Self-Esteem as a Mediator Between Peer Victimization and Social Withdrawal in Youth

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between peer victimization and social withdrawal in adolescents.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational research design was employed involving a sample of 329 Indonesian adolescents aged 12–18 years, selected using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table. Participants completed standardized self-report instruments: the Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (RPEQ) to assess peer victimization, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) for self-esteem, and the Withdrawn/Depressed subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) to measure social withdrawal. Data were analyzed using SPSS-27 for descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation, while Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS-21 to test direct, indirect, and total effects among variables. Model fit indices were computed to assess structural validity.

Findings: Descriptive analyses indicated moderate levels of peer victimization (M = 48.72, SD = 9.84), self-esteem (M = 27.45, SD = 4.93), and social withdrawal (M = 15.83, SD = 5.41). Pearson correlations showed significant associations among all variables: peer victimization was negatively correlated with self-esteem (r = -0.47, p < .001) and positively with social withdrawal (r = 0.53, p < .001), while self-esteem was negatively associated with social withdrawal (r = -0.42, p < .001). The SEM results supported a partial mediation model with good fit indices (χ^2/df = 1.96; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.052). Self-esteem significantly mediated the effect of peer victimization on social withdrawal (indirect β = 0.14, p < .01), indicating that low self-esteem partially explains the link between victimization and withdrawal behavior.

Conclusion: This study highlights the critical mediating role of self-esteem in the association between peer victimization and social withdrawal among adolescents. Interventions aimed at strengthening self-esteem may serve as effective buffers to reduce withdrawal behaviors in victimized youth.

Keywords: *Self-esteem, Peer victimization, Social withdrawal, Adolescents, Structural equation modelling*

1. Introduction

Social withdrawal among youth has emerged as a significant psychological and social concern globally, as it entails emotional disengagement, reduced peer interactions, and increased vulnerability to internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression. Social withdrawal is commonly understood as a behavioral pattern in which individuals actively avoid social interactions and isolate themselves from peers and group settings (Fredrick & Becker, 2022). While short-term withdrawal may reflect temporary coping strategies, chronic patterns of withdrawal during adolescence—an essential period for social development—can result in severe consequences for emotional, academic, and interpersonal functioning (Park, 2021). Recent studies have shifted attention to investigating the mechanisms underlying social withdrawal, identifying factors such as peer victimization and self-esteem as central contributors (Kim et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024).

Adolescents experiencing peer victimization often internalize negative experiences, leading to decreased self-worth and avoidance of peer relationships (Li et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2020). Peer victimization encompasses a broad range of aggressive behaviors, including verbal abuse, exclusion, and physical intimidation, which significantly affect young individuals' self-concept and social adjustment (Elsaesser et al., 2019). Studies have consistently shown that adolescents who are victimized by peers are at greater risk for withdrawal behaviors, particularly when they lack coping resources such as emotional support or internal resilience (Park & Lee, 2024; Weintraub et al., 2021). Importantly, peer victimization not only threatens social inclusion but also undermines the development of identity and self-worth during a formative life stage (Chauliac et al., 2017).

Self-esteem plays a potentially mediating role in this context. As a critical determinant of psychological adjustment, self-esteem refers to an individual's global evaluation of their worth and competence. Youth with low self-esteem are more likely to internalize negative peer experiences and to disengage from social settings out of fear of rejection or humiliation (Kim & Lee, 2016; Koo et al., 2022). Several longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have confirmed the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between social adversity and withdrawal, suggesting that victimization leads to reduced self-worth, which in turn drives social avoidance (Jun, 2019; Kim & Cui, 2024). Conversely, higher levels of self-esteem may serve as a buffer, enabling youth to reframe negative social experiences and maintain active engagement in peer networks (Li et al., 2017).

The theoretical and empirical linkage between these variables is grounded in both ecological and developmental frameworks. From an ecological perspective, adolescent development is influenced by the complex interaction between individual traits and environmental experiences. Within this view, peer victimization is a disruptive environmental input, while self-esteem represents an intrapersonal mediator that determines behavioral outcomes such as withdrawal (Liu et al., 2018). Developmental theories similarly underscore adolescence as a sensitive period wherein identity formation and peer belonging are prioritized; any disruption, particularly repeated victimization, can derail typical developmental trajectories and lead to maladaptive behaviors such as chronic withdrawal (Iannattone et al., 2021; Kim & Park, 2018).

Although previous research has addressed these variables independently, few studies have systematically examined their interconnectedness in a single model, particularly using robust analytic frameworks such as structural equation modeling. A growing body of research has highlighted the importance of understanding mediating processes in adolescent psychopathology. For example, Kim and Cho (2024) found that smartphone dependency mediated the link between social withdrawal and aggression in adolescents, underscoring the critical role of intermediary psychological processes in explaining behavioral outcomes (Kim & Cho, 2024). Similarly, Park and Lee (2024) demonstrated that social withdrawal and achievement motivation jointly mediated the effect of parental neglect on school dropout intention among multicultural adolescents in Korea (Park & Lee, 2024).

The cultural context of social withdrawal is particularly salient in collectivistic societies such as those in East and Southeast Asia, where group conformity, filial obligation, and social harmony are highly emphasized. In such environments, social withdrawal can carry an additional stigma, potentially exacerbating feelings of shame and failure (Lim & Jeong, 2022; Wong et al., 2020). While many studies on this topic have been conducted in East Asian contexts, fewer have focused on Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia—a culturally diverse country with both collectivist traditions and emerging digital lifestyles among youth. Indonesia's educational settings often emphasize group-based learning, which can place additional pressure on socially withdrawn youth, making the exploration of this

phenomenon particularly relevant for intervention planning and policy development.

Recent evidence has shown that the developmental course of social withdrawal may vary depending on contextual variables such as parenting style, digital media use, and peer network structure. Kim and Lee (2016), for example, emphasized the role of affectionate parenting in mitigating the negative effects of peer difficulties on social behavior, with ego-resilience serving as a critical mediator (Kim & Lee, 2016). Likewise, Oh and Jo (2017) demonstrated that achievement values mediated the link between social withdrawal and community sense among Korean youth, indicating that internal motivational systems can interact with behavioral tendencies (Oh & Jo, 2017). These findings collectively highlight the need to examine complex mediational pathways to better understand how and why social withdrawal emerges during adolescence.

Additionally, the role of friendship quality and peer communication has received attention as a potential buffer against the harmful effects of victimization. Li et al. (2024) showed that best friends' motivations for social withdrawal influenced adolescents' socio-emotional adjustment, suggesting that withdrawal can be both self-initiated and socially reinforced depending on interpersonal dynamics (Li et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the notion that youth do not operate in isolation, and that the quality and type of peer relationships can moderate the effects of broader adversities.

Another significant line of inquiry has focused on identifying longitudinal patterns of social withdrawal and its predictors. In a latent class growth analysis, Lee et al. (2024) identified multiple trajectories of withdrawal behavior in Korean adolescents and found that early predictors such as peer rejection and internalizing symptoms significantly shaped these patterns (Lee et al., 2024). Similarly, Kim et al. (2023) employed a cross-lagged panel analysis to demonstrate the bidirectional influence between peer relationships and social withdrawal over time, emphasizing the dynamic and recursive nature of these constructs (Kim et al., 2023).

Despite the growing attention to this area, there remains a need for studies that integrate peer victimization, self-esteem, and social withdrawal into a single explanatory model, particularly using representative samples and rigorous statistical methods. Such integrative approaches can inform intervention strategies by pinpointing key leverage points—such as enhancing self-esteem—to mitigate the negative impact of peer victimization on social functioning.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between peer victimization and social withdrawal among adolescents in Indonesia.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive correlational research design to examine the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between peer victimization and social withdrawal among youth. The participants were 329 adolescents from various middle and high schools in Indonesia. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, which suggests 329 as the appropriate sample size for a population of approximately 2,000 individuals at a 95% confidence level. A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure proportional representation across gender and grade levels. The inclusion criteria required participants to be between the ages of 12 and 18 and enrolled in formal education institutions. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from both students and their guardians in accordance with ethical standards.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Social Withdrawal

To assess the dependent variable of social withdrawal, the Withdrawn/Depressed subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) developed by Achenbach and Rescorla (2001) was employed. This instrument is a widely used parent-report questionnaire designed for children aged 6 to 18 years and includes a subscale specifically targeting behaviors related to social withdrawal, such as preferring to be alone, not getting involved with others, and being unresponsive to social engagement. The Withdrawn/Depressed subscale consists of 8 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true). Higher scores indicate greater levels of social withdrawal. The CBCL has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency coefficients for the Withdrawn/Depressed subscale typically ranging from $\alpha = .70$ to .84 across studies. Its construct validity and test-retest reliability have been well-documented in diverse populations, making it a robust

tool for assessing internalizing symptoms, including social withdrawal.

2.2.2. Peer Victimization

Peer victimization was assessed using the Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (RPEQ), developed by Prinstein, Boergers, and Vernberg (2001). The RPEQ is a self-report instrument designed to evaluate various dimensions of peer victimization and aggression among adolescents. For this study, the focus was on the victimization subscales, which include overt victimization (e.g., being hit or pushed), relational victimization (e.g., exclusion or rumor-spreading), and reputational victimization (e.g., damaging one's social status). The victimization section includes 18 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (a few times a week). Higher scores reflect higher frequencies of peer victimization experiences. The RPEQ has demonstrated strong reliability with internal consistency coefficients above $\alpha = .80$ for victimization subscales. Its factorial structure, convergent validity, and criterion-related validity have been confirmed in various adolescent samples.

2.2.3. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1965. This classic self-report measure assesses global self-worth by evaluating both positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Items such as "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (reverse scored) are included to capture a balanced view of self-perception. Total scores range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. The RSES has been extensively validated in both adolescent and adult populations, with internal consistency typically ranging from $\alpha = .77$ to .88. Its test-retest reliability, convergent validity with related constructs (e.g., depression, self-concept), and cross-cultural applicability are well-supported in empirical research.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics and key variables. To examine the relationships between variables, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the strength and direction of associations between social withdrawal (dependent variable), peer victimization, and self-esteem (independent and mediating variables). In the next step, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS-21 was applied to test the hypothesized mediation model and assess the direct and indirect effects. Goodness-of-fit indices such as χ^2/df, RMSEA, CFI, and TLI were used to evaluate model fit. A significance level of $p < .05$ was set for all inferential analyses.

3. Findings and Results

Of the 329 participants, 178 (54.1%) were female and 151 (45.9%) were male. In terms of age, 109 students (33.1%) were aged between 12 and 14 years, 144 students (43.8%) were between 15 and 16 years, and 76 students (23.1%) were aged 17 or older. Regarding educational level, 127 participants (38.6%) were enrolled in junior high school, while 202 participants (61.4%) were attending senior high school. The distribution of participants across urban and rural areas was also recorded, with 195 students (59.3%) residing in urban locations and 134 students (40.7%) from rural areas.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables (N = 329)

Variable	M	SD
Peer Victimization	48.72	9.84
Self-Esteem	27.45	4.93
Social Withdrawal	15.83	5.41

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for peer victimization was M = 48.72, indicating a moderate level of perceived victimization among participants (scale range: 18–90). The mean for self-esteem was M = 27.45, suggesting a slightly above-median level of self-worth based on the Rosenberg scale (range: 10–40). Social withdrawal had a mean of 15.83, reflecting moderate internalizing symptoms among the youth, measured through the CBCL subscale

(range: 8–24). Standard deviations suggest acceptable variability within each construct.

Prior to conducting parametric and SEM analyses, the underlying assumptions were examined. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, with all variables falling within the acceptable range of ±1.5 (e.g., social withdrawal: skewness = 0.48, kurtosis = -0.39; self-esteem: skewness = -0.22, kurtosis = 0.13). Linearity and homoscedasticity were confirmed through scatterplots, which indicated a linear relationship between variables with equal variance. Multicollinearity was evaluated using tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF); all tolerance values were above 0.75 and VIF values were below 1.33, indicating no multicollinearity concerns. Additionally, Mahalanobis distance was used to check for multivariate outliers, with none exceeding the critical value of 16.27 at $p < .001$ for the degrees of freedom considered.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Variables (N = 329)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Peer Victimization	—		
2. Self-Esteem	-0.47** (p < .001)	—	
3. Social Withdrawal	0.53** (p < .001)	-0.42** (p < .001)	—

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients among the study variables. Peer victimization was negatively correlated with self-esteem (r = -0.47, p < .001) and positively correlated with social withdrawal (r = 0.53, p < .001). Additionally, self-esteem was significantly and negatively associated with social withdrawal (r = -0.42, p < .001). These correlations confirm the initial hypotheses and provide justification for proceeding with structural equation modeling to examine mediation effects.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold
χ^2	94.32	—
df	48	—
χ^2/df	1.96	< 3.00
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.97	≥ 0.95
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95
RMSEA	0.052	≤ 0.06

As shown in Table 3, the overall model fit was acceptable. The χ^2/df ratio was 1.96, well below the recommended threshold of 3.00. Goodness-of-fit indices were strong: GFI = 0.94, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.97, and TLI = 0.95. The RMSEA value of 0.052 also indicated a good fit. These indices confirm that the structural model adequately represents the observed data.

Table 4

*Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects Between Variables in the Structural Model*

Path	b	S.E.	β	p
Peer Victimization → Social Withdrawal (Direct)	0.31	0.05	0.39	< .001
Peer Victimization → Self-Esteem (Direct)	-0.42	0.06	-0.47	< .001
Self-Esteem → Social Withdrawal (Direct)	-0.28	0.07	-0.29	< .001
Peer Victimization → Social Withdrawal (Indirect)	0.12	0.03	0.14	< .01
Peer Victimization → Social Withdrawal (Total)	0.43	0.04	0.53	< .001

Table 4 details the path coefficients in the structural model. Peer victimization had a significant direct effect on social withdrawal (β = 0.39, p < .001), and a significant negative effect on self-esteem (β = -0.47, p < .001). Self-esteem negatively predicted social withdrawal (β = -0.29, p < .001). The indirect effect of peer victimization on social withdrawal through self-esteem was also significant (β = 0.14, p < .01), indicating partial mediation. The total effect of peer victimization on social withdrawal was β = 0.53, suggesting both direct and indirect influences were substantial.

Figure 1

Structural Model of The Study

Structural Model of Peer Victimization, Self-Esteem, and Social Withdrawal
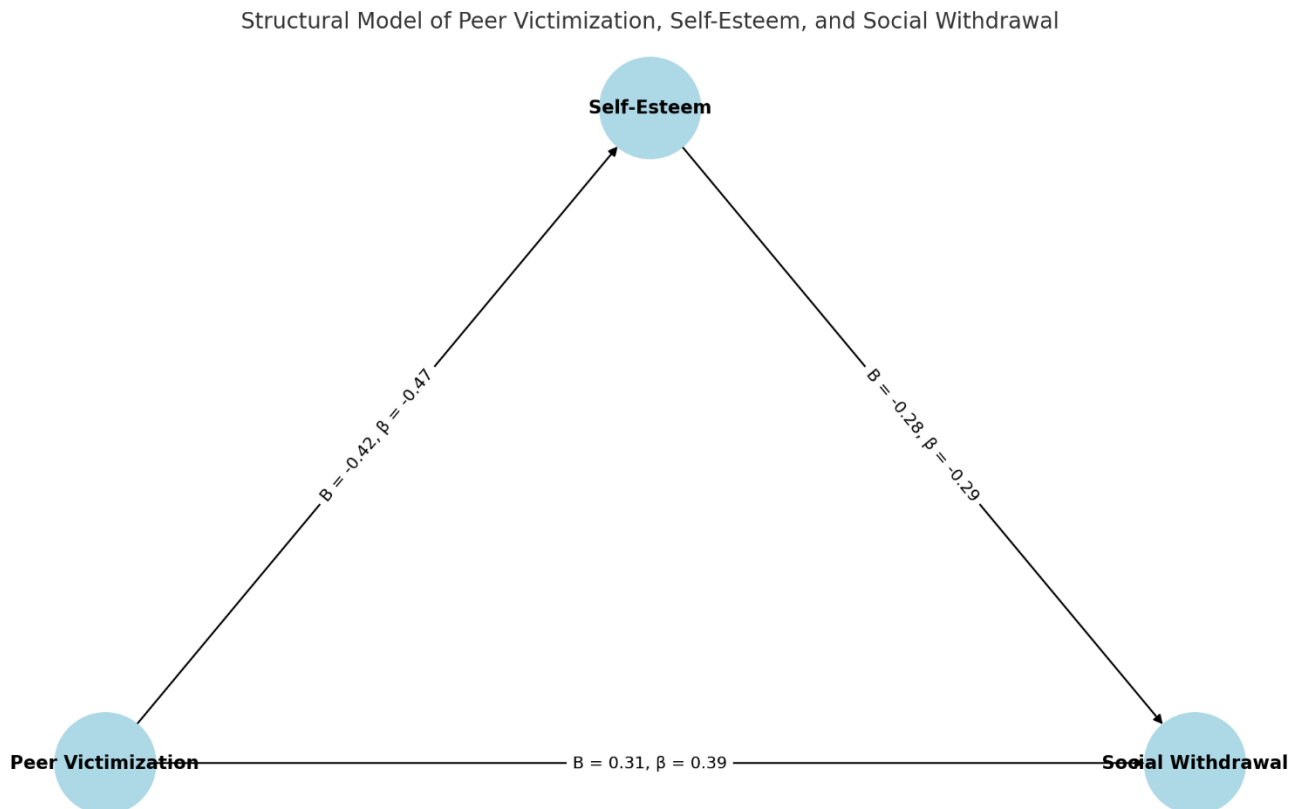
4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between peer victimization and social withdrawal among adolescents in Indonesia. The findings confirmed the proposed mediation model: peer victimization was significantly and positively associated with social withdrawal, negatively associated with self-esteem, and self-esteem, in turn, was negatively related to social withdrawal. Furthermore, structural equation modeling revealed that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between peer victimization and social withdrawal. These results underscore the critical function of self-esteem as an internal resource that can either buffer or intensify the adverse psychological consequences of victimization in adolescence.

The direct association between peer victimization and social withdrawal is consistent with previous research highlighting the detrimental effects of negative peer interactions on adolescents' social behavior and psychological development. Numerous studies have shown that exposure to relational aggression, verbal bullying, and social exclusion leads to increased tendencies to withdraw from peer groups, avoid interpersonal engagement, and develop internalizing symptoms (Li et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2020). For instance, Elsaesser et al. (2019) found that relational proximity to violence—particularly when the aggressor is a known peer—predicts higher levels of withdrawal and anxiety in adolescents (Elsaesser et al.,

2019). Similarly, Liu et al. (2020) emphasized that adolescents who experience repeated marginalization or neglect from peers are more likely to internalize rejection and disengage socially (Liu et al., 2020). The present findings reinforce this body of evidence and extend it to the Indonesian context, suggesting that peer victimization has consistent psychological repercussions across cultures.

In addition to replicating these direct effects, the present study contributes to the literature by elucidating the mediating role of self-esteem. Results indicated that adolescents who experienced higher levels of peer victimization reported significantly lower self-esteem, which, in turn, was associated with greater social withdrawal. This mediational pathway is theoretically grounded in social-cognitive models of self-perception, which posit that negative social interactions during adolescence can erode internal self-evaluations and lead to maladaptive coping strategies (Fredrick & Becker, 2022). The role of self-esteem as a mediator aligns with findings from Koo et al. (2022), who reported that low self-esteem mediated the link between parental structure and children's reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms like excessive smartphone use and withdrawal (Koo et al., 2022). Likewise, Park and Lee (2024) observed that low self-worth mediated the effect of neglectful parenting on students' withdrawal and achievement motivation in multicultural contexts (Park & Lee, 2024). Our findings extend these insights by showing that peer dynamics—rather than parental factors alone—can similarly shape self-perceptions that fuel withdrawal behaviors.

The observed negative relationship between self-esteem and social withdrawal is supported by several longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. Kim and Park (2018) found that youth with low self-esteem followed a developmental trajectory marked by increasing social withdrawal over time, particularly when intrusive parenting limited their autonomy and peer competence (Kim & Park, 2018). Similarly, Iannattone et al. (2021) emphasized the psychological vulnerability of adolescents with low emotional self-awareness and self-esteem, noting that such traits heightened the likelihood of avoidance and emotional disengagement (Iannattone et al., 2021). These findings support the hypothesis that low self-esteem serves as a psychological mechanism through which adolescents internalize social rejection and retreat from interpersonal contexts.

Interestingly, the partial mediation found in this study suggests that while self-esteem explains a significant portion of the relationship between victimization and withdrawal,

other mediating variables may also be at play. This is consistent with findings by Kim and Cho (2024), who found that smartphone dependency played a mediating role in the link between social withdrawal and aggression, suggesting that externalizing and internalizing pathways may share overlapping psychological antecedents (Kim & Cho, 2024). Similarly, Oh and Jo (2017) highlighted achievement values as mediators of the relationship between social withdrawal and broader psychosocial outcomes, suggesting that motivational frameworks may also buffer or exacerbate the impact of victimization (Oh & Jo, 2017).

This study also aligns with cultural and contextual research that emphasizes the role of social withdrawal in collectivist societies. Indonesian adolescents, like their counterparts in Korea and China, often operate within school and family environments that place a strong emphasis on social harmony, group belonging, and filial piety. Consequently, deviations from normative social engagement—such as chronic withdrawal—can be particularly stigmatizing and reinforce feelings of shame or alienation (Lim & Jeong, 2022; Wong et al., 2020). Li et al. (2017) further noted that adolescents in Asian cultures often experience withdrawal not solely as a personal choice, but as a culturally induced response to emotional suppression and conflict avoidance (Li et al., 2017). These insights support the argument that the psychological processes underlying social withdrawal may be culturally moderated, and interventions should be tailored to reflect these contextual nuances.

Moreover, the findings of this study echo those of Lee et al. (2024), who used latent growth class analysis to identify predictors of social withdrawal trajectories in Korean adolescents. Their results showed that early peer rejection and emotional distress were strong predictors of persistent withdrawal patterns (Lee et al., 2024). Kim et al. (2023) also emphasized the bidirectional influence between peer relations and withdrawal in adolescents, indicating that youth may enter a feedback loop where victimization leads to withdrawal, which further undermines social engagement and increases isolation (Kim et al., 2023). This feedback model provides a compelling lens for interpreting the partial mediation found in this study—suggesting that self-esteem, while crucial, is just one part of a larger recursive process.

Another noteworthy finding is the enduring impact of peer victimization even after controlling for self-esteem. This residual effect suggests that the direct experience of being bullied or excluded carries psychological weight that is not fully mitigated by internal traits. This observation

aligns with Park (2021), who found that even in the presence of mediators like depression or coping resources, peer victimization exerted a lasting negative influence on life satisfaction among multicultural adolescents in Korea (Park, 2021). Similarly, Liu et al. (2018) used web-based surveys in Chinese cities to demonstrate that socially withdrawn youth often cite unresolved peer conflicts and bullying histories as primary reasons for disengagement, regardless of self-perception (Liu et al., 2018). These findings point to the need for preventive strategies that address not just internal vulnerabilities but also environmental risk factors like school climate and peer culture.

Lastly, this study adds to the literature by validating the applicability of these psychological constructs and models in the Southeast Asian context, which has been underrepresented in social withdrawal research. While studies from Korea, China, and Japan have offered extensive insights into social withdrawal among adolescents, research from Indonesia remains limited. The current findings thus offer a culturally grounded contribution to the broader discourse, illustrating that the interplay between peer victimization, self-esteem, and social withdrawal is both cross-cultural and contextually variable.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite the valuable insights yielded by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causal relationships among peer victimization, self-esteem, and social withdrawal. Longitudinal data would be more effective in tracing developmental trajectories and testing reciprocal relationships. Second, all data were based on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability or response bias. Future studies could benefit from incorporating multi-informant data (e.g., peer, teacher, or parent reports) to enhance objectivity. Third, the study was conducted solely among Indonesian adolescents, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or educational contexts, particularly those with different norms around social engagement and peer dynamics.

Future research should explore additional mediating and moderating variables that may explain the relationship between peer victimization and social withdrawal, such as emotion regulation, social anxiety, or peer support. Investigating these variables in tandem could yield a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms involved. Moreover, longitudinal and experimental designs should be employed to determine causal pathways and to examine how interventions targeting self-esteem might reduce withdrawal behaviors over time. Comparative studies across cultural contexts would also help to determine how sociocultural norms influence the expression and development of social withdrawal.

From a practical standpoint, school-based interventions should prioritize building students' self-esteem and social skills as protective mechanisms against the harmful effects of peer victimization. Counseling programs that foster resilience and assertiveness may help reduce the internalization of negative peer experiences. Additionally, educators and policymakers should implement anti-bullying policies and peer mentoring systems that foster inclusive environments and minimize social marginalization. Early identification and support for victimized or socially withdrawn students could substantially improve their long-term emotional well-being and academic engagement.

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