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Bullying Behaviors among Adolescents and their Self-Esteem

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Introduction

The adolescent years span the transition from childhood to maturity, as the World Health Organization (WHO) presents adolescents as those aged between 10 and 19 years (Wu, 2022), who offer various developmental changes, including pronounced physical changes, psychological ambition for identity, and rising levels of socialization (Luo et al., 2023).

In general, three distinct phases make up the adolescent years: early adolescence (ages 10–13),

middle adolescence (ages 14–16), and late adolescence (ages 17–20) (Ziaei, 2018). Known as the "stormy period," this is the second crucial stage of a person's development. It's a time when they may experience conflicting emotions, which can lead to violent actions like bullying (He, 2024).

The most common form of adolescent violence that has grown to be a significant concern and a worldwide public health phenomenon among students is bullying (Ahmed et al., 2022). It involves the physically and/or socially stronger person deliberately and repeatedly

ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess bullying behaviors among adolescent students in Babylon, identify the self-esteem levels of adolescents who bully, and investigate the associations between bullying behaviors and self-esteem levels among adolescents.

Methods and Materials: A cross-sectional descriptive design for a period from October 19th, 2024, to January 2025. Two hundred sixty-five pupils from eight intermediate schools in the Al-Hilla Directorate were chosen using a simple random stratified sample procedure. Data were collected through interviews using an instrument and analyzed using SPSS version 22, applying both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Findings: The results showed the assessment levels of bullying behaviors among 265 adolescents were at a moderate level (37.4%) with (M.S = 2.05 ± 0.116). The self-esteem level among participants was neutral (61.5%), with a mean score of 2.09 ± 0.276. Additionally, a highly significant negative correlation was found between bullying behavior and self-esteem ($p = 0.002$, Spearman's $\rho = -0.192$).

Conclusion: The general assessment of bullying behaviors among adolescents was at a moderate level. The adolescents' self-esteem was at a neutral level, also demonstrating a highly significant negative correlation between bullying behavior and self-esteem among adolescents. Accordingly, the study recommended that a comprehensive approach, combining school policies, family, peer involvement, and community collaboration, is necessary to reduce bullying behaviors and improve self-esteem among adolescents.

Keywords: bullying behaviors, adolescents, self-esteem.

acting negatively towards the weaker person to cause harm. Physical, verbal, relational/social, sexual, and destruction of property are considered forms of these negative behaviors (Sireli et al., 2024). It stems from the desire for control and power, which can frequently arise from ignorance and an inability to manage emotions (Sulejmani & Ziberi, 2024).

The prevalence of bullying victims was 25.1% while the prevalence of bullies was 11.6%, according to a recent systematic review of research conducted in Australia. Less frequently, estimates for cyberbullying were 3.5% for perpetration and 7% for victimization. 35% of pupils engaged in traditional bullying, and 15% involved in cyber-bullying, according to a recent meta-analysis of adolescents aged 12 to 18 ($n = 335,519$). Studies conducted in Latin American nations are quite rare. In a survey of 60,973 youths in Brazil that looked at the 30-day prevalence of bullying, 25.4% were seldom bullied, and 5.4% reported that they had been frequently bullied. The prevalence in Argentina was determined to be 13% for victims, 6% for bullies, 5% for bullies and victims, and 73% for students who were not involved (Galal et al., 2019).

The recent (WHO) surveys also show that approximately 15-30% of adolescents aged 11-15 experience bullying globally, with variations depending on region and their sex (World Health Organization, 2022). In addition, 30 percent of children in grades 6 through 10 experience moderate-to-frequent bullying, either as the target, the bully, or both. Approximately 1.7 million children in this age group harassed other students. Compared to girls, boys are more likely to react aggressively and bully others. In contrast to physical violence, verbal bullying is more common among girls (Sulejmani & Ziberi, 2024).

There are two major classifications for bullying: direct bullying and indirect bullying. At the same time, physical assaults and verbal abuse are examples of face-to-face bullying. Isolation from others, spreading false information, and other forms of passive aggression are examples of indirect bullying. Since female students are more likely than male students to participate in verbal bullying, while male students are more likely to engage in direct physical abuse, different types of bullying are thought to be caused by gender-based disparities (Ahmed et al., 2022).

A person's self-esteem is an essential factor in their level of pleasure since it reflects their perception of their value, importance, and attractiveness. Positive peer relationships and self-confidence are hallmarks of adolescents with healthy levels of self-esteem. Researchers found that bullies were more likely to target students with low self-esteem (53.7 percent of bullied and lower average self-esteem scores for bullied and victims, respectively). According to a meta-analysis, it was shown that having high self-esteem was associated with lower rates of bullying victimization and aggressive actions (Dou et al., 2022).

A person's sense of self-worth significantly influences their psychological and physiological development. Those who score high on this scale are often considered emotionally fulfilled and healthy, whereas those who score low are likely to be mentally troubled and possibly sad. Additionally, self-esteem may shield youth from harmful habits and mental health problems that commonly plague this developmental period (Mawlod et al., 2024).

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

A cross-sectional descriptive study design was conducted in the Babylon province at intermediate schools, Al-Hilla directorate, selected randomly by chance as 10% from four educational directorates in "Babylon governorate education," through the period from October 19th, 2024, to January 2025. A simple random stratified sampling method was used to choose the 265 adolescents from 8 government intermediate schools in the Al-Hilla directorate.

The data is obtained from 265 through the period from 20 December 2024 until 20 January 2025; the data was collected by utilizing questionnaire using the Arabic version and by interviewing all participants inclusive in the research sample in a similar manner, the same questionnaire was used at the same place in the classroom to achieve objectives of the research, the interview takes in estimated 30-40 minute for each participant.

Instruments

The questionnaire was constructed from various previous literature reviews and articles related to this topic to meet the aims of the current study, and it consists of three parts and includes the following:

Part (1): Socio-Demographic data

The information consisted of numerous items related to adolescents, including age, sex, grade level, parents' education and occupation, parental marital status, residency, and adolescent order in the family.

Part (2):- Adolescent Bullying Behavior Scale:

Using "the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ-R)", which included 12 items

Part (3):- Self-Esteem Scale:

This part was adopted and modified from the "Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)", which consists of 10 items.

Validity of Study Instrument: The validity of the questionnaire was established by reviewing it with 20 experts to assess its clarity and relevance. A thorough review of the questionnaire was conducted, and changes were made based on their comments and opinions.

Reliability of Study Instrument: Assess the internal instrument reliability by internal consistency. Reliability was computed using the Cronbach's alpha technique, which is statistically acceptable (bullying behaviors =0.719, self-esteem 0.945)

Data Analysis

Results obtained electronically by using the statistics package program for social sciences (SPSS) version. (22) and Microsoft Excel (2010). Descriptive statistics, including frequency in terms of both number and percentage, mean and standard deviation, as well as inferential statistics, including Reliability Alpha Cronbach, and nonparametric equations such as the Mann-Whitney, Kruskal-Wallis, and Spearman correlation tests.

Findings and Results

Table 1 shows demographic data for 265 adolescents who agreed to participate in the study. Most of the study sample (146, 55.1%) consisted of males. Regarding age, 197 individuals were between 13 and 15 years old, with a mean and standard deviation of 14.37 ± 1.371 . Most of the adolescents, 129 (48.7%), were in the Second Intermediate grade. On the other hand, the study sample showed that most of the fathers (67, 25.3%) were primary graduates. With their occupation status, 216 (81.5%) were employed. Regarding the mother's education status, 86 (32.5%) were primary graduates, and 204 (77.0%) were unemployed. Finally, related to adolescents' order in the family, 192 (72.5%) were between 1 and 3.

Table 1

Distribution of Socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Demographic Data	Rating and intervals	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	146	55.1
	Female	119	44.9
	Total	265	100.0
Age / Years	Less than 13 years	14	5.3
	13 – 15	197	74.3
	More than 15	54	20.4
	Mean and Std. Deviation	14.37 ± 1.371	
	Total	265	100.0
Grade level	First intermediate grade	35	13.2
	Second intermediate grade	129	48.7
	Third intermediate grade	101	38.1
	Total	265	100.0
Father education	Illiterate	17	6.4
	read and write	50	18.9
	primary graduate	67	25.3
	Intermediate graduate	44	16.6
	Secondary graduate	33	12.5
	Institute graduate or above	54	20.4
	Total	265	100.0
Father occupation	Employed	216	81.5
	Unemployed	49	18.5

Mother education	Total	265	100.0
	Illiterate	20	7.5
	Read and write	42	15.8
	Primary graduate	86	32.5
	Intermediate graduate	35	13.2
	Secondary graduate	23	8.7
	Institute graduate or above	59	22.3
Mother occupation	Total	265	100.0
	Employed	61	23.0
	Unemployed	204	77.0
	Total	265	100.0
Parent marital status	Live together	249	94.0
	Separated	4	1.5
	Divorced	5	1.9
	One parent deceased	7	2.6
	Total	265	100.0
Residency	Urban	191	72.1
	Rural	74	27.9
	Total	265	100.0
Adolescents' order in the family	1 – 3	192	72.5
	4 – 6	59	22.3
	7 – 9	14	5.3
	Mean and Std. Deviation	2.78 ± 1.807	
	Total	265	100.0

Std. Deviation = standard deviation

Table 2 shows that the overall assessment of adolescents in the study sample related to bullying behavior was moderate, with a mean and standard deviation of 2.05 ± 0.116 .

Table 2

Overall assessment of adolescent responses of the study sample related to bullying behavior.

Main Domain	Rating	F	%	M.S	Std. Deviation	Assessment
Adolescent Bullying Behavior	Bad behavior	79	29.8	2.05	0.116	Moderate behavior
	Moderate behavior	99	37.4			
	Good behavior	87	32.8			
	Total	265	100			

F Frequency, %= percentage, M = mean, Std. Deviation = (standard deviation), M.S. Mean of scale, Mean of scale = 2, cut off point (0.66), (Bad behavior = 1-1.66), (Moderate behavior = 1.67-2.33), (Good behavior = 2.34 – 3).

Table 3 shows that the overall assessment of adolescent responses of the study sample related to self-esteem was neutral, with a mean and standard deviation of 2.09 ± 0.276 .

Table 3

Overall assessment of the responses of the study sample related to self-esteem.

Main Domain	Rating	F	%	M.S	Std. Deviation	Assessment
Self-esteem	Poor self-esteem	12	4.5	2.09	0.276	Neutral self-esteem
	Neutral self-esteem	163	61.5			
	Good self-esteem	90	34.0			
	Total	265	100			

F Frequency, %= percentage, M = mean, Std. Deviation = (standard deviation), M.S= Mean of scale, Mean of scale = 2, cut off point (0.66), (Poor self-esteem = 1-1.66), (Neutral self-esteem = 1.67-2.33), (Good self-esteem = 2.34 – 3).

Table 4 above shows the highly significant relationship between bullying behavior and self-esteem among adolescents at a p-value of 0.001, which is less than 0.01.

Table 4*Relationship between bullying behavior and self-esteem among adolescents.*

Main Domain	Poor	Neutral	Good	Total	χ^2	P. value	Ass
bullying behavior Bad	7	48	24	79	6.052	0.001	H.S

χ^2 = chi-square, p. value= probability value, Ass = assessment, H.S= highly significant

The table below shows a highly significant negative correlation between bullying behavior and self-esteem

among adolescents at P-Value 0.002, which is less than 0.01.

Table 5*Correlation between bullying behavior and self-esteem among adolescents.*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Spearman's Correlation (ρ)	P-Value	Assessment
Bullying behavior	2.05	0.116	265	- 0.192	0.002	Negative weak correlation (H.S)
Self-esteem	2.09	0.276				

Std. Deviation = standard deviation, N = number of participants, p. value= probability value, H.S= highly significant

Discussion and Conclusion

1. Distribution of Socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents.

The present study collects a sample of adolescents aged 11-18, as this age range is considered crucial for an individual's development.

Through a review of the findings of the current study, the demographic characteristics of the samples were found to be that more than two-thirds of the adolescents were aged between 13 and 15 years, more than half were males, and less than half were in the second intermediate grade. The reason for this is that most schools were for boys. After random selection, in coordination with the school administration, and considering the available lessons, the class was chosen. This study disagreed with a school survey conducted in Jordan on adolescent students (Dardas et al., 2022), which showed that a relatively high percentage of samples were in the 16-17 age group, and two-thirds were female.

This result confirms the study by Song & Kim (2022), which shows that the vast majority of adolescents were male. Also supported by Gaete et al. (2021) is an analytical cross-sectional survey, which shows the highest percentage of students attending the second intermediate grade.

The highest percentage of participants had primary graduate parents as the highest educational level. Due to the social and economic situation of the country at that

time, most people resorted to freelancing instead of completing their education to provide their family with basic needs, particularly since most families live in extended families as a cultural norm.

The majority of the fathers' adolescents were employed, while more than three-quarters of the mothers were unemployed. In this society, which still clings to remnants of customs and traditions, the father is typically viewed as the breadwinner, and the mother as the primary caregiver.

This result is supported by Oztekin et al. (2021), who found that the majority of parents' adolescents have a primary educational level, and the majority of mothers are homemakers. Another supported study (Ali et al., 2019) found that the highest percentage of parents' adolescents were primary school graduates, and a relatively high percentage were employed fathers.

Regarding the marital status of the parents, the vast majority of adolescents live with their parents. This is considered normal and represents most of the families in the country, as the presence of both parents has a significant impact on the development of adolescents. This result is compatible with the study by Wang et al. (2021), which was conducted in China, which showed that the vast majority of adolescents live with both parents.

Regarding the residence area of the samples, it shows that more than two-thirds of adolescents are from urban areas. Due to urban areas having high population density

and increasing urbanization, this leads to an increase in schools, resulting in most of the students from urban residences. This study aligns with [Sireli et al. \(2024\)](#), which found that less than two-thirds of adolescents were urban residents.

The adolescent's order in the family shows that more than two-thirds had an order of 1-3 between their siblings. This is due to family planning and awareness about childbearing and the number of children. Currently, raising children has become expensive, leading most parents, especially in urban areas, to reduce their family size. The 1-3 child rate is considered an appropriate number.

This result is supported by [Galal et al. \(2019\)](#), a cross-sectional study conducted in Egypt, including 476 students aged 12-18 years, which found a relatively high percentage of respondents who reported that their orders among their siblings were the first order.

2. Assessment of Bullying Behavior among Adolescents.

Adolescence is a sensitive and critical developmental period where adolescent goes through several biological and social changes that may negatively affect them, making them more vulnerable to negative behaviors. Also, the adolescents practice bullying as a means of showing strength and control and imposing their social status among peers, in addition to many factors that the adolescent is exposed to, which differ from one person to another.

The present study highlights the "bullying behaviors" among intermediate schools in the Babylon governorate of Iraq. According to the current study findings related to assessing bullying behaviors, the highest percentage of adolescent students have a moderate response to bullying behavior. This result agrees with [Doehne et al. \(2018\)](#), who showed that adolescent students were classified as bullies at a moderate level.

This result disagrees with [Menesini & Salmivalli \(2017\)](#), which is titled "School bullying: current understanding and successful strategies," and found a relatively high percentage of adolescent students were perpetrators.

A cross-sectional study in Nigeria by [Ezeh \(2024\)](#) was conducted on 278 secondary school students from six secondary schools to find the impact of peer pressure and parenting styles on bullying behaviors. The study

found that the students have a moderate level of bullying behavior, with a mean score of 2.02 (SD = 0.51).

Another study conducted by [Williams et al. \(2024\)](#) in the United States to examine bullying behaviors among 1,977 middle school students (ages 11-13) from 27 schools found that bullying preparation was at a moderate to high level among adolescent students.

3. Assessment of self-esteem level among study samples

Self-esteem in adolescents is a crucial aspect of their psychological and social development, as it is significantly influenced by the transitional phase they go through, including physical and hormonal changes, identity, self, and the need for social acceptance. However, self-esteem can be influenced by many factors, such as family support, peer interactions, and achievements in school or other activities.

Self-esteem of adolescents in the present study reveals that less than two-thirds of adolescents were neutral about their self-esteem level. This result agrees with a cross-sectional study in Erbil city done by [Shawki & Al-Hadithi \(2019\)](#), who investigated that more than half of the students have a moderate self-esteem level.

Another supported study ([Romero-Reignier et al., 2022](#)) titled Gender as a factor in the relationship between self-esteem and the impact of cyberbullying on the health of teenagers? Involving 797 secondary education adolescents, they found a relatively high percentage of students have a medium self-esteem level.

This result also disagrees with [Mawlod et al. \(2024\)](#), a quantitative, cross-sectional study conducted in the Kurdistan area of Iraq, which showed that the students dealt with low self-esteem.

4. Bullying behavior and self-esteem among adolescents.

The existing study findings specified that the adolescents' self-esteem about the bullying behaviors indicates a high negative correlation between bullying behaviors and adolescents' self-esteem. Because bullying may result from internal problems such as feelings of inferiority, jealousy, and the need for power, it is a way to prove strength and control. Adolescents who have high self-esteem, know their abilities and values, have emotional balance and psychological stability, and respect themselves and others. In addition, they are not easily influenced by peers and society, which reduces the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

This result agrees with Ayoub et al. (2021), a cross-sectional study including 600 adolescents from Tunisia, which showed that bullied adolescents have low self-esteem compared with adolescents who had not been bullied.

Another study, Palermi et al. (2022), involved 936 Italian adolescents aged 13-16 years, who showed that adolescents with low self-esteem were most engaged in bullying and cyberbullying. An Additional support study done by Fahmi et al. (2020), titled "Self-esteem and bullying behavior among junior high school students," showed that there was a negative correlation between self-esteem and bullying, meaning students with low self-esteem were more likely to engage in bullying behaviors than students who had high self-esteem.

Regarding the study by Lefta et al. (2023) titled "The Relationship Between Bullying Behaviors and Self-Esteem Among Primary School Students in Iraq," a high negative correlation was demonstrated between bullying and self-esteem; students who engaged in more bullying had significantly lower self-esteem.

Based on the findings, it was concluded that most adolescents aged between 13 and 15 years old, with a male majority, were in the Second intermediate grade, and mostly the students were from urban areas, more than those from rural areas. The general assessment of the bullying behaviors among adolescents was at a moderate level. And the adolescents' self-esteem was at a neutral level. In addition, the findings showed a statistically significant negative link between bullying behaviors and self-esteem among adolescent students, which led us to reject the null hypothesis and adopt the alternative. Consequently, the study recommended that a comprehensive approach, combining school policies, family, peer involvement, and community collaboration, is necessary to reduce bullying behaviors and improve self-esteem among adolescents. Increasing adolescents' awareness and knowledge, and developing new, proper preventive measures that can modify their negative behaviors.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional. All experience procedures have been approved by the University of Babylon's College of Nursing and the General Directorate of Education in Babylon province. The consent was obtained from the educational supervisor in the school to expose the adolescents to the study questionnaire.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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