

Dynamics of Verbal Bullying and School Ecosystem Responses in Junior High Education: An Analysis of Excessive Joking Culture and Character-Based Interventions

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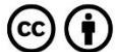
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ABSTRACT: Verbal bullying at the junior high school level is frequently normalized as ordinary social interaction, despite its significant detrimental impact on students' emotional well-being and academic development. This descriptive qualitative case study aimed to examine the manifestations of verbal bullying, analyze its socio-cultural determinants and psychological impacts on students, and evaluate the effectiveness of institutional responses within the school ecosystem. The study involved 50 participants, including students, subject teachers, Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers, and administrative staff at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang. Data were gathered through social interaction observations, open-ended questionnaires, and in-depth interviews, followed by interactive data analysis validated through triangulation techniques. The findings revealed that verbal bullying at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang predominantly manifested through negative labeling (name-calling), physical mocking, abusive language, and degrading jokes disguised as friendly banter (excessive teasing). Primary catalysts included peer group pressure, low emotional literacy, and expansion into digital spaces (cyber-verbal bullying). Psychologically, victims suffered from diminished self-efficacy, social anxiety, embarrassment, and reduced learning motivation. The study concludes that current reactive institutional interventions remain insufficient in preventing recurrent incidents. Consequently, strengthening the institutional role of SMP Kartiyoso Semarang requires integrating emotional literacy into the curriculum, strengthening interactive teacher supervision, establishing confidential reporting channels, and fostering sustainable synergy with parents.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education faces a multitude of complex psychosocial and structural challenges, among which the phenomenon of school bullying stands out as one of the most urgent strategic issues requiring serious scholarly and practical attention (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Muhopilah & Tentama, 2019). Conceptually and theoretically, bullying is defined as a form of aggressive behavior involving an imbalance of physical or psychological power, carried out repeatedly over time or possessing a high potential for repetition by the perpetrator against a victim who is in a vulnerable position and struggling to defend themselves (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019; Oktavian, 2021). In secondary school environments, particularly at the Junior High School level—which serves as a crucial developmental

phase during early adolescence—bullying frequently emerges in diverse manifestations that directly disrupt the psychological climate, sense of safety, and overall comfort of the educational ecosystem (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). Among the various types of oppression, verbal bullying is the most ubiquitous manifestation in daily social interactions, yet ironically, it is still frequently underestimated, normalized, or dismissed by school community members as a harmless component of peer socialization (Azmi et al., 2021; Fadiya et al., 2025; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024).

The forms, characteristics, and variations of verbal bullying behavior within educational settings are highly diverse and complex, ranging from assignation of derogatory negative labels (name-calling), mocking physical traits or appearance, insulting family backgrounds, uttering harsh and profane language, degrading academic performance, to issuing explicit verbal threats of violence (Lestari, 2013; Muhammad, 2009; Kurnia et al., 2019). Reinforcing this theoretical perspective, Lestari (2013) asserts that verbal bullying occurs when an individual intentionally utilizes spoken language as an instrument of psychological dominance to exert power and subjugate their victim (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). Manifestations of this destructive behavior include excessive teasing that inflicts emotional hurt, making inappropriate comments regarding personal attributes, public jeering, and systematically humiliating victims in front of peer groups (Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019). Although this form of oppression leaves no visible physical scars, the psychological, emotional, and mental injuries it inflicts are proven to be profoundly destructive, long-lasting, and capable of altering a student's developmental trajectory (Oktavian, 2021; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024; Fadiya et al., 2025).

The early adolescent developmental phase, which spans middle school education, represents a highly vulnerable biological and psychosocial transition during which individuals construct self-identity, expand social networks beyond the family unit, and experience an intensified need for peer group recognition and belonging (Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Yuyarti, 2018; Sumantri, 2016). This turbulent developmental stage renders adolescents exceptionally sensitive to peer pressures and social dynamics at school, where unmonitored peer interactions can easily escalate into aggressive behavior, including the proliferation of verbal bullying (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023). Furthermore, peer pressure, socio-economic background disparities, academic achievement gaps, and unchecked social media usage significantly exacerbate the expansion of verbal bullying across modern educational institutions (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Muhopilah & Tentama, 2019).

This condition is further worsened by a deeply entrenched culture of excessive banter and joking (over-boking/excessive teasing), alongside a low level of collective awareness among students and educators regarding the boundary where verbal expressions cross into ethical violations and bullying (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024). As Sejiwa (in Muhammad, 2009) highlights, verbal bullying represents a form of psychosocial violence that is easily auditory-detected, operationalized through cursing, insulting, bad nicknaming, shouting, public humiliation, false accusations, spreading rumors, slandering, and systematic social exclusion (Kurnia et al., 2019; Fadiya et al., 2025; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024). Because it leaves no tangible physical evidence, verbal bullying frequently bypasses the vigilance of teachers and school administrators (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). Nevertheless, its chronic psychological impact heavily damages mental well-being, manifesting in acute drops in self-confidence, severe anxiety, prolonged stress, academic decline, and extreme fear culminating in school refusal behavior (Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019; Oktavian, 2021).

As a formal educational institution rooted in character and moral development, SMP Kartiyoso Semarang bears a significant moral responsibility to foster a learning ecosystem that is safe, inclusive, conducive, and entirely free from all forms of psychological or physical violence. However, preliminary observations and empirical field data reveal that practices of verbal bullying persist in daily student interaction patterns at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang, occurring both directly inside

classrooms and outside during recesses, while expanding past physical boundaries into online social media spaces (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023).

While previous studies have addressed verbal bullying in primary and secondary schools (e.g., Fadiya et al., 2025; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024), most research remains limited to isolated single-variable correlations—such as its isolated effect on self-confidence or academic outcomes alone (Azmi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). Few studies comprehensively map the systemic interaction between local peer-joking cultures, social group dynamics, and institutional response effectiveness within a school ecosystem. Thus, the scientific novelty and urgency of this case study lie in its holistic empirical examination of verbal bullying dynamics at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang—analyzing its specific behavioral typologies, underlying socio-cultural catalysts, psychological consequences, and institutional intervention readiness to establish a grounded foundation for targeted character-based interventions.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) identify the specific forms and manifestations of verbal bullying occurring at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang, (2) analyze the underlying causal factors driving these behaviors, (3) evaluate the psychological impacts experienced by student victims, and (4) assess the role and effectiveness of the school ecosystem in preventing and managing verbal bullying cases (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024).

Study Aim and Hypothesis

This study aims to comprehensively examine the specific forms and typologies of verbal bullying, analyze its underlying socio-cultural causal factors, determine its psychological impacts on students, and evaluate the role and effectiveness of the school ecosystem in addressing verbal bullying at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024). The hypothesis of this study posits that an excessive joking culture, peer group pressure, and the intensity of school supervision simultaneously serve as primary socio-cultural predictors and determinants in shaping the dynamics and persistence of verbal bullying behavior within the educational institution environment.

METHODS

Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design based on a field case study approach. According to Moleong (2017), qualitative research provides descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behaviors, aiming to deeply explore and interpret the social reality and meanings constructed by individuals within their environment. This design was selected as the most appropriate methodology to capture the naturally occurring dynamics of verbal bullying without manipulative intervention, thereby preserving the ecological validity of the educational setting (Creswell, 2016; Sugiyono, 2019; Azmi et al., 2021; Fadiya et al., 2025; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024).

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang, located at Jalan Taman Progo No. 15, East Semarang District, Central Java Province. The target population comprised approximately 300 individuals within the school community, including students, teachers, Guidance and Counseling (BK) staff, and school administrative personnel. Using a purposive sampling technique, a sample of 50 respondents was selected based on their direct involvement in daily social interactions, classroom dynamics, and student supervision at the school. This sampling strategy ensured the retrieval of rich, representative, and credible information regarding the socio-cultural patterns and institutional handling of verbal bullying within the institution.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted using three primary qualitative instruments designed to triangulate empirical findings across multiple perspectives (Sumantri, 2016; Yuyarti, 2018; Tanjung & Amelia, 2017): 1) Structured observation protocol logs used to record direct social interactions, verbal communication behaviors, and student-teacher dynamics inside classrooms and around the school yard during recesses. 2) Written questionnaires distributed to educators and staff to capture systematic perceptions, frequency estimates, and observable typologies of verbal bullying occurring in the school environment. 3) In-depth interview protocols administered to students, homeroom teachers, BK counselors, and administrative staff at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang to explore psychological impacts, coping mechanisms, and institutional intervention workflows.

Data Analysis and Validity

Data were analyzed following the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Moleong (2017) and Sugiyono (2019), involving four continuous stages: 1) primary qualitative data through classroom observations, open-ended questionnaires, and recorded interviews across the research timeline. 2) Filtering, selecting, and discarding irrelevant details that fell outside the research focus to streamline analytical processing. 3) Structuring and classifying descriptive narratives into thematic categories aligned with the study's core research questions. 4) Formulating grounded conclusions while continuously verifying data consistency against field records.

To establish trustworthiness and data validity, source and method triangulation techniques were applied alongside member checking, prolonged field observation, enhanced persistence, and meticulous audit trails of observation notes and official school documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on empirical field investigations conducted through questionnaires, observation protocols, and in-depth qualitative interviews with 50 respondents across the SMP Kartiyoso Semarang community, a comprehensive mapping of verbal bullying dynamics was generated. The thematic data analysis categorized the empirical findings into four primary analytical focus areas:

Typologies and Manifestations of Verbal Bullying at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang

The empirical findings indicate that acts of verbal bullying remain deeply embedded within daily peer interaction patterns at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang. The most prevalent behavioral manifestations include negative labeling (*name-calling*), mocking physical attributes or bodily appearances, utilizing abusive or profane language, humiliating peers publicly, and engaging in excessive jokes that cross ethical boundaries. A significant majority of respondents reported that these behaviors have become so normalized within peer interactions that they are rarely recognized as destructive acts of bullying. Field data suggest that verbal bullying possesses unique covert characteristics, making it more subtle and difficult to detect compared to physical violence because it leaves no visible bodily injuries. Perpetrators frequently rationalize their behavior as harmless humor or a sign of social intimacy, whereas victims often choose silence out of fear of being labeled "overly sensitive" or unable to take a joke, resulting in unaddressed, recurrent cycles of verbal harassment (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024).

Causal Factors and Determinants of Verbal Bullying

Data analysis confirms that verbal bullying at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang is driven by a combination of interconnected socio-cultural factors, primarily an excessive joking culture (*over-boking/excessive teasing*), strong peer group pressure, low student awareness regarding emotional harm, and suboptimal supervisory vigilance during unstructured student interactions (Setiowati &

Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Muhopilah & Tentama, 2019). Most respondents perceive rude language and teasing as normal teenage communication as long as no physical harm occurs. Furthermore, peer groups exert a dominant influence; during early adolescence, the heightened need for social belonging drives students to conform to and replicate group behaviors to gain acceptance. In addition, unmonitored digital communication expands the arena into cyber-verbal bullying, extending harassment beyond school hours via social media platforms (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023).

Psychological Impacts on Students

The findings demonstrate that verbal bullying inflicts severe, tangible psychological harm on student victims. The most prominent psychological outcomes reported include a drastic drop in self-confidence, heightened social anxiety, acute embarrassment, and a decline in learning motivation during classroom activities. Several student victims exhibited behavioral withdrawal, becoming increasingly reticent and socially isolated. These psychological wounds damage students' self-concept and internal self-efficacy, which subsequently correlates with degraded academic performance (Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019; Oktavian, 2021).

Institutional Role and School Interventions

Evaluations reveal that SMP Kartiyoso Semarang has initiated preventive measures through character education programs, teacher monitoring, verbal reprimands, and counseling mediations led by homeroom teachers and Guidance and Counseling (BK) staff. However, these institutional interventions are currently perceived as largely reactive—occurring primarily post-incident—rendering them insufficient to sustainably curb the recurrence of verbal bullying cases (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024).

Discussion

A critical synthesis of these findings affirms that verbal bullying represents a pervasive form of psychosocial aggression that is routinely normalized within early adolescent social life (Fadiya et al., 2025; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024). In accordance with the theoretical frameworks of Setiowati and Dwiningrum (2020), Zakiyah et al. (2017), and Muhopilah and Tentama (2019), this phenomenon constitutes one of the most insidious threats to a healthy educational ecosystem. Although verbal violence causes no immediate physical injury, its cumulative emotional toll severely compromises psychological well-being (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). The widespread normalization of verbal abuse among middle school students allows destructive interaction patterns to persist without timely adult intervention (Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019; Oktavian, 2021).

The developmental characteristics of early adolescence at the junior high school level place students in a vulnerable transitional state of identity formation (Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Yuyarti, 2018; Sumantri, 2016). During this period, as highlighted by Suwandi et al. (2024), Gul et al. (2023), and Morgan (2023), adolescents possess an intense psychological drive for peer acceptance and group standing. Consequently, perpetrators often misuse verbal teasing and negative labeling to project social power and establish peer dominance (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024). This desire to assert social superiority frequently overrides ethical and moral considerations within the peer ecosystem (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Muhopilah & Tentama, 2019).

The case study findings at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang strongly align with existing literature emphasizing that verbal bullying must not be dismissed as mere banter (Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019; Oktavian, 2021). Empirical studies by Fadiya et al. (2025), Pebriana and Supriyadi (2024), and Rahmah and Purwoko (2024) confirm that unaddressed verbal aggression becomes

institutionalized within student subcultures, demanding systematic structural interventions (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022).

The psychological ramifications experienced by victims trigger complex emotional distress (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). As documented by Azmi et al. (2021), Damanik and Djuwita (2019), and Oktavian (2021), these impacts range from heightened social anxiety to chronic self-doubt, directly undermining learning motivation and socio-emotional maturation (Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Yuyarti, 2018; Sumantri, 2016). This underscores that psychological wounds from verbal abuse can be just as debilitating as physical harm (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Muhopilah & Tentama, 2019).

An analysis of underlying catalysts reveals that verbal bullying thrives at the intersection of cultural practices and structural oversights (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023). Key factors include unchecked joking cultures, coercive peer pressure, low emotional literacy, and reactive school supervision (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020). Perpetrators often remain oblivious to the mental anguish caused by harsh words, while victims feel trapped in silence to avoid social stigmatization as "weak" or "baperan" (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019). This enforced silence isolates victims from necessary psychosocial support systems (Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Yuyarti, 2018; Sumantri, 2016).

This dynamic is further exacerbated in the digital age, where social media platforms extend the reach of verbal harassment into private domestic spaces (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023). Unmonitored cyber-verbal bullying deprives victims of a safe sanctuary, intensifying continuous psychological distress (Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020). This necessitates an adaptive, digital-literate monitoring strategy from school authorities (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017).

From an educational sociology perspective, schools serve not only as centers for academic instruction but also as social laboratories for emotional regulation, empathy, and social ethics (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021). When verbal bullying goes unaddressed, a toxic school climate develops that suppresses student engagement and well-being (Fadiya et al., 2025; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Azmi et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding verbal bullying dynamics at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang must lead to concrete operational policies (Azmi et al., 2021; Damanik & Djuwita, 2019; Oktavian, 2021).

Educators, homeroom teachers, and BK counselors play a crucial role in dismantling verbal bullying (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Muhopilah & Tentama, 2019). Teachers must exercise pedagogical sensitivity to discern the boundary between friendly teasing and verbal abuse, acting as moral guides to correct harmful joking norms (Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020). Early detection of behavioral changes serves as an effective primary prevention measure (Fadiya et al., 2025; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024). Simultaneously, optimizing Guidance and Counseling services through proactive psychoeducation, confidential reporting, and restorative rehabilitation for perpetrators ensures holistic ecosystem support (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020). Finally, fostering strong school-parent partnerships aligns home parenting with anti-bullying values, creating a consistent environment that minimizes aggressive behavior in public spaces (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023).

Implications

This study holds broad theoretical and practical implications for educational science and the management of school bullying: 1) Theoretical Implications: The empirical findings strengthen conceptual frameworks regarding verbal bullying dynamics in early adolescence (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024). It highlights that verbal

aggression is sustained by complex interactions between adolescent psychosocial needs, peer group pressures, and permissive school cultural norms (Fadiya et al., 2025; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Azmi et al., 2021). This enriches educational psychology literature by providing a grounded character-ecosystem model for anti-bullying strategies (Isabela & Anggraini, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Najah et al., 2022). 2) Practical Implications for School Policy: SMP Kartiyoso Semarang and comparable educational institutions are encouraged to formulate operational policies under a unified "One Anti-Bullying Vision" (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024). This program involves structured anti-bullying socialization, positive communication workshops, and the appointment of student change agents to shift peer group norms toward mutual respect (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023; Tanjung & Amelia, 2017; Yuyarti, 2018; Sumantri, 2016). 3) Counseling and Guidance (BK) Interventions: Guidance and counseling personnel are challenged to move beyond reactive dispute resolution toward proactive psychoeducation (Fadiya et al., 2025; Pebriana & Supriyadi, 2024; Rahmah & Purwoko, 2024). Implementing emotional literacy training builds psychological resilience and provides safe, confidential recovery pathways for victims (Setiowati & Dwiningrum, 2020; Zakiyah et al., 2017; Isabela & Anggraini, 2023). 4) Parental Synergy: The study emphasizes the crucial role of home-school synergy (Suwandi et al., 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023). Parents must align parenting practices with anti-violence values to reinforce assertive communication and prevent aggressive behaviors in public spaces (Rahmawati & Illa, 2020; Suhendar, 2020; Tanjung & Amelia, 2017).

Limitations and Further Research

Although this case study provides a detailed mapping of verbal bullying dynamics, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, some respondents did not fill out the research instruments completely due to situational or emotional constraints during data collection, leading to minor data gaps. Second, participant mobility where a small number of students moved away or left the school environment restricted longitudinal follow-up sessions. Based on these limitations, future research should expand both the sample scope and analytical variables. Comparative studies are recommended to examine differences in student psychological well-being and social climate between schools with strong character-building supervision and those with permissive cultures. Additionally, cross-grade and multi-school comparative studies across diverse demographic backgrounds would enhance the generalizability of findings regarding early adolescent verbal aggression.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that verbal bullying at SMP Kartiyoso Semarang predominantly manifests as derogatory name-calling, physical mockery, abusive language, public humiliation, and degrading jokes, which persist in student interactions due to being widely misperceived as harmless banter. This abusive behavior is collectively driven by an excessive joking culture (*over-baking*), intense peer group pressure, low emotional awareness regarding psychological harm, and insufficient supervisory vigilance within the daily school environment. Consequently, verbal aggression inflicts severe psychological trauma that damages students' emotional well-being and academic focus manifesting in diminished self-confidence, heightened social anxiety, social withdrawal, and reduced learning motivation thereby necessitating a systemic transition from reactive disciplinary interventions toward a proactive, character-based school ecosystem.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

I, and SF agree to the final version of this article.

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