

Teacher-student relationship quality as a protective mechanism against cyberbullying: a phenomenological approach among school adolescents

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Abstract: Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant psychological threat to adolescents in the digital era, contributing to anxiety, diminished self-esteem, social withdrawal, and impaired academic functioning. This study aims to examine how teacher-student relationship quality functions as a protective mechanism against the psychological consequences of cyberbullying among school adolescents. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved five participants aged 13–18 years who had experienced cyberbullying within the past year and were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, field notes, and a reflexive journal, and were analyzed using thematic phenomenological procedures, including transcription, coding, categorization, and theme development. The findings identified four major themes: psychological safety at school, emotional validation from teachers, willingness to disclose victimization experiences, and the development of resilience and adaptive coping strategies. Teachers who demonstrated warmth, responsiveness, and non-judgmental attitudes were perceived as secondary attachment figures who assisted students in regulating emotional distress and reframing their victimization experiences, thereby encouraging help-seeking behaviors and reducing feelings of helplessness. The study concludes that teacher-student relationship quality plays a crucial protective role in mitigating the psychological consequences of cyberbullying, highlighting the importance of strengthening relational interactions within schools as a preventive mental health strategy for adolescents in the digital era.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has shifted adolescents' social interactions from physical environments to virtual spaces. Social media, instant messaging applications, and content-sharing platforms enable communication to occur without spatial and temporal boundaries. However, these advancements have also generated new forms of aggression, particularly cyberbullying. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying possesses distinct characteristics, including perpetrator anonymity, rapid dissemination of information, and repeated exposure that is difficult for victims to control. Consequently, cyberbullying constitutes a form of psychological violence with significant impacts on adolescents' mental health, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Kowalski et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). Studies in Indonesia likewise indicate that victims of cyberbullying experience psychological distress, impaired concentration, and reduced learning engagement, which subsequently affect their academic and social functioning (Sari & Suryanto, 2016; Putri & Handayani, 2020).

School represents an important developmental context for adolescents, functioning not only as an academic setting but also as a socio-emotional environment. Teachers hold a strategic role as both authority figures and secondary attachment figures for students. Positive teacher–student relationship quality contributes to psychological safety, open communication, and students’ willingness to report problems they encounter (Roorda et al., 2011). Within the Indonesian context, warm interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are associated with students’ psychological well-being, learning engagement, and social adjustment at school (Rasyid et al., 2020; Wulandari & Fauziah, 2019). Conversely, distant and rigid relationships tend to discourage students from disclosing their victimization experiences, including cyberbullying, due to fear of blame or disbelief (Pratama & Setyawan, 2021).

Teacher–student relationships may function as a protective mechanism against the negative consequences of cyberbullying. When students feel understood, heard, and validated by teachers, they are more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies and psychological resilience. Emotional support from teachers helps victims reduce feelings of helplessness and enhances self-efficacy in confronting threatening social situations (Longobardi et al., 2019). National studies have also demonstrated that teacher support decreases the risk of involvement in bullying behavior and victimization, as students perceive the presence of a “safe adult” within the school environment (Wiguna & Kurniawati, 2018; Safaria et al., 2016). Previous studies have also indicated that academic anxiety, learning motivation, and emotional intelligence are associated with students’ academic achievement, underscoring the importance of emotional support and a supportive educational environment in assisting learners to manage psychological stress (Dipsatara, 2022). Therefore, the quality of teacher–student interaction functions not merely as an educational factor but also as a protective factor for adolescent mental health.

Although research on cyberbullying in Indonesia has continued to grow, most studies have focused on prevalence, individual risk factors, or perpetrator characteristics. Investigations exploring victims’ subjective experiences in relation to teacher–student relationships remain limited, particularly through a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology enables researchers to understand the meaning of victims’ lived experiences in depth, how they interpret the presence of teachers as a source of psychological protection. Accordingly, this study aims to explore teacher–student relationship quality as a protective mechanism against cyberbullying through the subjective experiences of school adolescents.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of adolescent victims of cyberbullying in interpreting their relationships with teachers at school. A phenomenological approach was selected because it focuses on participants’ lived experiences, enabling researchers to capture the essence of psychological experiences that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measures. The study was conducted with secondary school students (junior and senior high school or equivalent) who had experienced cyberbullying within the past year. The researcher served as the primary instrument (human instrument), directly involved in data collection and interpretation through interpersonal interaction with the participants.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (1) adolescents aged 13–18 years, (2) having experienced cyberbullying via social media, messaging applications, or other digital platforms, (3) willingness to openly share their experiences, and (4) parental or guardian consent. The number of participants ranged from five to seven individuals or until data saturation was achieved. The participants were recruited from urban secondary schools. Participants were recruited

through school counselors who helped identify students who had experienced cyberbullying. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online, guided by open-ended questions exploring cyberbullying experiences, emotional responses, and perceptions of teacher support and relationship quality. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. To enhance data richness, the researcher also employed field notes and a reflexive journal.

Data analysis followed thematic phenomenological procedures, including verbatim transcription, repeated reading, open coding, categorization of codes, and the development of essential themes representing participants' experiences. Research trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, and confirmability strategies, including member checking with participants, peer debriefing among researchers, and maintaining an audit trail documenting the analytical process. Ethical considerations were also addressed by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, and allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Forms of Cyberbullying Experienced	Duration of Experience
P1	Woman	14 years	Instagram	± 4 months
P2	Woman	16 years	WhatsApp Group	± 8 months
P3	Man	15 years	Instagram	± 3 months
P4	Woman	15 years	TikTok	± 5 months
P5	Woman	16 years	Instagram	± 4 months

RESULT

Analysis of the interview data revealed four major themes describing how teacher–student relationships helped students cope with cyberbullying: (1) psychological safety at school, (2) emotional validation from teachers, (3) courage to disclose victimization experiences, and (4) teachers as secondary attachment figures. Collectively, these themes illustrate how supportive teacher interactions function as a protective mechanism that alleviates the psychological burden experienced by students facing cyberbullying. Participants frequently described teachers as sources of emotional comfort and stability during distressing situations. When teachers demonstrated warmth, consistency, and responsiveness, students reported feeling more secure and better able to regulate negative emotions arising from online victimization. In contrast, distant or rigid relationships tended to encourage avoidance and silence, leading students to conceal their experiences (Roorda et al., 2011). These findings suggest that the quality of teacher–student relationships plays an important role in strengthening students’ resilience and coping capacity when confronting cyberbullying.

The emergence of psychological safety and the willingness to disclose victimization experiences further highlights the importance of emotionally supportive school environments. Psychological safety refers to individuals’ perceptions that they can express themselves without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or blame (Edmondson, 1999; Longobardi et al., 2019). In this study, students were more willing to report cyberbullying when they perceived their teachers as open, attentive, and non-judgmental. Under such conditions, teachers function not only as academic authorities but also as sources of emotional reassurance. As a result, the school environment becomes a protective space where students feel supported in addressing difficult experiences. These findings indicate that reporting behavior is influenced not only by the severity of cyberbullying incidents but also by the level of trust and relational security students experience with their teachers.

The themes of emotional validation and resilience development further demonstrate how teacher support helps students interpret and cope with cyberbullying experiences. Victims often experience negative cognitive and emotional reactions such as shame, self-blame, and diminished self-esteem (Patchin, 2018). When teachers respond with empathy and understanding, students are better able to reinterpret these experiences in a more constructive way. Such support encourages students to move from maladaptive coping strategies such as withdrawal or retaliation toward more adaptive responses, including seeking help, setting boundaries online, and managing their social media use. Through these processes, teacher support contributes to the strengthening of students’ psychological resilience and their ability to manage the emotional consequences of cyberbullying.

Table 2. Major Themes and Psychological Meanings of Teacher Support in Students’ Cyberbullying Experiences

No.	Major Theme	Psychological Meaning	Participant Experience Indicators
1	Psychological Safety at School	Students perceived the school environment as emotionally secure, enabling them to re-engage in social interactions without fear.	Feeling comfortable in the classroom; absence of fear when meeting peers; willingness to return to school.
2	Emotional Validation from Teachers	Teachers provided empathy, active listening, and non-judgmental responses, which validated victims’ emotional experiences.	Teachers listened attentively; expressed verbal support; demonstrated genuine concern.
3	Courage to Disclose Victimization Experiences	Supportive teacher figures encouraged help-seeking behavior and facilitated open disclosure of cyberbullying experiences.	Reporting incidents to homeroom teachers or counselors; sharing personal experiences; seeking assistance.
4	Teacher as a Secondary Attachment Figure	Teachers were perceived as alternative secure attachment figures who contributed to emotional regulation and psychological comfort.	Seeking teachers when distressed; feeling calmer after conversations; trusting teachers with personal concerns.

Psychological Safety at School

A central theme emerging from the interviews was students' perception that supportive teachers created a sense of psychological safety within the school environment. Participants described feeling calmer and more comfortable attending school when they knew that a teacher was willing to listen and protect them. This sense of safety helped students overcome fear and anxiety that often followed online harassment.

One participant explained:

"After I told my teacher what happened on Instagram, I felt much safer in class. I knew someone at school understood what I was going through." (P3)

Another participant reported that teacher support reduced their reluctance to attend school:

"Before talking to my teacher, I was afraid to meet my classmates. But after that conversation, I felt more relaxed and not as worried anymore." (P1)

These accounts indicate that teacher support contributed to an emotionally secure school atmosphere where students could continue their academic and social activities despite experiencing cyberbullying.

Emotional Validation from Teachers

Participants also emphasized the importance of emotional validation from teachers. Students valued teachers who listened attentively, acknowledged their feelings, and responded without blaming or minimizing their experiences. Such responses helped students feel understood and supported.

One participant stated:

"My teacher didn't judge me. She just listened and said that what I experienced was not something I deserved." (P4)

Another participant described how empathy from a teacher helped reduce feelings of isolation:

"When my teacher said that my feelings were valid, I felt relieved. It was the first time someone really understood how hurt I was." (P2)

These experiences suggest that emotional validation helped students process negative emotions associated with cyberbullying, including shame, sadness, and anger.

Courage to Disclose Victimization Experiences

Supportive teacher relationships also encouraged students to disclose their cyberbullying experiences. Several participants reported that they initially hesitated to report incidents due to fear of being blamed or ignored. However, when teachers demonstrated openness and concern, students became more willing to seek help.

One participant shared:

"At first I wanted to keep it to myself, but my homeroom teacher asked if something was wrong. That made me brave enough to tell the story." (P5)

Similarly, another student explained:

"Knowing that my teacher would listen made it easier to talk about what happened in the WhatsApp group." (P2)

These findings indicate that trust in teachers played a key role in transforming silence into help-seeking behavior.

Teacher as a Secondary Attachment Figure

Another prominent theme was the perception of teachers as figures who provided emotional comfort similar to trusted adults. Students described approaching teachers when feeling distressed and experiencing relief after conversations with them.

One participant noted:

“When things online became overwhelming, talking to my teacher made me feel calmer.” (P1)

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

“Sometimes I feel my teacher understands me better than others. After talking to her, I didn’t feel alone anymore.” (P4)

These narratives suggest that teachers functioned as important sources of emotional stability during difficult experiences related to cyberbullying.

Overall, this study highlights that efforts to address cyberbullying should not rely solely on disciplinary policies or technological monitoring, but also require a relational approach within the school environment. The findings demonstrate that supportive teacher–student relationships play an important role in helping students cope with cyberbullying by fostering psychological safety, emotional validation, and the confidence to disclose their experiences. When teachers build warm and trusting interactions with students, these relationships function not only as part of the learning process but also as a form of preventive psychological support that strengthens students’ resilience and sense of security. In this way, the study contributes to filling a gap in previous Indonesian research, which has predominantly focused on prevalence and individual risk factors, by emphasizing that relational dimensions particularly teacher–student relationships are crucial in protecting adolescent mental health in the digital era.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that the quality of teacher–student relationships constitutes a significant protective factor against the psychological consequences of cyberbullying among school adolescents. Warm, consistent, and responsive interactions enable students to experience emotional security within the school environment, thereby preventing them from confronting digital victimization in isolation. These results extend prior literature emphasizing the critical role of interpersonal relationships in promoting students’ psychological well-being. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study provides in-depth insight into how adolescents interpret teacher support as a source of strength and stability when navigating social pressures in digital spaces.

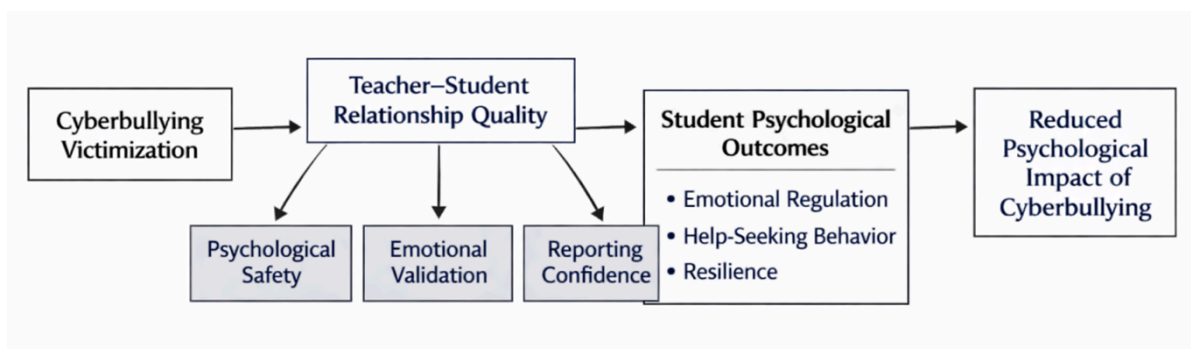


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Teacher–Student Relationships in Mitigating Cyberbullying Impact

From the perspective of attachment theory, teachers may function as secondary attachment figures who provide a secure base during threatening experiences such as cyberbullying. When educators demonstrate empathy, availability, and openness, students are more likely to develop secure attachment patterns that enhance emotional regulation capacities. Conversely, distant, rigid, or authoritarian relational styles may foster avoidant attachment tendencies, leading students to suppress or conceal their victimization experiences. These findings highlight that relational dynamics within the classroom exert direct influence on the coping strategies adolescents adopt in response to online conflict.

The emergence of psychological safety as a central theme further underscores the importance of emotionally secure school climates. When students perceive their teachers as non-judgmental and willing to listen, they feel safe to disclose experiences of cyberbullying without fear of humiliation or blame. Reporting behavior, therefore, is shaped not solely by the severity of the bullying incident but also by the quality of relational trust established in the classroom. Under such conditions, the school environment transcends its evaluative function and becomes a protective space that facilitates help-seeking and early intervention.

Emotional validation from teachers also plays a critical role in mitigating maladaptive cognitive responses associated with cyberbullying, including self-blame, shame, and diminished self-esteem. Empathic responses enable students to engage in cognitive reframing, allowing them to reinterpret their experiences without internalizing negative attributions. This process illustrates how relational support operates as a mediating mechanism linking adverse digital experiences with psychological recovery. Teacher validation thus not only alleviates immediate distress but also supports healthier self-perceptions and emotional resilience.

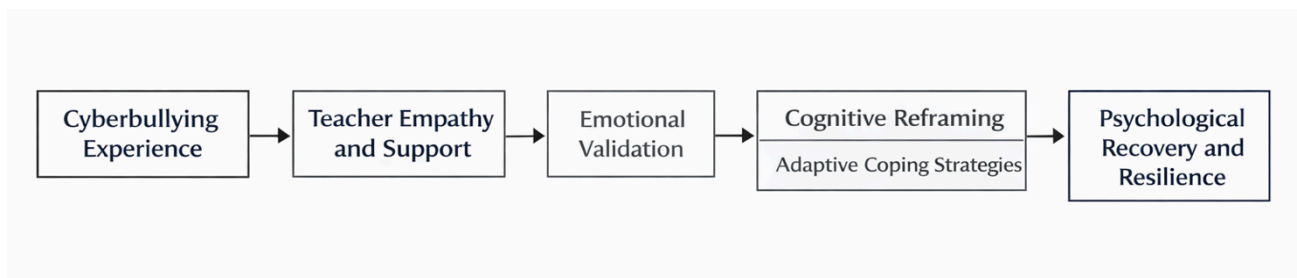


Figure 2. Mechanism of Teacher Support in Reducing Cyberbullying Harm

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that high-quality teacher–student relationships contribute to the strengthening of resilience. Resilience in this context should not be conceptualized merely as an inherent personality trait, but rather as a dynamic capacity cultivated through supportive interpersonal interactions. Students who perceive strong teacher support are more inclined to adopt adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking assistance, regulating social media engagement, and establishing healthy digital boundaries. These findings suggest that resilience is relationally constructed and reinforced through consistent experiences of empathy and guidance within the school setting.

The present findings are consistent with previous quantitative research demonstrating that supportive teacher–student relationships significantly reduce the negative psychological outcomes of bullying and cyberbullying. For instance, Longobardi et al. (2019) found that students who reported positive relationships with teachers experienced lower levels of depressive symptoms following online victimization. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Wang et al. (2020) indicated that teacher support serves as a protective social resource that buffers emotional distress caused by peer aggression. The current study extends these findings by providing qualitative evidence illustrating how students subjectively experience teacher support as a form of emotional protection.

Compared with prior research focusing primarily on peer dynamics in cyberbullying, this study highlights the relatively underexplored role of adult figures within school ecosystems. Many earlier studies emphasized peer norms, bystander behavior, and online social status as dominant determinants of cyberbullying experiences (Kowalski et al., 2014). However, the narratives gathered in this research demonstrate that adolescents frequently interpret teacher intervention as a stabilizing force when peer relationships become hostile. This suggests that adult authority figures remain highly influential despite the peer-centered nature of adolescent social environments.

Another important point emerging from this study relates to the mediating role of trust in encouraging disclosure. Previous research by Bauman and Del Rio (2016) reported that many students refrain from reporting cyberbullying because they fear

negative judgment or ineffective intervention from adults. In contrast, the present findings show that when teachers demonstrate empathy and confidentiality, students become significantly more willing to share their experiences. This indicates that the presence of trust transforms the reporting process from a perceived risk into a coping strategy.

The findings also resonate with ecological perspectives of adolescent development, particularly the framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which conceptualizes schools as critical social systems influencing psychological outcomes. Within this ecological structure, teachers represent key agents who shape students' sense of belonging and emotional safety. Research by Aldridge and McChesney (2018) further supports this perspective, showing that positive school climate and supportive teacher relationships are associated with reduced bullying involvement and improved student well-being. The current study reinforces the argument that relational climates within classrooms are central components of bullying prevention.

Furthermore, the role of emotional validation observed in this study aligns with trauma-informed educational approaches. Cyberbullying, particularly when persistent, may produce psychological responses similar to those found in interpersonal trauma, including anxiety, rumination, and diminished self-worth. According to research by Dorahy et al. (2017), validation from trusted adults helps victims reconstruct meaning and regain psychological stability. The accounts provided by participants in this study similarly demonstrate how teacher empathy enables students to reinterpret harmful online interactions without internalizing stigma.

It is also important to consider cultural and contextual factors influencing the findings. In collectivist societies, such as many Asian educational contexts, teachers are often perceived not only as academic instructors but also as moral guides and authority figures responsible for students' broader development. Studies conducted in Southeast Asia indicate that respectful and caring teacher interactions can significantly influence students' emotional adjustment and willingness to seek help (Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, the protective role of teachers identified in this research may be particularly salient within cultural environments that emphasize relational harmony and respect for educators.

Finally, the present study contributes to the growing body of research advocating relational approaches to digital safety education. Traditional cyberbullying interventions frequently prioritize surveillance technologies, disciplinary sanctions, or digital literacy programs. While these approaches remain valuable, scholars increasingly argue that relational trust within schools constitutes a critical but often overlooked protective mechanism (Cross et al., 2015). By illustrating how teacher empathy fosters psychological safety, the current findings suggest that strengthening interpersonal relationships should be considered a core component of comprehensive cyberbullying prevention strategies.

In conclusion, the study emphasizes that effective cyberbullying prevention and intervention strategies must extend beyond disciplinary enforcement and technological monitoring. While structural measures remain important, they are insufficient without parallel efforts to strengthen relational bonds between teachers and students. Professional development initiatives that enhance teachers' empathic communication, active listening, and relational responsiveness are essential in fostering psychologically safe learning environments. Positioning teacher–student relationships as a preventive mental health resource offers a sustainable framework for mitigating the long-term psychological impact of cyberbullying in the digital era..

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the quality of teacher–student relationships plays a crucial protective role in mitigating the psychological impact of cyberbullying among adolescents. Supportive, warm, and responsive interactions with teachers foster psychological safety, encourage students to disclose victimization experiences, and promote emotional validation. Through the lens of attachment and psychological safety, teachers function as secondary attachment figures who help students regulate distress and reinterpret negative online experiences in a more adaptive manner. Such support strengthens resilience and facilitates constructive coping strategies, including help-seeking behaviors and effective management of digital interactions. Therefore, addressing cyberbullying should not rely solely on disciplinary policies or technological supervision; instead, schools should prioritize nurturing positive relational climates and strengthening teacher–student connections as part of preventive mental health efforts in the digital era.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author conceptualized and designed the study, developed the research instruments, and obtained ethical clearance and participant consent. The author conducted participant recruitment, carried out in-depth interviews, and compiled field notes and a reflexive journal. Data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic phenomenological procedures by the author, followed by interpretation of findings and integration with relevant theoretical frameworks. The author also drafted, revised, and finalized the manuscript, approved the final version for publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the research.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and because the participants were minors, additional consent was secured from their parents or legal guardians. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the procedures used to ensure confidentiality. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Interview data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Throughout the research process, particular care was taken to minimize psychological discomfort, and participants were offered the opportunity to pause or discontinue the interview whenever they felt distressed.

DATA AND CODE AVAILABILITY

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and the need to protect participants' confidentiality, as the data contain sensitive personal narratives from minor participants. Anonymized excerpts of the interview data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with permission from the institutional ethics committee. No statistical code or software scripts were produced in this study because the analysis employed qualitative thematic phenomenological procedures conducted through manual coding and interpretative analysis.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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