttest
O1	x	O2

Description :

O1 = Level *Cyberbullying* Before done *cognitive behaviour therapy*

X = Intervention *cognitive behaviour therapy*

O2 = Level *Cyberbullying* after done *cognitive behaviour therapy*.

Samples constitute a portion of the number and characteristics of the population that the researcher sets out to study and draws for its conclusions.(Scott, 2018)

The data results obtained using *the slovin* formula, the sample will be used by 71 respondents from a total population of 240 students of SMP Kanisius 1 Surakarta. However, the researcher also considered the possibility of incomplete data or refusal of participation from respondents during the research process. Therefore, the number of samples is added as a form of anticipation of potential drop outs. This adjustment refers to an estimated data loss of 10%, as suggested by . So that the minimum number of samples after the addition is estimated to reach 78 respondents. Usman & Akbar (2019)

The sampling technique in this study uses a *non-probability sampling* method with a *purposive sampling approach*, which is the selection of samples based on certain criteria or considerations that have been set by the researcher in accordance with the research objectives. With the inclusion criteria of early adolescents aged 12-15 years, attending Kanisius 1 Junior High School in Surakarta, adolescents who experienced (Nurasalam, 2020) *cyberbullying* and were willing to sign *informed consent* when collecting data in the study.

Data collection was carried out in two stages, namely *pretest* and *posttest* using an instrument in the form of a *cyberbullying level questionnaire* from Williard's theory which includes 6 aspects, *flaming, harassment, degenigration, impersonation, outing & trickery, and exclusion*. The questionnaire has gone through a validity and reliability test from previous researchers totaling 25 questions and using a likert scale that has been modified into four alternative answer options by eliminating the neutral option. This instrument is designed to measure the frequency and intensity of *cyberbullying* experiences experienced by respondents.

The intervention provided was in the form of *cognitive behaviour therapy* (CBT) which was carried out in six sessions, with a duration of each session of about 90 minutes. Each session consists of stages of assessing the psychological condition of the respondents, cognitive interventions to identify and reconstruct negative thoughts, behavioral therapy to change maladaptive responses, evaluation of therapy progress, reinforcement to prevent recurrence, and termination as the closure of the intervention process. During the implementation of therapy, the researcher used observation sheets and field notes to systematically record respondent participation and the dynamics of the therapy process.

It is carried out through the process of organizing and grouping data into patterns, categories, and basic information units, thus allowing researchers to identify key themes and formulate work hypotheses based on the findings obtained (Surahman et al., 2016)

The data analysis techniques used in this study are descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the distribution of cyberbullying level data before and after the intervention, such as mean scores, media, and standard deviations. For inferential analysis, previously the data were tested first to determine the distribution of normality using the *Kolmogrov Smirnov test*. Based on the results of the test, the appropriate statistical analysis method was chosen, namely the *Wilcoxon Signed Rank test* because the data was not distributed normally. The analysis was carried out using SPSS version 26, with a significance level of 0.05.

## Results

This study will be held in April 2025 at SMP Kanisius 1 Surakarta, which is located in the city of Surakarta, Central Java Province, Indonesia. This school is one of the private educational institutions located in urban areas, with adequate learning facilities and internet access. This location was chosen based on prevalence data from the Kakak Foundation, an institution engaged in child protection and advocacy for adolescent rights, which noted that Kanisius 1 Surakarta Junior High School has the highest number of *cyberbullying* cases compared to other schools in the Surakarta area, which is 26 cases in the past year.

## Sample Characteristics

This research was conducted during April 2025 with a sample of 78 adolescents consisting of boys and girls, early adolescent age from 12-15 years old. The aspects of respondents covered in it were age and gender.

**Table 2 Frequency Distribution of Respondents**

Variable	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	43	55,1
Women	35	44,9
Total	78	100%
<b>Age</b>		
12 years	10	12,8
13 years	45	57,7
14 years	17	21,8
15 years	8	7,7
Total	78	100%

According to the data in table 3, the characteristics of respondents at SMP Kanisius 1 Surakarta show that the male gender is more dominant with a percentage of 55.1% compared to women with a percentage of 44.9%. Meanwhile, the age characteristics of the respondents showed the dominant age of 13 years with 57.1%, followed by adolescents aged 14 years with a percentage of 21.8%, adolescents aged 12 years with a percentage of 12.8% and finally adolescents aged 15 years with a percentage of 7.7%.

In this study, respondents consisted of 78 adolescents aged 12-15 years who had been identified as experiencing *cyberbullying*. This age is a critical developmental period in which adolescents are very sensitive to social acceptance and are forming self-identity. Studies show that adolescents in this age range have a high risk of becoming victims of *cyberbullying*, especially due to the increasing use of social media and digital devices in daily life.

Most of the respondents were also recorded to be active in using social media and digital devices every day. The high intensity of internet use has the potential to increase exposure to negative content and psychologically harmful interactions, such as *cyberbullying*. Research shows that media exposure to antisocial content contributes to an increase in *cyberbullying* among adolescents.(Hamer et al., 2020)

In terms of gender, both adolescent girls and boys show vulnerability to *emotionally or socially* motivated *cyberbullying*, such as *online* exclusion or derogatory comments. In contrast, adolescent boys tend to experience more direct and explicit forms of *cyberbullying*, such as ridicule or threats. Research shows that women are more vulnerable to the psychological effects of *cyberbullying*, including an increased risk of depression and anxiety.(Yang et al., 2021)

In addition, the study also found that adolescent girls who are victims of *cyberbullying* are more likely to seek social support as a coping strategy, especially when they have high self-awareness and support from parents. This shows the importance of the role of individual and environmental factors in helping adolescents cope with *cyberbullying* (Espino et al., 2023).

### 3.2 Univariate analysis

Univariate analysis was used so that the variables for measuring *pretest* and *posttest* scores at *cyberbullying* levels were known.

**Table 3 Distribution of Cyberbullying Level Categories**

Categories	n	%
<b>Pretest</b>		
Low	49	62,8%
Medium	29	37,2%

Height	0	0%
Total	78	100%
<b>Posttest</b>		
Low	65	83,3%
Medium	13	16,7%
Height	0	0%
Total	78	100%

Description : Height : 75-100  
 Low : 25-49  
 Medium : 50-74

Based on table 4, it is known that before the intervention was given (*pretest*), most of the respondents were in the category of low *cyberbullying* level, which was 49 people (62.8%). Meanwhile, as many as 29 respondents (37.2%) were in the medium category, and there were no respondents in the high category (0%). After the intervention was given (*posttest*), there was an increase in the number in the low category to 65 people (83.3%) and a decrease in the medium category to 13 people (16.7%). Just like during *the pretest*, none of the respondents were in the high category. This change shows that the interventions carried out have a positive impact in reducing the level of *cyberbullying*. An increase in the percentage in the low category and a decrease in the moderate category indicated that respondents experienced an improvement in *cyberbullying*-related behaviors or experiences after *the cognitive behaviour therapy intervention* was administered.

**Table 4 Pretest and Posttest Scores of Cyberbullying Rates in Adolescents**

Categories	N	Minimum	Maximum	Red
Pretest	78	27	74	46.90
Posttest	78	28	62	41.73

In table 5, there was a decrease in the average score of 46.90 to 41.73, which indicates a decrease in *cyberbullying rates after cognitive behaviour therapy interventions*.

Based on the results of filling out the questionnaire on the level of *cyberbullying* given before and after the *cognitive behaviour therapy intervention*, it was found that in general, the level of *cyberbullying* experienced by the respondents showed a decrease after the intervention was given;

Before being given an intervention, the majority of respondents reported *experiencing cyberbullying* in the form of receiving insulting messages, being humiliated online, and experiencing exclusion in social media groups. This has an impact on the emotional state of the respondents, such as feelings of shame, anger, sadness, and even withdrawal from the social environment.

After being given *cognitive behaviour therapy* interventions, respondents showed improved ability to manage emotional responses to *cyberbullying* levels, as well as being able to distinguish between unrealistic facts and negative thoughts. *Cognitive behaviour therapy* allows respondents to be aware of harmful mindsets, replace them with healthier mindsets, and develop social skills in dealing with a digital environment that is not always supportive.

### Bivariate analysis

This study used the wilcoxon test to analyze the effectiveness of *cognitive behaviour therapy*, because the data was not distributed normally. This method is to determine the difference in *cyberbullying* score before and after *cognitive behavior therapy* interventions.

**Table 5 Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test Results**

Z	-4.405
Asymp. Sig. (2-tails)	0.000

The significance value obtained based on *the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test* is 0.000. Since the value is smaller than the set significance level ( $\alpha = 0.005$ ), it can be concluded that the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected. Thus, there was a statistically significant difference between the level of *cyberbullying* before and after the intervention. This shows that the interventions provided have a significant influence on reducing the level of *cyberbullying* in respondents.

The findings are in line with a study conducted by , which shows that Chillemi et al. (2020) *cognitive behaviour therapy* (CBT)-based programs can improve adolescents' understanding of effective coping skills in dealing with *cyberbullying*, as well as increase their likelihood of seeking help when they are victims.

In addition, a study by , found that YÜKSEL & ÇEKİÇ (2019) *cognitive behaviour therapy-based cyberbullying* prevention programs significantly reduced *cyberbullying behaviors among junior high school students*.

Descriptively, this change shows that adolescents who previously felt helpless or depressed due to *cyberbullying*, become better able to control their reactions, more confident in socializing, and more resistant to psychological pressure from digital media. These findings reinforce the understanding that *cognitive behaviour therapy* is not only effective in the context of depression or anxiety, but is also applied to reduce the negative impact of digital social experiences such as *cyberbullying*.

### Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the results of a study conducted on 65 adolescents at SMP Kanisius 1 Surakarta who experienced *cyberbullying*, evidence was obtained that *cognitive behaviour therapy* (CBT) interventions were effective in reducing the level of *cyberbullying*. The average score of *the cyberbullying* rate decreased from 46.90 during *the pretest* to 41.73 during *the posttest*, with a difference of 5.17 points. The results of *the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test* showed a significance value ( $p < 0.005$ ), which indicates that the decline did not occur by chance, but as a result of the intervention.

In addition, respondents also reported an improvement in psychosocial skills after participating in a CBT session. Some of the positive changes recorded include: the ability to manage emotions better, a more rational mindset in dealing with negative situations, and increased confidence in dealing with pressure on social media.

Thus, it can be concluded that *cognitive behavior therapy* has a significant effect on reducing the level of *cyberbullying* in adolescents.

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