



THE INFLUENCE OF CONFORMITY ON BULLYING BEHAVIOR: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

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Bullying remains a serious problem in schools and is often influenced by peer conformity among adolescents. This study aims to examine the effect of conformity on bullying behavior and the mediating role of critical thinking among students of SMA Budi Agung Medan. A quantitative approach was used involving 117 students selected through cluster random sampling. Data were collected using conformity, bullying behavior, and critical thinking scales and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results showed that conformity had a positive and significant effect on bullying behavior and a negative effect on critical thinking. Critical thinking also had a negative and significant effect on bullying behavior and significantly mediated the relationship between conformity and bullying. These findings indicate that higher conformity increases the likelihood of bullying, while stronger critical thinking reduces such behavior. Strengthening students' critical thinking may serve as an effective strategy to prevent bullying in schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a serious problem that still frequently occurs in the educational environment in Indonesia, especially at the secondary school level. Various reports indicate that bullying cases continue to increase and have significant negative impacts on the psychological, social, and emotional development of adolescents, such as anxiety, depression, and even the risk of suicide [1]. This condition shows that bullying cannot be regarded as an ordinary phenomenon, but rather as a complex social problem that requires systematic handling from various parties.

One factor that contributes to bullying behavior is peer conformity. Adolescents tend to adjust to group norms to gain social acceptance, even when these norms are negative [2]; [3]. Conformity not only encourages direct involvement in bullying but also passive behaviors such as allowing or indirectly supporting it. This indicates that social pressure plays a significant role in shaping individual behavior, especially during adolescence, which is still in the process of identity formation.

On the other hand, critical thinking skills become an important factor that can inhibit an individual's involvement in bullying behavior. Individuals with critical thinking skills tend to be able to evaluate situations objectively, consider the consequences of actions, and reject group norms that are inconsistent with moral values [4]; [5]. This ability allows individuals not merely to follow social pressure but to make independent theoretical contributions in enriching the study of social and educational psychology, as well as practical contributions in

designing interventions based on the development of critical thinking skills to reduce bullying behavior in the school environment.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative explanatory design with a survey approach to examine the effect of conformity on bullying behavior and the mediating role of critical thinking. The dependent variable was bullying behavior (Y), the independent variable was conformity (X), and critical thinking was positioned as the mediating variable (M). Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) to test both direct and indirect effects among variables.

The population consisted of 722 students of SMA Budi Agung Medan in the 2025/2026 academic year, including students from grades X, XI, and XII. However, this study focused only on students in grades X and XI, totaling 470 students, because grade XII students were excluded due to preparation for final examinations. The sampling technique used was cluster random sampling, in which sampling was conducted based on groups rather than individual subjects [6]. Following Arikunto [7], when the population exceeds 100, researchers may take 10–25% of the population as samples. Therefore, 25% of the target population was selected, resulting in 117 students as research participants. The sample was proportionally drawn from 15 classes, with approximately 8 students randomly selected from each class.

Data were collected using three psychological scales. Bullying behavior was measured using the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ) adapted by Wulandari and Putri [8], focusing on the bullying perpetrator dimension, including verbal, physical, and relational bullying. The conformity scale was adapted from the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI-30) developed by Levant et al. [9], consisting of 10 dimensions such as emotional control, self-reliance, risk-taking, and pursuit of status. Critical thinking was measured using an instrument adapted from Susanto, Purwono, and Nelwan [10], which originally consisted of 70 items across five dimensions: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation. For this study, 30 valid and reliable items were selected.

The instruments were tested for content validity through professional judgment and for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure internal consistency. Data collection was conducted directly at school after obtaining permission from the school administration and informed consent from participants. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that all responses would remain confidential.

Data analysis included measurement model evaluation (validity and reliability testing), structural model evaluation (R-square, path coefficients, and predictive relevance), and mediation effect testing. All analyses were conducted using SmartPLS software to determine the significance of relationships among conformity, critical thinking, and bullying behavior.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

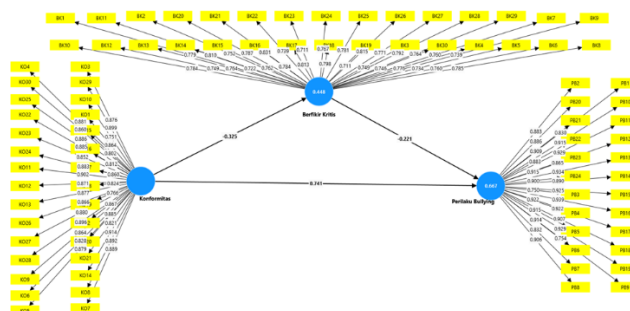


Figure 1. Output Result of the Route Diagram

This phenomenon was also found in an early study at Budi Agung High School in Medan, where there were still various forms of bullying, both verbal and physical, influenced by factors of conformity and peer group dynamics. This condition indicates that bullying does not only occur due to individual factors, but is also influenced by a social environment that supports or tolerates such behavior. Although research on conformity and bullying has been widely conducted, most of it still focuses on the direct relationships between variables without examining the underlying psychological mechanisms. Research that integrates the role of critical thinking as a mediating variable in the relationship between conformity and bullying behavior is still limited, especially in the context of students in Indonesia.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the influence of conformity on bullying behavior and to examine the role of critical thinking ability as a mediating variable. This study is expected to provide and responsible decisions. Therefore, critical thinking can serve as a protective factor in reducing the negative impact of conformity

Table 1. Validity Testing based on Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Variable	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Condition	Result
Critical Thinking	0.590	AVE > 0,5	Accepted
Conformity	0.743	AVE > 0,5	Accepted
Bullying Behavior	0.794	AVE > 0,5	Accepted

Table 1 shows that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all research variables are above 0.5, indicating construct validity. The AVE values for each variable are 0.590 for Critical Thinking, 0.743 for Conformity, and 0.794 for Bullying Behavior. With these AVE values, it can be concluded that all tested variables have good validity.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha & Composite Reliability (CR) Results

	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Cronbach's alpha	Condition	Result
Critical Thinking	0.977	0.976	> 0.7	Accepted
Conformity	0.989	0.988	> 0.7	Accepted
Bullying Behavior	0.989	0.989	> 0.7	Accepted

Table 2 presents the reliability test results using Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's Alpha (CA). All variables showed CR and CA values above 0.70, indicating that the measurement instruments met the reliability criteria and were considered consistent and dependable for data collection. Critical Thinking obtained a CR value of 0.977 and CA of 0.976, Conformity showed a CR value of 0.989 and CA of 0.988, while Bullying Behavior had a CR value of 0.989 and CA of 0.989. These results confirm that all constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency and were suitable for further structural model analysis.

Table 3. R-Square Value Result

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Critical Thinking	0,448	0,443
Bullying Behavior	0,667	0,662

Table 3 shows the R-Square values for endogenous variables. The R-Square value of Critical Thinking was 0.448, indicating that Conformity explained 44.8% of the variance in Critical Thinking, while the remaining 55.2% was influenced by other variables outside the model. Meanwhile, the R-Square value of Bullying Behavior was 0.667, meaning that Conformity and Critical Thinking together explained 66.7% of the variance in Bullying Behavior, while 33.3% was influenced by other factors. These findings indicate that the structural model has moderate to strong explanatory power, particularly in predicting bullying behavior among students.

Table 4. Path Coefficient Test & Significance of Influence

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Critical Thinking -> Bullying Behavior	-0.221	-0.222	0.074	2.988	0.003
Conformity -> Critical Thinking	-0.325	-0.324	0.029	11.037	0.000
Conformity -> Bullying Behavior	0.741	0.742	0.075	9.849	0.000
Conformity -> Critical Thinking -> Bullying Behavior	0.072	0.073	0.028	2.520	0.012

The Q^2 predictive relevance values also supported the model quality. The Q^2 value for Critical Thinking was 0.101 and for Bullying Behavior was 0.505, both greater than zero, indicating that the model had good predictive relevance and was capable of accurately predicting endogenous constructs. This strengthens the validity of the SEM-PLS model used in this study.

The path coefficient analysis in Table 4 shows that Critical Thinking had a negative and significant effect on Bullying Behavior ($\beta = -0.221$; $T = 2.988$; $p = 0.003$). This indicates that students with higher critical thinking skills were less likely to engage in bullying behavior. Critical thinking enables students to evaluate social situations more objectively, consider consequences, and resist negative peer pressure.

Conformity also had a negative and significant effect on Critical Thinking ($\beta = -0.325$; $T = 11.037$; $p = 0.000$), indicating that higher conformity was associated with lower critical thinking ability. Students who strongly conform to peer group norms tend to rely less on independent reasoning and are more likely to follow group behavior without critical evaluation.

Furthermore, Conformity showed a positive and significant direct effect on Bullying Behavior ($\beta = 0.741$; $T = 9.849$; $p = 0.000$). This was the strongest direct effect in the model, suggesting that peer conformity is a major predictor of bullying behavior. Students who seek acceptance from peer groups are more likely to participate in bullying, either actively or passively, to maintain social belonging.

The mediation analysis also revealed that Critical Thinking significantly mediated the relationship between Conformity and Bullying Behavior ($\beta = 0.072$; $T = 2.520$; $p = 0.012$). This indicates that conformity influences bullying behavior not only directly but also indirectly through its effect on critical thinking. However, because the direct effect of conformity on bullying behavior remained stronger and significant, Critical Thinking functioned as a partial mediator rather than a full mediator.

These findings highlight the unique contribution of this study, showing that Critical Thinking is not only an academic competence but also a social-psychological protective factor against bullying. Strengthening students' critical thinking skills may reduce the negative impact of peer conformity and serve as an effective strategy for bullying prevention. Schools can implement this through reflective learning, ethical discussions, problem-based learning, and social decision-making training to help students develop more independent, rational, and responsible behavior.

3.1 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that conformity has a positive and significant effect on bullying behavior ($T = 9.849$; $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.741$), which indicates that the higher an individual's tendency to adapt to peer pressure and group norms, the greater the likelihood that the individual will engage in bullying behavior. These findings reinforce the social conformity theory proposed and expanded by Santrock [11] and Myers [12], which states that individuals, especially during adolescence, have a strong need to be accepted within their social group, and therefore tend to change their attitudes and behaviors to align with the group, even when the group's norms are negative or deviant.

In the context of bullying behavior, conformity functions as a social mechanism that normalizes aggressive behavior, where individuals are not only actively involved but can also play a passive role by allowing or supporting bullying actions in order to maintain their social position within the group. This aligns with the research of Laili [13] as well as Setiawan et al. [14], which found that peer pressure is a strong predictor of the emergence of bullying behavior in adolescents. Nevertheless, although conformity shows a significant influence, its contribution to the variance in bullying behavior does not stand alone, but is influenced by internal cognitive factors of the individual, one of which is critical thinking ability.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that conformity has a negative and significant effect on critical thinking ability ($T = 11.037$; $p < 0.001$; $\beta = -0.325$), which means that the higher the level of an individual's conformity, the lower their critical thinking ability. These findings provide important implications that social pressure not only influences behavior but also the cognitive processes of individuals in evaluating information and making decisions. Conformist individuals tend to accept information or group norms without going through a thorough analysis process, thereby hindering their ability to conduct rational evaluations, question assumptions, and consider more adaptive alternatives. From the perspective of adolescent development, this condition is reinforced by the characteristics of the adolescent phase, which is still in the identity-seeking stage, making them more vulnerable to social environmental influences. [11]

Research by Baron, Vandello, and Brunzman [15] also shows that in certain situations, especially when individuals do not consider a decision to be important, they tend to prefer conformity over using their critical thinking abilities. This indicates that conformity can hinder the development of cognitive autonomy and rational decision-making skills, which are key components of critical thinking.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that critical thinking has a negative and significant effect on bullying behavior ($T = 2.988$; $p = 0.003$), which suggests that the higher an individual's critical thinking ability, the lower their tendency to engage in bullying behavior. Individuals with good critical thinking skills tend to be able

to analyze social situations more objectively, evaluate the consequences of the actions they will take, and consider the moral and social impacts of those behaviors on others. [16] This ability enables individuals not to be easily influenced by peer pressure and to better uphold positive personal values. In addition, critical thinking is closely related to moral and empathy development, allowing individuals to better understand the victim's perspective and reject actions that harm others [17]

These findings are in line with the research of Ikaningrum et al. [18], which shows that students who have critical thinking skills tend to be more prepared to face bullying situations, wiser in responding to social pressure, and not easily involved in aggressive behavior. Thus, critical thinking can be understood as a protective factor that can suppress the tendency toward bullying behavior in adolescents. Mediation analysis results indicate that critical thinking acts as a significant mediator in the relationship between conformity and bullying behavior ($T = 2.520$; $p = 0.012$; indirect $\beta = 0.072$), which means that the influence of conformity on bullying behavior occurs not only directly but also through the mechanism of reduced critical thinking ability. These findings indicate that high conformity can weaken an individual's ability to think rationally and independently, which ultimately increases an individual's vulnerability to bullying behavior.

In other words, individuals who have a high level of conformity tend to experience a decline in critical thinking ability, making them more likely to accept and follow group norms that support aggressive behavior. This reinforces the findings of Salmivalli and Voeten [19] and Coloroso [20] which state that peer group dynamics play an important role in shaping bullying behavior, both through direct pressure and through the internalization of group norms. In this context, critical thinking functions as a cognitive mechanism that can intervene in such social influences, enabling individuals to evaluate and resist group pressure that is inconsistent with moral values.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that bullying behavior in adolescents is the result of a complex interaction between external and internal factors, where conformity plays a role as a social factor that encourages bullying behavior, while critical thinking acts as a cognitive factor that can either strengthen or weaken this influence. These findings provide an important contribution to the development of theory and intervention practice, particularly in the educational context, suggesting that efforts to prevent bullying are not sufficient by merely reducing negative social pressure, but also need to focus on strengthening students' critical thinking skills.

The development of critical thinking skills through the education curriculum, decision-making training, as well as learning based on reflection and analysis is expected to improve students' ability to face social pressure adaptively, so that they are not only able to resist bullying behavior but also actively contribute to creating a healthier, safer, and more inclusive social environment. Thus, this study not only enriches empirical research on the relationship between conformity and bullying but also offers strategic practical implications in efforts to build adolescents' character to be more independent, rational, and with integrity.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis and discussion, this study concludes that conformity has a positive and significant effect on bullying behavior, indicating that students with higher levels of conformity are more likely to engage in bullying behavior. Conformity also has a negative and significant effect on critical thinking, which means that stronger conformity to peer group norms tends to reduce students' ability to think independently and critically. Furthermore, critical thinking has a negative and significant effect on bullying behavior, suggesting that students with stronger critical thinking skills are less likely to participate in bullying because they are better able to evaluate situations objectively and resist negative peer pressure.

This study also confirms that critical thinking serves as a significant mediating variable in the relationship between conformity and bullying behavior. Conformity not only directly increases bullying behavior, but also indirectly influences bullying through its negative effect on critical thinking. This finding indicates that bullying behavior among adolescents emerges from the interaction between social pressure from peer groups and the weakening of cognitive capacity to critically evaluate group norms. In this context, critical thinking functions not only as an academic skill but also as an important social-psychological protective factor against bullying.

These findings imply that schools should not only focus on controlling negative peer group influence, but also develop educational programs that strengthen students' critical thinking skills. Reflective learning, ethical discussions, problem-based learning, and social decision-making training may serve as effective strategies to reduce bullying behavior in school environments.

This study is limited to students from one senior high school, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to examine this model in different school contexts and include additional psychological variables such as empathy, self-control, or emotional intelligence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of bullying behavior among adolescents.

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