

## The Construction of Maladjustment and Self-Control on Bullying Coping Mechanisms among Adolescents in Palu City

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Bullying among adolescents remains prevalent, especially in Palu City, which from 2018–2022 had the highest violence rates in Central Sulawesi. Incidents often occur in schools like SMP Negeri 14 and 7. Coping mechanisms particularly maladjustment and self-control play crucial roles in how adolescents respond to psychosocial stress and bullying. **Objective:** To analyze the effects of maladjustment and self-control on bullying coping mechanisms among adolescents. **Method:** A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among 440 students at SMP Negeri 14 Palu. Using proportionate stratified random sampling, 81 respondents were selected. Data were analyzed through univariate analysis and logistic regression. **Result and Discussion:** Simultaneous analysis showed maladjustment and self-control significantly influence bullying coping mechanisms among adolescents at SMP Negeri 14 Palu. Their combination better predicts coping than models without predictors, explaining strategy variation. Consistent with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, high maladjustment and low self-control heighten negative appraisals, limit emotional regulation, and increase the likelihood of maladaptive responses such as avoidance, aggression, or withdrawal when facing bullying. **Conclusions:** Maladjustment increases adolescents' vulnerability to the impacts of bullying, whereas self-control protects by promoting regulated emotions, rational thinking, and adaptive coping strategies in dealing with social pressures.

## **Introduction**

Bullying and school violence among adolescents are global social issues that have become major concerns for researchers, policymakers, and the wider community. The report *Behind the Numbers: Ending School Violence and Bullying*, published by UNICEF and UNESCO, emphasizes that school violence in its various forms—verbal, physical, and psychological remains high and significantly impacts children's right to a safe and inclusive education (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2019). This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, particularly Target 16.2, which emphasizes ending all forms of violence against children, including bullying (WHO, 2024).

Global data indicate that bullying is widespread among adolescents. According to the *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020*, about one in three students aged 11–15 experienced bullying in the past month, with prevalence rates of 35% for boys and 30% for girls (WHO, 2020). Meta-analytic studies show similar figures, with an average of 36% of adolescents experiencing bullying victimization, while in some countries prevalence can exceed 65% (Biswas et al., 2020). These data suggest that over 200 million adolescents worldwide have experienced violence or bullying in school settings (WHO, 2025). In Indonesia, although specific data for cities such as Palu are still limited, global trends indicate a relatively high prevalence of bullying, especially in secondary schools. Bullying negatively affects learning concentration, school attendance, mental health, and adolescents' psychological well-being (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, local research at SMP Negeri 14 Palu is important to support the development of evidence-based interventions and policies tailored to local cultural, social, and school conditions, enabling more effective prevention and management strategies against bullying.

Adolescent bullying is a form of violence commonly occurring in schools and involves unwanted aggression. Its three main characteristics include: (1) intentionality, (2) repetition, and (3) an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim (Olweus, 2013; Gladden et al., 2024). Bullying occurs when someone intentionally and repeatedly harms another by exploiting power disparities, leaving the victim unable to defend themselves (Ahmed, 2022). Within this dynamic, two primary roles exist perpetrator and victim although some individuals may experience both (Olweus, 2013).

Recent statistics reveal a significant increase in bullying cases in Indonesia over the past three years: 194 cases in 2022, rising to 285 in 2023, and further increasing to 573 in 2024. Data from SIMFONI PPA also show that Palu consistently recorded the highest rates of violence against women and children in Central Sulawesi from 2018–2022, with 123 cases in 2019, 58 in 2020, 103 in 2021, and 94 in 2022, including bullying incidents (KemenPPA, 2023). Bullying is frequent in Palu, particularly among school-aged adolescents, as seen at SMP Negeri 14 and SMP Negeri 7.

Although bullying has been extensively studied globally, research specifically analysing the relationship between maladjustment and self-control in relation to bullying coping mechanisms in Indonesia especially in Palu City remains limited. Understanding these factors is essential for designing interventions tailored to local contexts. Such research is urgently needed as it can enrich the national scientific literature, support evidence-based prevention efforts, and provide practical guidance for teachers, counsellors, and policymakers in protecting adolescents' psychosocial well-being.

Maladjustment refers to an individual's inability to appropriately adjust their thoughts, emotions, behaviours, or physiological responses to environmental demands, negatively affecting well-being (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). The theory of self-control

explains that individuals feel capable of regulating themselves when their environment provides order and structure; conversely, chaotic conditions threaten this sense of control (DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008). Low self-control makes individuals more vulnerable to negative external influences, hampers emotional and behavioural regulation, and increases the risk of involvement in bullying.

An important aspect of understanding bullying is the coping mechanisms individuals use to manage stress. In this context, maladjustment and self-control are key factors that may mediate the relationship between psychosocial pressures and involvement in bullying (R. F. Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994).

The findings of this study are expected to help schools design evidence-based guidance and counselling programs by considering psychological factors that influence adolescents' ability to cope with bullying. They may also serve as a reference for policymakers in developing anti-bullying policies that support adolescents' mental well-being. Ultimately, these findings are anticipated to make a positive contribution to developing more effective prevention and intervention strategies against bullying, both at the school level and within national education policies.

## **Method**

This study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design to analyse the relationship between maladjustment and self-control on bullying coping mechanisms among adolescents. The research site was purposively selected based on recent bullying cases in Palu City, particularly at SMP Negeri 14 Palu.

The study population comprised all students of SMP Negeri 14 Palu, totalling 440 individuals. Based on sample size calculations, 81 students were selected as respondents. Sampling was carried out using a simple random sampling technique, with inclusion criteria covering students from grades VII, VIII, and IX.

The research instruments consisted of questionnaires incorporating several measurement scales. Maladjustment was assessed using a mental health subscale developed by Wang, (1997) which includes five items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (serious), with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. Self-control was measured using a scale developed by Maloney *et al* (2012), comprising seven items rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and demonstrated good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.63 (Luo *et al*, 2021). Coping mechanisms were assessed using the *Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced* (COPE) Inventory developed by (Carver, 1997).

Data analysis began with the collection of secondary data from the local Education Office and school administrative records. Subsequently, primary data were gathered through questionnaires completed by the selected respondents. The collected data were processed statistically using JASP (*Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program*). Analyses were conducted in stages, starting with univariate analysis to examine frequency distributions, followed by logistic regression to test the effects of maladjustment and self-control on bullying coping mechanisms among adolescents.

## Result and Discussion

Based on the results of the study conducted on adolescents at SMP Negeri 14 Palu, as shown in the following table

**Table 1**  
 Distribution frequency of research variables

| No | Variable                          | Frequency | Percentage |
|----|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1  | <b>Maladjustment</b>              |           |            |
|    | • Experiencing                    | 52        | 64.2       |
|    | • Not Experiencing                | 29        | 35.8       |
| 2  | <b>Self-control</b>               |           |            |
|    | • Low                             | 41        | 50.6       |
|    | • High                            | 40        | 49.4       |
| 3  | <b>Bullying Coping Mechanisms</b> |           |            |
|    | • Maladaptive                     | 51        | 63         |
|    | • Adaptive                        | 30        | 37         |

The descriptive analysis in Table 1 shows that, out of 81 respondents, the majority had a high level of maladjustment, namely 52 respondents (64.2%), while only 29 respondents (35.8%) reported low maladjustment. Meanwhile, 41 respondents (50.6%) were found to have low self-control, and 40 respondents (49.4%) had high self-control. In addition, more than half of the respondents, namely 51 students (63%), were classified as having low coping mechanisms toward bullying, while only 30 students (37%) demonstrated high coping mechanisms.

These findings indicate that most adolescents at SMP Negeri 14 Palu face challenges in adjusting to social pressures as well as in regulating their emotions and behaviour, which in turn affects their ability to select adaptive coping strategies in response to bullying. This condition aligns with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which emphasizes that coping responses to social stressors are influenced by individuals' appraisals of the situation and the resources available to them.

The results of the Hosmer and Lemeshow's Goodness of Fit Test showed a chi-square value of 0.532 with a significance level of 0.970 ( $>0.05$ ). This indicates that the logistic regression model developed in this study is appropriate and adequately fits the data to predict coping mechanisms for bullying. Moreover, the Nagelkerke R Square value of 0.531 shows that the combination of *maladjustment* and *self-control* explains approximately 53.1% of the variance in adolescents' coping mechanisms against bullying. This finding demonstrates that internal psychological factors such as the ability to adapt to social stress (maladjustment) and to regulate emotions and behaviour (self-control) significantly shape how adolescents respond to bullying situations. However, the remaining 46.9% of the variance is influenced by other factors outside the model, such as social support from peers and teachers, the normative climate of the school, and family experiences or parenting styles. Previous studies emphasize that these contextual variables play an important role in strengthening resilience and developing adaptive coping strategies in bullying contexts (Carver, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Smith, Thompson, & Robinson, 2023). The implication is that while interventions focusing on strengthening self-regulation and reducing maladjustment are crucial, a broader approach is also needed. Efforts should include improving school norms, building supportive peer networks, and engaging families to create a more comprehensive strategy for preventing the negative impacts of bullying.

Table 2 shows the results of the simultaneous test, where the Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients produced a chi-square value of 39.904 with a p-value of 0.000 ( $<0.05$ ). This indicates that, simultaneously, maladjustment and self-control have a significant effect on bullying coping mechanisms among adolescents at SMP Negeri 14 Palu. These findings reinforce the assumption that poor adaptation to social demands and weak self-control together increase the likelihood of choosing ineffective coping strategies, such as avoidance, aggression, or withdrawal.

The partial test results presented in Table 2 also show that the variable maladjustment has a significant effect on coping mechanisms ( $p = 0.000$ ). Adolescents with high maladjustment have 7.9 times greater odds of adopting maladaptive coping strategies compared to those with good adjustment. Likewise, self-control has a significant effect on coping mechanisms ( $p = 0.000$ ). Adolescents with low self-control are 7.8 times more likely to choose ineffective coping strategies than those with high self-control.

This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that maladjustment makes it difficult for adolescents to understand social expectations and regulate emotions, making them more vulnerable to stress from bullying and more inclined to adopt non-constructive strategies. Conversely, low self-control limits students' ability to manage negative impulses when facing conflict or social pressure, thereby increasing the likelihood of selecting responses that exacerbate the situation.

**Table 2**  
Results of Partial Test and Simultaneous Test

| Variable                      | Sig   | Partial test |                                 | Simultaneous test |       |
|-------------------------------|-------|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------|
|                               |       | Exp B        | 95% CI for exp B<br>Lower-Upper | Che-square        | Sig   |
| Internet use addiction        | 0.001 | 7.978        | 2.283 – 27.884                  | 39.904            | 0.000 |
| Family communication patterns | 0.003 | 7.849        | 2.060 – 29.915                  |                   |       |

Maladjustment in adolescents, understood as difficulty in emotional and social adaptation to environmental demands, makes bullying victims more vulnerable to prolonged psychological distress. This condition triggers chronic stress responses and changes in affective-cognitive functioning, which subsequently influence coping strategy choices. Coping mechanisms themselves are not fixed traits but rather cognitive-behavioural processes activated by appraisal of stressors; when adolescents perceive their internal or external resources as insufficient, they tend to resort to avoidance or withdrawal strategies that are less adaptive. This explanation aligns with the transactional model of stress and coping proposed by (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Consistent with this theory, cross-national studies have found that bullying victims with high levels of maladjustment more frequently employ internalizing coping strategies (e.g., emotional withdrawal, resignation) and avoidance, whereas problem-focused or support-seeking strategies are less common among adolescents with high maladjustment (Ma *et al*, 2020). These findings support the view that maladjustment is not only a consequence of bullying but also a factor shaping adaptive or maladaptive coping pathways (Wang *et al*, 2023). Protective factors such as self-regulation/self-control, social support, and school bonding can mitigate the effects of maladjustment on maladaptive coping. Recent studies emphasize that self-regulation serves as a mediator between bullying and psychological outcomes; interventions targeting emotional

regulation and problem-solving skills have been shown to reduce the impact of maladjustment on coping strategies (Liu *et al*, 2024; Ye *et al*, 2024).

The results of this study further highlight the importance of addressing maladjustment in efforts to prevent the negative effects of bullying. Logistic regression analysis showed that maladjustment significantly influenced bullying coping mechanisms among students at SMP Negeri 14 Palu, with an odds ratio (Exp B) of 7.9. This indicates that adolescents with high maladjustment were nearly eight times more likely to choose coping strategies that exacerbate bullying situations than their well-adjusted peers. This finding is consistent with evidence that maladjustment weakens adolescents' ability to manage stress, thereby increasing the likelihood of using maladaptive coping such as avoidance, withdrawal, or venting frustration through aggression (Santrock, 2018). Other studies also show that individuals with high maladjustment tend to have lower resilience and are more likely to employ maladaptive coping strategies, ultimately increasing the risk of involvement in bullying, whether as victims or perpetrators (Jessor, 2014; Richaud *et al*, 2013). Therefore, school-based psychosocial interventions that strengthen adjustment skills, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies are essential to breaking the cycle of bullying and helping adolescents develop healthier coping mechanisms (Smith *et al*, 2023).

Self-control is an individual's ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviours so that they align with social norms and long-term goals. In the context of bullying, adolescents with high self-control are better able to evaluate situations calmly and choose adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support, reporting incidents, or managing emotions in healthy ways; conversely, low self-control often leads adolescents to react impulsively, for example through aggression or extreme withdrawal, which can worsen the impact of bullying (Barlett & Fennel, 2024; Cohen, 2023). The Self-Control Theory proposed by Gottfredson & Hirschi, (1990) explains that low self-control is associated with impulsive behaviour and a lack of consideration for long-term consequences, so adolescents with good self-control are more capable of regulating emotions and applying constructive problem-solving strategies (Ismail *et al*, 2023). Empirical studies also show that self-regulation acts as a mediator in the relationship between bullying and depression, anxiety, or psychological distress; adolescents with higher self-control are better able to cope with bullying-related stress through healthy coping mechanisms (Kim *et al*, 2024; Zhou *et al*, 2023).

The findings of this study reinforce earlier evidence that self-control is an important protective factor in dealing with social stressors such as bullying. Logistic regression analysis of students at SMP Negeri 14 Palu showed that self-control significantly influences coping mechanisms toward bullying, with an odds ratio (Exp(B)) of 7.8: adolescents with low self-control were almost eight times more likely to select maladaptive coping strategies than those with high self-control. Theoretically, these findings can be explained through self-regulation theory, which posits that the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviours determines how individuals respond to pressure (Baumeister *et al*, 2021). Adolescents with strong self-control tend to engage in cognitive reappraisal, manage negative emotions, and select problem-solving or social support strategies; conversely, low self-control makes adolescents more vulnerable to avoidance, aggression, or passive coping responses, which can intensify the psychological effects of bullying (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Recent studies also confirm this protective role: self-regulation has been shown to be a significant

mediator between bullying experiences and depressive symptoms or maladaptive behaviours (Liu *et al.*, 2024; Ye *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond individual aspects, contextual factors such as family support, school climate, and peer norms also influence the effectiveness of self-control in coping with bullying. Longitudinal studies reveal that low self-control among bullying victims increases the risk of both internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety and depression) and externalizing problems (e.g., aggression), while high self-control supported by an enabling environment reduces these risks (Chen *et al.*, 2024; Salmivalli *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2023). A meta-review of anti-bullying interventions also concludes that programs combining self-control enhancement with social skills and emotional regulation training are more effective in reducing the negative effects of bullying (Smith *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, comprehensive interventions that include emotion regulation, problem-solving, and empathy training, alongside fostering a supportive school climate, can help adolescents develop adaptive coping strategies and strengthen their resilience in dealing with bullying.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study conclude that maladjustment functions as a risk factor, while self-control serves as a protective factor in determining the direction of coping mechanisms among adolescents who experience bullying. In the context of students at SMP Negeri 14 Palu, this is evident from the finding that students who struggle to adjust to the school environment and have difficulty building positive relationships with peers or teachers tend to use maladaptive coping strategies, such as withdrawing, blaming themselves, or even responding with aggressive behaviour. This condition shows that maladjustment increases adolescents' vulnerability to the negative impacts of bullying.

Conversely, adolescents at SMP Negeri 14 Palu with high self-control demonstrate a different tendency. They are better able to regulate their emotions, think more rationally, and seek constructive solutions when facing bullying. For example, some students choose to talk to a guidance counsellor, seek support from peers, or attempt to resolve problems through dialogue, reflecting the use of adaptive coping strategies. This highlights the role of self-control as a "protective shield" that can mitigate the adverse effects of maladjustment.

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