

Healing Beyond Online Abuse: The Role of Forgiveness and Self-Esteem in Mental Health Among Victims of Cyber Dating Abuse

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Submitted: 2026-06-02 Revised: 2026-07-11 Published: 2026-08-13 Keywords: Forgiveness, Self-Esteem, Mental Health, Victims Of Cyber Dating Abuse Copyright holder: © Author/s (2026) This article is under:  How to cite: Nabu, N. F., & Huwae, A. (2026). Healing Beyond Online Abuse: The Role of Forgiveness and Self-Esteem in Mental Health Among Victims of Cyber Dating Abuse. <i>Bulletin of Counseling and Psychotherapy</i>, 8(2). https://doi.org/10.51214/002026082010000 Published by: Kuras Institute E-ISSN: 2656-1050	ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of violence in romantic relationships has become increasingly prevalent, particularly through the misuse of modern technology, which negatively affects victims' mental health, including the emergence of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This study aimed to identify the role of forgiveness and self-esteem as predictors of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. The study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design. The participants consisted of 122 adolescents aged 15–21 years who had experienced or were currently experiencing cyber dating abuse during the early, middle, or final stages of a romantic relationship. The sampling technique used in this study was accidental sampling. Data were collected using the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38). Multiple linear regression analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that forgiveness and self-esteem simultaneously served as significant predictors of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse ($F = 12.2$, $p < 0,001$). Specifically, forgiveness was found to be a significant negative predictor of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse ($t = -3.67$, $p < 0,001$). Similarly, self-esteem was also identified as a significant negative predictor of mental health ($t = -3.49$, $p < 0,001$). These findings suggest that individuals who experience cyber dating abuse require forgiveness toward the events they have experienced, accompanied by adequate self-esteem, as protective factors. These factors may help victims of cyber dating abuse maintain their mental health in daily life.
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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of social media and communication technologies in the digital era has significantly influenced how individuals form and maintain romantic relationships. However, this progress has also given rise to new forms of violence within relationships, namely cyber dating abuse. Cyber dating abuse refers to abusive behaviors perpetrated by a partner through technological devices or internet networks, such as issuing threats via text messages or phone calls, using social media without consent, disseminating private photos or videos with the intent to harm, and utilizing other technological tools to control a partner (Schokkenbroek, 2024).

Cyber dating abuse behaviors can be categorized into two primary forms: direct aggression and coercive control. Direct aggression includes acts intended to harm or hurt a partner, such as distributing private photos or videos without consent in a humiliating or sexually abusive manner, degrading a partner on social media, and sending threatening messages (Linares et al., 2021). Meanwhile, controlling behaviors involve excessive monitoring and control over a partner, such as surveilling a partner's personal social media accounts, repeatedly calling or messaging to track a partner's activities, and accessing a partner's email or social media passwords to continuously monitor their movements (Linares et al., 2021).

In 2022, the National Commission on Violence Against Women received 1.4% fewer reports of Gender-Based Cyber Violence (GBCV) than the previous year. In the personal sphere, 821 incidents of cyber violence were documented, most involving sexual abuse. Former intimate partners were the primary perpetrators (549 incidents), followed by current partners (230 incidents). In the public sphere, "social media acquaintances" accounted for the most cases, with 383 reports. However, service institutions reported an increase of 112 cases of cyber violence, mostly involving unidentified individuals, current partners, or former partners.

According to the Annual Report of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (CATAHU), 91 cases of dating violence involving digital technology were reported in 2020, compared to 97 cases in the previous year. The report identifies prevalent patterns of digital dating violence, such as coerced video call sex (VCS), pressure to send sexually explicit photos or videos, and threats to share intimate content on social media to force compliance. These forms of coercion often leave victims feeling powerless to refuse sexual demands or end the relationship (Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan, 2020).

The phenomenon of cyber dating abuse is generally driven by controlling and affective behaviors within romantic relationships, which are often misinterpreted as expressions of "proof of love" and a sense of "security" toward one's partner (Flach & Deslandes, 2019). In addition, other contributing factors include digital interactions, such as love scamming, post a picture (PAP), video call sex (VCS), ghosting, and zombieing, which frequently emerge in romantic relationships mediated by digital platforms (Caridade & Pinho, 2019). Furthermore, experiences of family violence, jealousy, low levels of digital ethics and literacy, individual personality traits, and the high intensity of digital interaction are also interrelated factors. This indicates that cyber dating abuse is influenced not only by individual aspects but also by environmental and socio-digital cultural factors (Yanti et al., 2023).

Individuals who experience cyber dating abuse continuously are at risk of developing various psychological problems. These can include diminished trust in others, anxiety, depression, and even posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This condition may also reduce self-confidence and lead individuals to feel a diminished sense of personal control (Hikmatunnazah & Kaloeti, 2022). Compared to other forms of dating violence, cyber dating abuse has a particularly significant impact on the development of depression. Perpetrators often employ harsh language, insults, and demeaning criticism to exert control over victims. These behaviors erode their self-confidence and self-esteem (Shukla et al., 2023). This decline in self-esteem not only affects victims' mental health but also impairs their ability to cope with problems and make appropriate decisions (Irmayanti & Zuroidah, 2024).

Mental health refers to an individual's psychological condition that reflects their capacity to adapt and cope with problems arising from both internal and external sources (Gautam et al., 2024). It encompasses how individuals think, feel, and behave efficiently and effectively when facing the various challenges and stressors encountered in daily life (Seely, 2018). Furthermore, mental health is also reflected in a state in which individuals do not experience dysfunction across psychological, emotional, behavioral, and social domains. In other words, mental health is a state of well-adjusted functioning and the absence of disturbances across multiple aspects of an individual's life (Gautam et al., 2024).

This study highlights two factors associated with mental health, namely forgiveness and self-esteem. These factors were selected because both play a significant role in influencing the mental condition of victims of cyber dating abuse. When individuals can positively value themselves and recognize their self-worth, this may facilitate the development of the ability to forgive the experiences they have undergone (Muariz et al., 2020). Among these factors, forgiveness is considered the primary variable, defined as an internal motivation to reconcile with one's circumstances without the desire for revenge (McCullough, 2008). This study is important and distinctive as it examines the psychological recovery of victims of cyber dating abuse through two variables, which are forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness, which helps release negative emotions such as resentment and guilt, and self-esteem, which serves as a natural protective factor against psychological stress and self-blaming thoughts (Camadan et al., 2023).

Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on the negative impacts of cyber dating abuse, this research explores the internal psychological empowerment of victims. The novelty of this study lies in its Indonesian context, which remains underexplored in the domain of cyber dating abuse, despite data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) indicating that the majority of perpetrators of online violence originate from personal relationships, such as current or former romantic partners (Komnas Perempuan, 2023). Additionally, a positive psychological approach that emphasizes healing factors, such as forgiveness and self-esteem, offers a new direction for more constructive and sustainable intervention efforts. Therefore, this study contributes not only theoretically but also practically to the development of relevant and contextual psychological approaches for victims of cyber dating abuse.

Study Aim and Hypothesis

This study aims to examine the predictive roles of forgiveness and self-esteem in mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. The hypothesis is that forgiveness and self-esteem simultaneously serve as predictors of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. The minor hypotheses consist of two propositions: first, forgiveness serves as a predictor of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse; second, self-esteem serves as a predictor of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design with multiple linear regression analysis to investigate whether forgiveness and self-esteem (independent variables) significantly predicted mental health (dependent variable) among victims of cyber dating abuse.

Participants

The population in this study included individuals who had experienced cyber dating abuse. The sample was selected using an accidental sampling technique. The inclusion criteria were adolescents aged 15-21 years who had experienced or were currently experiencing cyber dating abuse. This included those exposed to cyber dating abuse at the beginning, middle, or end of a romantic relationship. A total of 122 victims participated in this study. Their demographic data, including age, gender, and duration of exposure, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Participant Classification	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	37	29,6%
	Female	85	70,4%
	Total	122	100%

Age	15 years	14	11,5%
	16 years	16	13,1%
	17 years	20	16,4%
	18 years	22	18,0%
	19 years	20	16,4%
	20 years	16	13,1%
	21 years	14	11,5%
	Total	122	100%
The time frame during which cyber dating abuse is experienced	At the beginning of the relationship	32	26,2%
	In the middle of a relationship	53	43,4%
	At the end of the relationship	37	30,3%
	Total	122	100%

Instruments

Forgiveness

Forgiveness was measured using the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18) (McCullough et al., 2006). The instrument assesses an individual's motivational responses toward a person who has committed an interpersonal transgression. The TRIM-18 consists of 18 items distributed across three dimensions: avoidance (7 items), revenge (5 items), and benevolence (6 items). Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Indonesian version of the instrument adapted by Amajida et al. (2023) was used in this study. In the present study, all 18 items were retained, and the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .889$).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1965). The instrument assesses individuals' overall evaluation of their self-worth and self-acceptance. The RSES consists of 10 items, including five positively worded items and five negatively worded items, representing the dimensions of self-acceptance and self-respect. Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Inappropriate) to 4 (Strongly Appropriate). In the present study, all items were retained, and the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .838$).

Mental Health

Mental health was measured using the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38) (Veit & Ware, 1983). The instrument provides a comprehensive assessment of mental health by measuring two broad components: psychological well-being and psychological distress. The MHI-38 consists of 38 items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). In the present study, all 38 items were retained, and the instrument demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .951$).

Procedure

Data were collected using three psychological instruments: the Forgiveness Scale, the Self-Esteem Scale, and the Mental Health Scale. Prior to data collection, all instruments underwent content and construct validity evaluations conducted by three psychology experts. The instruments were subsequently pilot-tested with 30 victims of cyber dating abuse who were not included in the

main study to evaluate item clarity and comprehensibility. The overall research protocol was then reviewed by three independent reviewers to assess its methodological feasibility.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Approval No. E.6.m/351/KE-FPsi-UMM/VII/2025). Following ethical approval, the researchers prepared the informed consent form and administered the questionnaire online using Google Forms. Data were collected over a two-month period. The survey link was disseminated through several social media platforms, including X, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook.

Before completing the questionnaire, participants were required to read the informed consent form and indicate their voluntary agreement to participate by selecting the “Agree” option. The informed consent explained the study objectives, research procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and participants’ rights. As compensation for their participation, 10 participants were randomly selected to receive an incentive of IDR 100,000 through a lottery.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis to examine the predictive roles of forgiveness and self-esteem on mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. All statistical analyses were performed using Jamovi (Version 2.7.6), with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Descriptive Statistical Test

Based on the results of the descriptive statistical analysis presented in Table 2, involving 122 participants, the forgiveness variable showed a minimum score of 20, a maximum score of 76, a mean of 53.0, and a standard deviation of 7.97. The self-esteem variable had a minimum score of 12, a maximum score of 37, a mean of 23.3, and a standard deviation of 4.33. Furthermore, the mental health variable demonstrated a minimum score of 101, a maximum score of 144, a mean of 120, and a standard deviation of 8.34.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistical

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Forgiveness	122	20	76	53,0	7,97
Self-esteem	122	12	37	23,3	4,33
Mental health	122	101	144	120	8,34

Hypothesis Test

Correlation Test. The correlation analysis presented in Table 3 indicated that forgiveness was significantly associated with mental health ($r = -0,347$; $p < 0,001$). Similarly, self-esteem was also significantly associated with mental health ($r = -0,334$; $p < 0,001$).

Table 3. Result of Pearson’s Correlation Test

		Forgiveness	Self-esteem	Mental health
Forgiveness	Pearson’s r	-		
	df	-		
	p-value	-		
Self-esteem	Pearson’s r	0,147		
	df	120		
	p-value	0,107		
Mental health	Pearson’s r	-0,347***	-0,334***	-

df	120	120	-
p-value	<0,001	<0,001	-

Note. *p<0,05, **p<0,01, ***p<0,001

Linear Regression Test (Model Fit Measures). The results of the multiple regression analysis presented in Table 4 indicated that Model 1 accounted for 12.0% of the variance in mental health, ($F(1, 120) = 16.4, p < 0,001$). Meanwhile, Model 2 accounted for 44,9% of the variance in mental health, ($F(2, 119) = 15.1, p < 0,001$). These findings suggest that Model 2 has a more complex structure and better explains the variance in mental health than Model 1. To determine which model provided the most optimal information, the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) values were used as references, with lower values indicating a better-fitting model. The AIC and BIC values for Model 2 were lower than those for Model 1. Therefore, Model 2 was considered to provide a better model fit and more optimal information than Model 1.

Table 4. Results of the Simple Regression Test

Model	R	R ²	AIC	BIC	Overall Model Test			
					F	df1	df2	P
1	0,347	0,120	853	862	16,4	1	120	<0,001
2	0,449	0,202	843	855	15,1	2	119	<0,001

Linear Regression Test (Model Comparisons). The results of the multiple linear regression analysis presented in Table 5 indicated an F value of 12.2 with a significance level of $p < 0,001$, suggesting a significant difference between Model 1 and Model 2. The ΔR^2 value indicates that the addition of one predictor in Model 2 results in a 49.6% increase in the explained variance in mental health. Therefore, forgiveness and self-esteem simultaneously have a significant role in predicting mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse.

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Test: Significance of the F-Value

Comparison							
Model		Model	ΔR^2	F	df1	df2	P
1	-	2	0,0819	12,2	1	119	<0,001

Linear Regression Test (Model Coefficients). The results of the multiple linear regression analysis presented in Table 6 indicate that the forgiveness variable yielded a significance value of $p < 0,001$, demonstrating that it is a significant predictor of mental health. Similarly, the self-esteem variable also showed a significance value of $p < 0,001$, indicating that it is a significant predictor of mental health. Both variables, forgiveness and self-esteem, contribute to the mental health variable, as reflected in the regression equation $Y = 149.938 + (-0,318X_1) + (-0,557X_2) + \epsilon$, with a contribution of 20.2%. Meanwhile, the remaining 79.8% of the variance is influenced by other variables not examined in this study. These findings suggest that forgiveness and self-esteem play a significant role in predicting mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse.

Table 6. Multiple Linear Regression Test: t-Values

95% Confidence Interval							
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate	Lower	Upper
Intercept	149.938	5,5150	27,19	<0,001			
Pemaafan	-0,318	0,0867	-3,67	<0,001	-0,304	-0,468	-0,140
Harga diri	-0,557	0,1595	-3,49	<0,001	-0,289	-0,453	-0,125

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the major hypothesis was supported; that is, forgiveness and self-esteem simultaneously serve as significant predictors of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. These findings suggest that both variables play a positive role in enhancing mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse who have experienced challenging romantic relationships. Conceptually, forgiveness has been shown to be positively associated with mental health, as the process of forgiving can improve psychological well-being (Worthington & Wade, 2019; Li & Yang, 2019; Schuttenberg et al., 2022). Meanwhile, self-esteem shows a positive relationship with mental health, functioning as a protective factor that mitigates stress and anxiety (Muris & Otgaar, 2023; Zell & Johansson, 2024). The combination of these two variables may promote stable emotional regulation and adaptive psychological resilience, thereby allowing victims of cyber dating abuse to maintain better mental health despite having a history of adverse relational experiences.

The results of the analysis also support Minor Hypothesis 1, namely that forgiveness is a significant predictor of mental health. This finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that forgiveness plays a positive role in mental health (Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Yuliatun & Megawati, 2021; Mullen et al., 2023). Higher levels of forgiveness tend to be associated with better mental health, as reflected in lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as greater life satisfaction and happiness (Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Aneja, 2022; Mullen et al., 2023; Tripathi, 2024).

Conversely, individuals with lower levels of forgiveness are more vulnerable to psychological problems such as depression, rumination, aggressiveness, and decreased mental well-being (Li & Yang, 2019; Toussaint, 2022; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023). Further supporting these findings, specific dimensions of forgiveness were found to significantly predict mental health. Research conducted by Kaleta and Mróz (2020) found that, among victims of cyber dating abuse, avoidance motivation toward the perpetrator often does not provide relief and may even exacerbate psychological distress and reduce mental health. This is because avoidance does not resolve intrapersonal conflict or interpersonal relationship issues (Kaleta & Mróz, 2020). Similarly, revenge motivation following interpersonal harm has been shown to negatively impact mental health (Mullen et al., 2023; Mróz & Kaleta, 2023). In contrast, benevolence motivation toward the perpetrator is positively associated with psychological recovery (Skalski-Bednarz et al., 2024).

The second minor hypothesis was also supported, indicating that self-esteem is a significant predictor of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. Self-esteem has been shown to function as a psychological protective factor that helps mitigate the negative impact of stress (Orth & Robins, 2022). Individuals with high levels of self-esteem tend to exhibit a realistic attitude, enabling them to value and respect themselves (Oktaviani, 2019). In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to display self-rejection, dissatisfaction, or a negative self-image, and may even experience difficulties in establishing relationships with others (Oktaviani, 2019).

Implications

The practical implications of this study highlight the importance of developing forgiveness- and self-esteem-based interventions to improve mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. Although three intervention programs, namely DARSI (Developing Healthy and Egalitarian Adolescent Relationships), Dat-e Adolescence, and the Brief Incremental Theory of Personality (ITP) have been implemented to prevent cyber dating abuse, findings indicate reductions and decreases in aggressive behaviours within relationships, both in digital contexts and in real-life interactions (Galende et al., 2020).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that forgiveness and self-esteem, when examined simultaneously, play a significant role in the mental health of victims of cyber dating abuse. These findings corroborate previous research indicating that forgiveness and

self-esteem are internal variables that contribute to psychological recovery (Muvariz et al., 2020; Camadan et al., 2023; Pandey et al., 2023; Chen, 2024).

Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations. First, it did not consider participants' domicile as a sampling factor, limiting the examination of potential cultural influences on their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Second, the sensitive nature of the topic may have introduced response bias, as participants could have provided socially desirable or less truthful responses, affecting the validity of the data. Finally, the study did not examine other potential predictors of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse, with 79.8% of the variance remaining unexplained by the variables included.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that both forgiveness and self-esteem, examined simultaneously and individually, were significant predictors of mental health among victims of cyber dating abuse. Forgiveness contributed to improved psychological well-being by enabling individuals to regulate negative emotions and reducing their motivation to avoid or seek revenge against the perpetrator. Meanwhile, self-esteem functioned as a protective factor that helped individuals cope with stress and maintain positive psychological functioning.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

NFN and AH agree to the final version of this article.

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